



**In the early 1970's** when I first dove Archipelago Espiritu Santo it was amazing. Nowhere in the Sea of Cortez was there anything like it. Hundreds of hammerhead sharks and dozens of giant pacific manta rays lived there year-round. In 1981, El Bajo (near Espiritu Santo) was the number one place in the world to see hammerhead sharks. Hundreds of thousands of newly born yellowfin tuna boiled the waters around the island, offspring of the amazing congregations of tuna that used to breed in the spring between the tip of the Baja and Mazatlan. Blue and black marlin, gorging themselves on the huge schools of juvenile tuna, were plentiful along the deep drop off on the east side of the island. Pargo, cabrilla, grouper, parrotfish, and surgeon fish, too many to count, plied the waters off every point. The reefs were clean and full of healthy corals.

**Today**, that experience has vanished. Beginning in the 1990s, the reef fish of Espiritu Santo have been in steady decline. Unfortunately, that didn't change when the island was made a National Park in 2007. *Pistoleros* and *encerradores* using compressed air continued to take 20 tons of reef fish a night from the Bay of La Paz and the reefs surrounding Espiritu Santo National Park.



***The results can be seen [here](#).***

**In 2007**, SeaWatch Director and attorney Maria Ugarte successfully petitioned the Federal Government to stop compressed air from being used in any fish extraction. Building on that success, SeaWatch initiated a citizen driven vigilance program to help authorities stop illegal fishing and in 2010, in the program's first year of operation, we stopped the killing of over 500 tons of reef fish. The program has since evolved into a non-profit organization, called **Red de Observadores Ciudadanos (ROC)**, which in coordination with the Navy and the federal national fisheries agency, conducts routine patrols to stop illegal fishing.



During that same time, **Cabo Pulmo National Park** (58 miles south of Espiritu Santo) implemented a reef fish recovery effort based on a strict **no-take fishery zone** and has been recognized worldwide and is the only true success story in the Sea of Cortez. [Watch this video to see the results.](#)

**If the success of Cabo Pulmo can be duplicated at Espiritu Santo, next to a city of 350,000 people with a variety of user groups, it can be duplicated anywhere in the Sea of Cortez.**



In 2016 SeaWatch spearheaded a communication campaign called **Espiritu Santo es Parte de ti** to engage the public and by building community pride for the park and educating the citizens of La Paz that if they continue to eat parrotfish (a keystone species of reef ecology) they will never restore the reef ecology around Espiritu Santo.

**Watch this short video on recovery efforts.**

In just two years, the campaign's appeal to the public to **stop consuming parrotfish** resulted in 92 restaurants that stopped serving parrotfish and a return of reef critical herbivores like parrotfish and surgeon fish, and a notable decrease in algae on the reefs. The community's collective success was recognized in 2018 when Espiritu Santo National Park was given a prestigious IUCN award for management excellence.

Expecting continued improvement, we instead saw the ranks of federal authorities that regulate fishing and Mexico's parks were gutted. For example, federal fisheries staff in the Baja were reduced from 16 to 2. **The result is that fishing pressure, both legal and illegal, increased.** Worse, fish traps were introduced in the waters around Espiritu Santo and by 2020 they were ubiquitous in the waters around the park. Banned over 20 years ago throughout the Caribbean and Southeast United States, fish traps are indiscriminate killers of reef fish life.



## THE REAL WORLD



Where fish exist, fishing interests will find a way to take them. **The only solution is large "No Take" zones.** Scientists tell us that 30% to 40% of an area must be protected by a "No Take" zone to recover the ecology of reefs and reef fish<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, Espiritu Santo's "No Take" zones comprise only 1.4% of the park's waters leaving 98.6 % of the park open to spearfishing, commercial fishing and sportfishing.

<sup>1</sup> Erik Sala: No Take Zones Work

## A WINNING STRATEGY



**We know what works: the success of Cabo Pulmo and SeaWatch is committed to helping duplicate that success at Espiritu Santo.**

In 2021, we hired environmental attorney Camilo Thompson (who lead the effort in getting parrotfish protected on the Caribbean side of Mexico) to team up with “Espiritu Santo is Parte de ti” to adopt the following campaign goal for Espiritu Santo and to file all petitions and proposals before deadlines:

### **PROTECT PARROTFISH, ELIMINATE TRAPS, NETS AND CREATE A 1 KM “NO TAKE” ZONE AROUND ESPIRITU SANTO NATIONAL PARK**

**To date** we have petitioned Mexico’s environmental agency to permanently protect all parrotfish in Mexico’s Pacific waters (based on the results of a two-year survey of parrotfish populations and fishing pressure in the Sea of Cortez.

***Read the Spanish version of our presentation to Semarnat [here](#).***

And our **“no-take ”** proposal has been delivered to the environmental council and will be presented to the general council in charge of updating the management plan for the park.

***Read English version of our presentation [here](#).***

## EXECUTION OF OUR STRATEGY

We will use the once every 5 year update of Espiritu Santo’s management plan (currently in progress) to **protect all parrotfish within the park along with expanding the no-take zones around the park.** To that end, we will need the citizens of La Paz to understand what must be done and win their support as we anticipate that these changes will meet with resistance from some fishermen and fisheries authorities. To meet this resistance, we will take a proactive approach with a positive multimedia campaign plan and professional team.

