

# Ocean Realm

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## ST. VALENTINE'S DAY MASSACRE

On June 10, 1993, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari declared the upper Gulf of California (Sea of Cortez) and adjacent Pinacate-Gran Desierto a Biosphere Reserve, the largest protected area in the world, covering 4,092,212 acres. The purpose of this Upper Gulf Delta Reserve is to restore the eroded marine resources, to protect the fragile environment from petroleum exploration, and hopefully to save the endemic totoaba (a large bass-like fish) and vaquita (the world's most endangered porpoise) from extinction.

After the celebration of this significant event, there was a feeling

among those who attended of self-congratulation and optimism that something was finally being done to help protect the troubled waters of the Sea of Cortez. Everyone went home gratified and content.

Two hundred miles away, however, along Baja's central and southern shores, the carnage silently and inexorably continues. Tons of sharks are being taken by commercial fishermen each night. Manta rays and non-target fishes from shrimp trawls continue to fall prey to the rapacious jaws of commercial fisheries. Because of the estimated 60 to 95 percent decline of gulf fisheries in recent years, more trawlers, more nets, and

more pangas are being deployed, depleting even further the vanishing resources of the Sea of Cortez.

Anticipating the total collapse of the gulf's fisheries, commercial fishing activities are now spreading further south, outside the gulf where Mexico's last remaining pristine treasures have, until now, escaped man's insatiable, destructive greed.

For over a decade the diving community has enjoyed the unique underwater wilderness of Mexico's enchanted Revillagigedo Islands, situated between 220 and 365 miles southwest of the tip of Baja California. The chain consists of three major islands: Isla Socorro, Isla San





Howard Hall

*"Ghost netting," remnants of lost or discarded fishing net entangle and kill hundreds of thousands of marine animals yearly.*

Benedicto, and Isla Clarion. These islands have earned the reputation of supporting large populations of sharks, manta rays, and pelagic species such as yellowfin tuna, wahoo, and billfishes. Occasionally, migrating blue whales and humpbacks will also visit the Revillagigedos, roaming close to the islands while feeding in the plankton-rich waters.

Unfortunately, this is all about to come to an end. Members of Sea Watch, an organization of Americans and Mexicans on a crusade to save the dwindling marine life of the gulf and surrounding waters, have recently noticed some ominous signs—on each visit to the islands since November 1993, they observed fewer and fewer sharks. Resident tiger sharks, usually present on almost every dive, were missing, while fewer hammerheads and reef sharks could be seen. Although manta rays still abounded, the signs were clear that commercial fishing had finally, and sadly, encroached on the very

heart of west Mexico's last marine realm. And like a cancerous plague, it will decimate all major fish stocks, and ultimately all marine life in this remote archipelago will suffer.

The Sea Watch group discovered that many of the boats fishing the Revillagigedos are Mexican "expeditionary" vessels subsidized by the government to find new, untouched fishing grounds. Even Clipperton Island, occasionally called the "forgotten island," is now being infested by hordes of Mexican commercial fishing boats illegally slaughtering sharks by the thousands. Located approximately 600 miles south of the Revillagigedo chain, and 670 miles off Acapulco, this two-mile-wide, French-owned atoll is one of the most isolated and least studied islands on earth.

Conservative estimates reveal that off Clipperton approximately 1800 sharks are killed per month with longlines and monofilament gill nets. Many sharks are harvested exclusively for their fins (finning) to be

shipped to the Orient. The rest of the mortally wounded sharks are discarded overboard. If this decimation continues unchecked, Clipperton's shark population will be seriously imperiled within a few months.

Commercial fishing is prohibited inside a two-mile buffer zone around all three of the Revillagigedo Islands. But on St. Valentine's Day, 1994, the news of a fishing massacre was revealed by eyewitnesses Terry Kennedy, a founding member of Sea Watch, and his companion Joyce Clinton. They reported the following:

"At dawn on February 14, 1994, while anchored at the south end of San Benedicto, we were awakened by two Mexican fishing boats laying longlines and gill nets on the reefs just 200 yards off the beach.

"At about 9:00 a.m. the *Unicap III*, a Mexican Department of Pesca vessel leased to commercial fishermen, began retrieving their nets as we watched helplessly. Our fears were realized when we witnessed two large manta rays hopelessly tangled in the nets. These were the two mantas we played with the day before. These gentle giants had fought hard to free themselves and were torn to pieces by the nets. Because of the damage to the nets, the fishermen decided it would be easier to cut the nets loose and leave them in the water along with the entangled, mutilated mantas. When they departed, they left behind thousands of feet of fine monofilament nets covering the reefs like spider webs. Being non-biodegradable perpetual traps, the nets will continue killing marine animals indefinitely.

"When they hauled in their longlines, only unusable reef sharks were hooked. As the dead or dying sharks came up over the stern, the lines were cut above the hooks and the sharks were thrown back overboard. The reefs were littered with dozens of dead and dying mutilated sharks.

"Meanwhile, another fishing vessel, the *Mero VII*, harpooned the first manta that swam close to the boat.



The eighteen- to twenty-foot animal was then gaffed with large hooks and lifted along the side of the vessel. Still alive, the manta was butchered with axes as the fishermen kept two severed wings.

"In one morning, over five tons of fish were killed, with more destroyed in the discarded nets. In the end, the slaughter yielded only two manta wings of questionable commercial use."

Award-winning underwater photographers Howard Hall, Stan Waterman, and Marty Snyderman all agree the Revillagigedo archipelago is one of the few places in the world where mantas and large sharks can be encountered any time of the year. A good part of Mexico's tourist trade is

environment but is also detrimental to Mexico's sagging economy.

Fortunately, the St. Valentine's Day massacre was recorded on video and aired shortly after on Mexico City's *Televisa*, which was ultimately televised in thirteen Latin American countries. Also, the Mexican Navy was immediately notified after the incident, resulting in the arrest of one of the boats and search for the other. According to naval sources, the rogue fishing vessels will be heavily fined.

The diving and sportfishing world is watching Mexico's reaction to this incident to see if an example will be set with heavy penalties, thus sending a strong message to the fishing industry, or whether the government

national park. If commercial fishing continues unchallenged, the Revillagigedo Islands will shortly go the way of the Sea of Cortez, a body of water once known as one of the richest marine realms on earth.

The overexploitation of the Sea of Cortez is having a disastrous effect on tourism, particularly in fishing towns such as Loreto, Bahia de Los Angeles in Baja, and most of the coast of Sonora on the mainland. Experienced divers also have long since left the Sea of Cortez in search of richer diving grounds in other parts of the world.

Whether Mexico is aware of its overexploitation problems is debatable. The attitude that Mexico's marine environment is the source of in-

exhaustible riches still persists in the minds of some Mexican politicians. The diving community must take some responsibility and make a commitment to provide the necessary outside international pressure to help Mexico protect their fisheries and marine environment. Since pelagic animals often migrate great distances, from one sea to another, these animals belong to the world community, not just Mexico. The unregulated and excessive exploitation of these animals, even in



T. Kennedy/J. Clinton

*Butchered alive for a gourmet meal, this manta's wings will probably be trimmed into cookie-cutter sized disks and sold as "sea scallops."*

paid by amateur and professional divers worldwide who travel to Mexico's remote islands to search for and to photograph these large creatures. Therefore, manta rays and sharks account for a significant portion of the Mexican tourist revenue. The tragic loss of these popular animals is not only destructive to the marine

will simply allow the vessels to return to sea with merely a slap on the wrist, as has been customary in the past. Mexico's response to this regrettable event will symbolize its resolve in stopping the slaughter in their seas.

The need for an instant ban on all commercial fishing within five miles of these remote islands is crucial. Better still, banning fishing activities entirely off these islands is recommended. Mexico should follow Costa Rica's example when it declared Cocos Island an offshore

Mexican territorial waters, affects not only Mexico's marine environment, but the rest of the world as well. □

Mike McGettigan is the founder of Sea Watch, a group dedicated to stopping the destruction of the Sea of Cortez. For further information on how you can help, contact Sea Watch 3939 N. Suttle Rd. #12, Portland, Oregon 97217, or FAX Sea Watch (503) 285-3673. In Mexico, Phone/FAX 011-52-112-55108.