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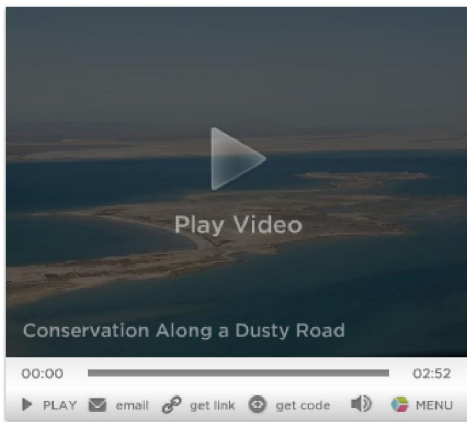
Balancing Conservation with Opportunity in the 'Abandoned Zone'



A paved road will soon come to the isolated coastal town of Laguna San Ignacio. Photo: Rob Davis
By **ROB DAVIS** Voice Staff Writer

PRINT E-MAIL STORY SHARE

LAGUNA SAN IGNACIO, Mexico -- Tuesday, April 1, 2008 | When he needs gasoline for his boat, whale-watching guide Antonio Aguilar puts a 50-gallon barrel in the back of his pickup and bounces 37 miles down the rutted path that connects this isolated coastal village to the closest town.



For the few hundred residents who rely on the aquamarine waters here as fishermen or whale guides, going to the market, the clinic or the gas station means driving an hour north on an unpaved road that blankets their cars, inside and out, in a fine, beige-colored dust.

In this off-the-grid part of Baja California Sur, that dirt road connects villagers to the on-the-grid world of running water, electricity and groceries in the closest town. And it serves as a hurdle so that only the hardest tourists reach this area, reinforcing an old saying in Baja: A bad road brings good people.

But a paved road is coming to this sparsely developed area surrounded by salt flats and windswept desert 475 miles south of San Diego. Here, along the shores of a 248-square mile lagoon where gray whales spend winters nursing their newborn calves to strength, the growth that will follow the road is inevitable.

The village along this lagoon sits on the precipice of asphalt-induced change. As its residents ponder their future, San Diego environmental groups and philanthropies are hoping to address what they see as both the fundamental opportunities and challenges posed by conservation in the developing world.

They can preserve stretches of land as large as some American states, but must ensure they create economic opportunities for landowners and residents whose livelihoods are solely dependent on the conserved land. The resulting middle ground mixes habitat preservation with sustainable development.

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In an area that has been called *zona abandonada* for its lack of government infrastructure, the lagoon's residents have few job opportunities beyond fishing and whale-watching tours. To entice preservation, the conservation groups say they must ensure residents still make a living if they decide not to sell to condo developers.

The remote lagoon, a Unesco World Heritage Site that draws 4,000 visitors a year, is the least visited of Baja's

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four whale nurseries largely because it sits a 15-hour car ride or four-hour charter flight from San Diego. Other lagoons are closer to developed towns and are accessible by paved road.

Around this lagoon, the road project's improved access promises residents economic opportunity and an easier life. But it also threatens the isolation that keeps the area pristine.

The conflict between land preservation and growth is not unique to Baja California. But at the lagoon, the issue must be resolved without the benefit of government involvement or oversight, which groups working there acknowledge poses a risk.

"Who is going to apply the rule of law in an area that remote? That's the challenge," says Richard Kiy, president and CEO of the International Community Foundation, a San Diego-based philanthropy working to promote sustainable development around the lagoon.

Viewed through the eyes of Southern California's conservationists, Baja's massive stretches of open coast offer opportunities to preserve biologically rich habitat on a scale no longer possible north of the border. But people populate those undeveloped open spaces, and selling the conservation message can be difficult.

The land around Laguna San Ignacio is officially designated as part of the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve, one of Latin America's largest preserves, blanketing 9,600 square miles of the Baja peninsula from the Pacific to the Gulf of California. The protected zone is home to species such as pronghorn antelope and covers an area the size of Vermont.

The biosphere reserve status affords one level of protection. But because the federal government offers limited involvement, conservation groups say they don't want to rely on that shaky protection. They turn to conservation easements, a legally binding agreement for residents to give up certain development rights in perpetuity.

In 2005, the groups set up a trust fund for the 43 members of one collective of landowners, Ejido Luis Echevarria, which agreed to sign a conservation easement for their 140,000 acres, a tract of desert as large as Camp Pendleton. The fund provides about \$25,000 a year to the *ejido* to fund projects that benefit all members. The latest payout bought a pickup truck.

In exchange, the *ejido* members developed a zoning plan for their land outlining areas where development is prohibited and where uses such as ecotourism camps and ranching are permitted.

"Ultimately, it's much more acceptable to have somebody with his cattle or fishing versus a \$4 billion port or liquefied natural gas terminal or marina project," says Serge Dedina, executive director of Imperial Beach-based Wildcoast. "The landscape scale is huge, but the scale of development is huge as well. Your worst nightmare does become realized in Baja. We know what the worst that can happen is, because we've seen it in Tijuana and Ensenada. Our goal is to come up with an alternative to that future."



In Baja California Sur, a Mexican state where *ejidos* own about 80 percent of the land, five other collectives around the lagoon have been reluctant to sign similar easements. Conservationists still hope to preserve 773,000 acres around the lagoon, an area about one-fourth the size of San Diego County.

Because a dollar stretches farther in Baja, Kiy says some prospective donors find the idea of conservation there alluring. The land is protected, so its appraised value is low. Conservation groups estimate that preserving those 773,000 acres around the lagoon in an easement would cost about \$8 million. That's like conserving Yosemite National Park for \$10 an acre.

"The underlying land value, if laws are enforced, is such that the price is reasonable," Kiy says. "Because you can't technically

develop there. What happens in practice is another thing."

Fishing camps have sprouted up along the lagoon's shores, despite the area's protected status. Conservationists call the dirt-floored shacks "informal development." They don't expect massive condos or hotels -- "formal development" -- to be built. But when the road comes, so will more informal development, Kiy says.

Dedina says he worries that residents haven't considered the road's consequences. The tourists who arrive today provide a captive audience. Lagoon access will improve, but in a place where visitors now stay several days at a time, leaving will also be easier. But Dedina says he will not fight the road because it will improve residents' lives and because stopping construction would be nearly impossible.

Around the lagoon, no one is sure exactly when the state government will start building the road, two years, maybe three. Jesus Mayoral, the 32-year-old manager of Pachico's Eco Tours, a whale-watching company started by his father, hopes to harness the changes that access will bring.

Like a preacher working up a Sunday sweat, Mayoral emphatically outlines a sweeping vision for a sustainable future. In a tourist destination dependent on four months of whale-watching, Mayoral wants to diversify the offerings by introducing mountain biking, guided hikes to ancient cave paintings, sailing and kayaking and bird watching.

"Somehow the place is going to develop, no matter what," he says. "In order to succeed you have to develop. Opposing the road, it'd be one of the most stupid things we could do as a community, because we've been

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struggling with that forever."

Yes, he says, as he gets on a roll, they'll rely on wind energy and have a farmers market to supply tourism camps. Villagers will lead hikes and bike trips, expanding job opportunities beyond the handful of ecotourism camps based around whale-watching. "We have to give the community reasons to cooperate with us in conservation," he says.

Next month, he will meet with advisors from Expedia, the travel website. The meeting, coordinated by the International Community Foundation, aims to give Mayoral and others around the lagoon advice on ways to market themselves.

"We have to get prepared," Mayoral says. "There is going to be a population boom. Once that road gets here, [controlling growth is] going to be harder."

In the road, a fuse has been lit. Land speculators call and e-mail. Mayoral said he heard from one speculator the other day, offering to sell land to Mayoral that already belonged to him.

Mayoral's 67-year-old father, Pachico, says he wants to see the land around the lagoon stay the way it is now. Residents live off the grid, getting water from a small desalination plant that operates three days a week. Electricity at ecotourism camps comes from small windmills.

But Pachico and others around the lagoon say they need to provide for their families. Pachico says he doesn't want to make a deal with *capitalistas*, but fears he would be forced to out of necessity. "What is fine today," he says through a translator, "tomorrow may not be enough."

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