

Fang Ming

the first vessel in Latin America to be sunk intentionally as an artificial reef.

On April 18th, 1995, the Mexican Navy impounded a Chinese ship found in its territorial waters, carrying 157 illegal immigrants who had crossed the Pacific Ocean in search of a better life. The ship, named Fang Ming, had been underway for two months and, on inspection, the passengers and crew were found to be in poor health, in overcrowded conditions, with very little food and water. The vessel was directed to Puerto San Carlos, in Baja California Sur, and the crew and passengers were transported to the United States, where they were deported back to China.

After that the Fang Ming was anchored in Puerto San Carlos along with another confiscated Chinese ship called Lapas No 3. Mike Mcgettigan of Seawatch saw them while fishing in Magdalena Bay, and thought they could be sunk to make excellent artificial reefs for diving. Mike shared this idea with his friends and SeaWatch board member John Riffe, one of the pioneer divers in La Paz, and with Miguel Sanchez Navarro, former president of Pronatura, a Mexican non-government, conservation organization. Together they formulated a plan to make this idea a reality.

Pronatura assembled a coalition of donors to help with the funding, investigated the legal requirements, and managed the acquisition of the two vessels. These were never claimed by their owners, and in 1999 the Ministry of the Navy granted the transfer of rights of ownership title to Pronatura

Fortunately, John Riffe was a close friend of the admiral in charge of the Navy in La Paz and convinced him to join the project. The Navy consequently transported the two ships to Puerto Cortes on Isla Margarita in Bahía Magdalena and then cleaned and removed, by hand, hydrocarbons and other pollutants and toxic materials.



The Fang Ming rotting away in Bahía Magdalena in 1999 is now a major dive attraction at Espiritu Santo National Park in La Paz.

The vessels were then towed into the Sea of Cortez to the port of Pichilingue near La Paz, where the Navy spent 4 months preparing them for safe diving. Wide cuts were made in the hull for more light penetration and easy access for divers. Obstacles and loose materials were removed to create a safer diving environment.

The place chosen for the Fang Ming artificial reef was on the west side of Espiritu Santo Island, in an area protected from winds and swells, near a natural reef and outside the navigation channels.



The last minute of the Fang Ming in the surface.

On November 18th, 1999, the Fang Ming was towed to the site of the sinking. Anchors were used to fix the orientation of the hull in the direction of the dominant currents. The navy brought a fire fighting frigate to flood the hull compartments, and the bottom valves were opened, flooding the chambers of the vessel with thousands of litres of seawater. Two teams of divers and cameramen were inside the boat while it sank to be able to document the process. All of them described the experience as like being in a "giant washing machine". In less than two minutes the Fang Ming sank to the seabed and the divers that sank with it came out shaken but unharmed!



SeaWatch's John Riffe worked for months with his friends in the Navy preparing the Fang Ming and Lapas to be safe and clean dive sites in the bay of La Paz.

Today, 17 years later, the wreck of the Fang Ming enjoys the protection of the Marine Park and is full of life. Fishing is forbidden on the site, with the result that fish are plentiful and approachable. On our last visit, this November, we were able to closely observe a pair of green turtles on the deck, a sea lion resting inside the wreck all kinds of moray eels and lots of Cortez angelfish big parrotfish and groupers, and schools of snappers and grunts.



PHOTO: Paola Ruffo

A sea turtle swims in front of the commemorative plaque that gives recognition to everyone involved in the creation of this artificial reef.

The Fang Ming project clearly demonstrates that protecte-artificial reefs are tremendous generators of marine life and a sensational environment for diving.



PHOTO: Paola Ruffo

A sea lion thakes a breath from the air left by divers inside the Fang Ming.



PHOTO: Alex Double

The wreck has regular currents running through and over it which encourages the growth of black coral. The feeding polyps which are the live part of the "bush" are bright yellow!

This year Archipelago Espíritu Santo National Park celebrated 10 years of protection. It is the most visited island group by tourists in the Gulf of California and the Mexican Pacific, with a record number of more than 60,000 visitors per year. Fishing is also an important activity inside the natural protected area, but the type of fishing permitted and the areas where this activity can be carried out are defined.

However, the high demand for parrotfish on the market makes illegal fishing by "Encerradores" and "Pistoleros" still profitable. Tourism in conjunction with fishing activities at Espíritu Santo play an important role in the health of the economy of the city of La Paz and both activities rely heavily on a healthy marine ecosystem.

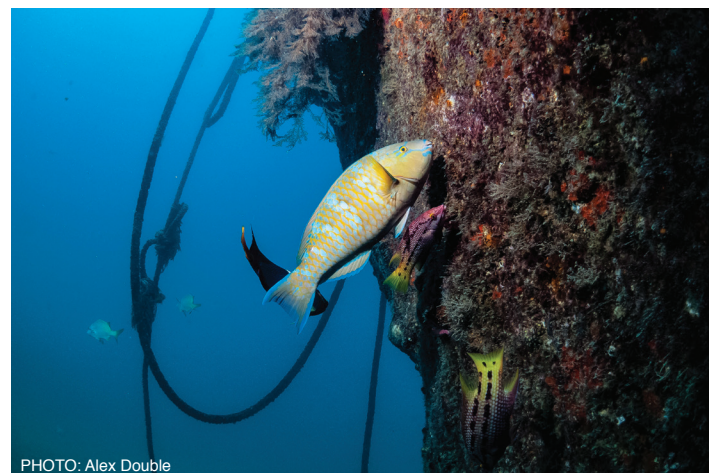


PHOTO: Alex Double

Colourful parrotfish graze on the algae growth that covers much of the wreck.

The "Espíritu Santo es parte de ti" campaign aims to encourage visitors and citizens of La Paz to take pride in Espíritu Santo National Park and help protect it by supporting citizen-driven vigilance and by not consuming parrotfish, a key species in the health of the reef ecosystem. After just one year of work, there is already a remarkable and visible recovery of reef fish populations at Espíritu Santo, thanks to citizen-driven vigilance and the joint efforts of a responsive Conapesca (Mexican fisheries) and an engaged public.

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