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The San Diego Union-Tribune
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Big changes loom for coastal town

By Sandra Dibble
STAFF WRITER

April 6, 2008

Rich in history, natural resources and striking landscapes, the Baja California Sur community of Loreto is threatened by intense development pressures, say Mexican and U.S. academics who have studied the town.

Their essays comprise a new book about the community of 14,000 residents on the Gulf of California. "Loreto, The Future of the First Capital of the Californias" examines many aspects of this town as it faces change.

"This latest wave of development (could) overwhelm the local population and create another Los Cabos or Cancun," said Paul Ganster, one of the book's authors and head of the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University. "This is something that's playing out everywhere along the coast of Baja California and Mexico."

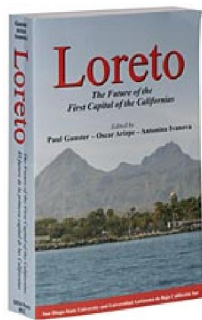
The book aims to to pull together existing information about Loreto, Ganster said. The volume contains separate versions in Spanish and English, and was edited by Ganster and two colleagues from the Autonomous University of Baja California Sur, Oscar Arizpe and Antonina Ivanova.

The authors of the book's 17 chapters include researchers from the two institutions, as well as others with knowledge of the peninsula. It is aimed at policy-makers, companies, activists, students, faculty, anyone with interest in the region, Ganster said.

The authors caution against rapid growth, saying it will change the character of Loreto, a community with a strong sense of history and identity. "Most of the researchers don't feel that Los Cabos and Cancun and that type of tourism megadevelopment is beneficial for either the local people or the local environment," Ganster said.

Unless steps are taken to curb the current trend, "there are going to be long-term negative impacts on the development of Loreto and the quality of life of the people that live there," he said.

The Loreto City Council last year passed a master plan that by 2025 envisions 11,000 rooms in hotels, condominiums, time-shares and condo-hotels - and a population of 110,000 full-time residents; opponents of the plan who are fighting to have it reversed say that number of rooms would bring closer to 220,000 residents. They say the



Loreto: The Future of the First Capital of the Californias

Paul Ganster, Oscar Arizpe and Antonina Ivanova, editors

SDSU Press and the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, 704 pages (contains English and Spanish versions), \$29.50 available from Sunbelt Publications, (800) 626-6579 or sunbeltpub.com, and the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias, (619) 594-5423.

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plan was imposed by Fonatur, Mexico's federal tourism development agency.

Fonatur has been a major player in Loreto since the 1970s, when it identified the town as an area of major tourism potential, along with Cancun, Ixtapa, Huatulco and San Jose del Cabo.

But while the other areas turned into important tourist destinations, Loreto largely languished for nearly three decades, despite \$200 million in infrastructure investm

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All that changed in 2002, with the arrival of an Arizona-based developer with a plan to build 6,000 homes south of town in the community of Nopolo. The project, known as the Villages of Loreto Bay, is aimed primarily at U.S. and Canadian investors, and is portrayed by the developer as an environmentally friendly, walkable community. Citigroup Property Investors last year acquired a majority interest in the project.

From its inception, Loreto Bay has been a major catalyst for change, drawing widespread attention to Loreto's potential as a major tourist destination, Ganster said. Its arrival also set off a land rush and unprecedented speculation, he said.

"If Loreto Bay were the only development to take place, Loreto still might retain a high quality of life and experience for tourism," Ganster said. "But some of the proposed additional developments would ruin the viewscape, increase migrants, squatter settlements and put further pressure on limited resources."

The region's water supply is a major limitation, the book's authors say. Their conclusions echo those of a 2005 study commissioned by the San Diego-based International Community Foundation, the "Loreto Alternative Futures Study." The foundation also provided support for the new book.

The Alternative Futures study stated that desalination is the "only apparent option" for Loreto if its population grows beyond 30,000. But desalination poses a potential threat to ecosystems, and requires large investments in electric power.

"Water is the most difficult problem," Ganster agreed. "Because there is just not enough water for that much growth."

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