

Lines in the sand

Residents of pristine, isolated Baja fishing town are split over how to balance development pressure with cross-border calls for conservation

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BAHIA DE LOS ANGELES, Baja California – The view from Fermin Smith's property is priceless: a school of dolphin leaping in a sandy cove, a frenzy of pelicans diving for fish, a small, rocky island where eagles and osprey nest.

The 69-year-old fisherman and three of his children turned down a \$1 million offer for their secluded beachfront parcel, a 30-minute boat ride from the town of Bahia de los Angeles. Instead, the family put its property into a private reserve, becoming pioneers in a conservation effort to protect Baja California's coastline.

As development pressures and land speculation escalate on Baja California, environmental groups on both sides of the border are fighting to preserve some of Mexico's last untouched regions. Increasingly, the key has become forging alliances with local residents like the Smiths.

"We have so much beauty here," said Smith's 41-year-old son and business partner, also named Fermin. "Holding onto it and working it is a way of leaving a legacy for my family."

A 380-mile drive from the border, Bahia de los Angeles is a collection of small, cinder-block houses and low-key tourist camps that look out over the Sea of Cortez. With rich marine life and uninhabited islands that harbor endemic plant and animal species, no other region of the Sea of Cortez is so valued by conservationists.

But living amid the majesty of this sparsely settled desert region has its disadvantages. Bahia de los Angeles' 600 year-round residents have no hospital, no full-time doctor, no gas station, and electricity only part of the day. To attend high school, students often travel eight hours to Ensenada.

Fish once were plentiful, but as elsewhere on the Sea of Cortez, overfishing has depleted stocks, and fewer families can support themselves from the sea.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Bahia de los Angeles' marine life make it the highest-valued region in the Sea of Cortez for conservationists.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Fermin Smith Jr. (left) and his father, Fermin Sr., placed their 1.2-mile beachfront parcel, known as La Unica, into a private reserve - becoming the first Bahia de los Angeles residents to do so.

Former fishermen now use their boats to ferry tourists and sport fishers, but business is slow. Many find themselves forced to leave town in search of opportunities.

"Right now, they can only make a living if they do not conserve," said Roberto Enriquez Andrade, an economist at the Autonomous University of Baja California in Ensenada.

"The key is how to conserve and at the same time create opportunities that allow locals to do business," said Andrade, who specializes in natural resource conservation.

For decades, the peninsula's coastline has been shielded from development, because much of the territory was in the hands of communal landholding groups, or *ejidos*, and couldn't be bought or sold. But legal changes in the 1990s allowed the land to be privatized and sold, so growing numbers of *ejido* members are selling their properties to outsiders.

"What we are getting with privatization of *ejidos* is a tremendous fragmentation," said Alfonso Aguirre, director of the Ensenada-based conservation group Islas. "That means a tremendous risk for the environment."

Development pressures also have increased with the Escalera Nautica, the Fox administration's mega-project to bring nautical tourism and \$1.7 billion in private investments to the Sea of Cortez through a network of ports.

Proponents say the Escalera will bring much-needed jobs and improve the quality of life of isolated communities. But environmental groups fear that without proper controls, the plan could decimate the region's biologically sensitive areas.

While Bahia de los Angeles confronts the same problems as other communities, few have drawn as much attention from U.S. and Mexican conservationists. They say it's possible to bring jobs and development to this isolated town with minimal impact on the environment. But their biggest hurdle has been to win over its residents.

"There is not the conscience that exists in other regions where people see that they can come out ahead through conservation," said Enrique Villegas, the Baja California government's top environmental official.

Strong local role

The agreement between the Smiths and Pronatura, Mexico's oldest and largest conservation group, is part of a much larger conservation effort by Pronatura in the Bahia de los Angeles region. For three years, Pronatura has been working to create a marine park – described as a nautical version of Yellowstone National Park – covering 1,680 square miles in which fishing would be controlled and natural resources would be protected.

Pronatura says the park is crucial for managing the region's diminishing marine resources. The group has worked to enlist support for the park from Bahia's residents and sought their input for a management plan, breaking with Mexico's practice of designating parks by federal decree with no local participation.

Lack of regulation has created a no-man's land, said Pronatura's Gustavo Danemann. "The old Baja was fine when it really was the Wild West," Danemann said. "But it's a condition that works against the sustainability of economic activities."

Though several major fisheries have collapsed, Bahia de los Angeles is still considered the most biologically productive area of the Sea of Cortez, rich in plankton and small fish that feed the wide variety of marine life.

"It is incredible that this being the richest part of the Sea of Cortez in terms of marine resources, that its fisheries would be so depleted," Danemann said.

The Baja California state government has withheld its approval of the marine park plan, citing the lack of consensus among Bahia residents. Without the state's endorsement, Mexico's National Commission for the Protection of Natural Areas is holding off on approving the park.

Villegas, Baja California's director of ecology, said the project should proceed "only if we can persuade all who live there that it can be positive for them and not just for the environment."

That may not be an easy task. The community seemed fragmented about the proposal last month, but with little open debate among the residents. Yet they readily discussed their reservations with an outsider.

Some insisted the local *ejido* has sole control over a park. Others insisted control should be in the hands of the fishermen, while others said decisions affecting the community should be made by a cross-section of residents. A few argued against more regulation in the area, saying that would create only bureaucracy and paperwork. Others said there is too little information about the proposal, while some worried it could become a vehicle for outsiders to control the area's resources.

Francisco Zavin was an early champion of the idea, but he has changed his mind.

"It's this green wave that has washed over Bahia de los Angeles," said Zavin, a leader in the local *Ejido Tierra y Libertad* and operator of Las Hamacas seafood restaurant in the center of town. "This marine park is not convenient for us. They're going to prevent us from fishing."

Fermin Smith Jr., a former local government official who is working for Pronatura to promote the park, said continuing with few controls is benefiting no one except poachers.

The opposition, he believes, is ill-informed and misled.

"Sometimes I think, I am sick of the people of this town, I am tired, I'd like to leave and go somewhere else," he said. "Why don't they want to do something for themselves? They're just worrying about bread for today and don't care whether they'll eat tomorrow."

Pronatura says it has gathered more than 220 signatures in support of the marine park from a cross-section of residents, from fishermen to business owners to leaders of the local *ejido*. The group is preparing to ask the state government once again for its endorsement.

Many of Pronatura's staunchest supporters include U.S. groups that have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of the conservation efforts. The Imperial Beach-based conservation group Wildcoast has worked closely with Pronatura to open a community center, promote a marine park, and find funds for the Smith family's ecotourism camp.

Wildcoast also connected Bahia de Los Angeles to such donors as the San Diego-based International

Community Foundation, the North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Homeland Foundation. Their support has been key to Pronatura's projects in Bahia de los Angeles.

"What's driving this is a desire to protect a significant marine site," said Serge Dedina, Wildcoast's co-director. "We believe that Bahia de los Angeles is one of the most important marine and coastal sites on the planet."

A study released this month by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography said overfishing has led to dramatic changes in marine ecosystems in the coastal regions of the Sea of Cortez.

Without stricter regulations and tighter enforcement, the trends will continue, and fishermen will find it even harder to survive, said Enric Sala, one of the study's authors. Establishing marine reserves also are crucial for guaranteeing the survival of coastal fishing communities, he said.

The key of any successful conservation measure will be guaranteeing that local residents can benefit directly, said economist Enriquez Andrade, a former Pronatura director who helped create the park proposal. Now he believes the project has grown too large and warns against outside groups using the park for their own ends.

"You have to bring benefits to the local residents; if not, there will be a very strong incentive to destroy and to change," Andrade said. "We need to give them the tools to really benefit, as opposed to saying, 'Don't destroy here.'"

Property management

Fermin Smith has witnessed the changes in Bahia de los Angeles over the decades. His family settled in the region in 1936, when his father arrived from another Baja California community to prospect for gold. Smith grew up fishing. So did his sons.

"Before there was so much," he said. "Now I'm seeing how everything is dying off."

The father still remembers when turtles, totoaba, vaquita, sea cucumber, shark and mother of pearl clams were plentiful. But those days are long gone, and some of Smith's relatives are searching for new ways to support themselves.

Smith's nephew, Francisco Zavin, reluctantly sold a 74-acre waterfront parcel for \$100,000 to a Tijuana developer, who is building a hotel on the site. Zavin said he needed money to pay for his daughter's college tuition and for medical treatment for his wife.

But the Smiths believe holding onto their property will help guarantee their family's future.

In an agreement supervised by Pronatura late last year, they became the first Bahia de los Angeles residents – and the first on Mexico's coastline – to sign a conservation easement, a legal agreement that restricts development of their 1.2-mile beachfront parcel, known as La Unica. Similar agreements have long been used in other parts of the world to protect endangered areas, but in Mexico it's a relatively new concept.

As compensation for signing away some of their property rights, the three Smith children – Fermin, Eduardo and Luz Maria – received a few thousand dollars and Fermin Smith has been granted a small

pension for the rest of his life. Pronatura also is helping the family apply for a \$50,000 grant from Mexico's National Forest Service to refurbish a dozen cabins they have built at La Unica and start an ecotourism business.

Some question how much such a small private measure can do against the enormous changes facing the peninsula. But Pronatura's Danemann believes it can make a difference.

"This will be a model for other property owners," he said. "Not just in Bahia de los Angeles, but for other parts of the Sea of Cortez."

The Smith family is banking that visitors will want to visit La Unica for decades to come. Luring them will not just depend on preserving La Unica, but conserving the marine life on its shores.

"What can we offer tourists if we have nothing in the sea?" asked Fermin Smith Jr. "If we have no fishing, what do we have to offer?"

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