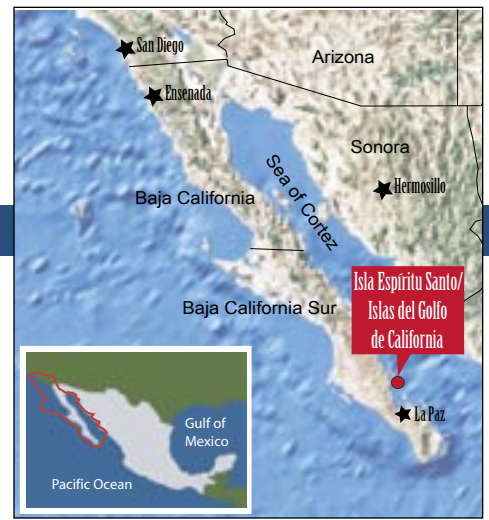


Mexico: Baja and the Gulf of California

# ISLA ESPÍRITU SANTO/ISLAS DEL GOLFO DE CALIFORNIA

*Historic Private/Public Collaboration Protects Pristine Island Archipelago*



**ecoregion** Gulf of California  
Xeric Scrub

**targets** endemic cactus species; mangroves; sandy beaches and dunes; black tailed jack rabbit; endemic reptiles; sea lions; blue-footed booby; osprey; magnificent frigate bird; heerman’s gull; yellow-footed gull; brown pelican; elegant tern

**stresses** tourism development; introduction of exotic species; unsustainable fishing practices

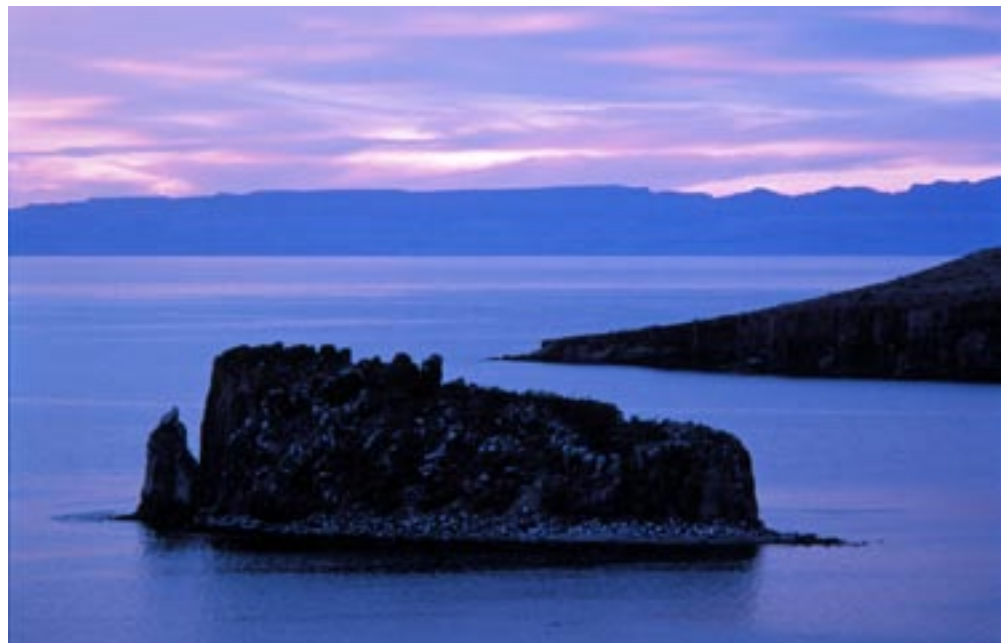
**strategies** in collaboration with local partners, secure protection of the privately owned islands through acquisition, conservation easements and/or other legal mechanisms; develop and implement tourism impact monitoring programs; ensure long-term financial support for site management; decree marine protected areas surrounding the islands

**results** with local partners and national government, acquired 23,383-acre Isla Espíritu Santo

**partners** Niparaja; Fundación de Educación Ambiental; National Commission for Protected Areas

**2005 funding need** \$650,000 to complete Isla Espíritu Santo acquisition; \$150,000 for conservation programs

**leveraging opportunity** TNC Wilson Challenge Grant Program



Isla Espíritu Santo is encircled by smaller islets and crystalline blue waters. © B. Evarts

Isla Espíritu Santo, an uninhabited island situated in the Gulf of California, is considered to be one of the most intact and unspoiled ecosystems in the region. Aptly named the Island of the Holy Spirit, Isla Espíritu Santo holds a spiritual allure for many who find inspiration in its pristine beauty and breathtaking vistas.

Located 20 miles north of La Paz in the Mexican state of Baja California Sur, the island encompasses 23,383 acres — roughly the size of Manhattan. Its landscape contains a brilliant contrast of multicolored volcanic striations, crystalline sea, sandy

white beaches and small lagoons surrounded by mangroves. Limestone cliffs dotted by endemic desert scrub are juxtaposed against a beach fronted by turquoise waters. The long, narrow island is encircled by smaller islets where colonies of sea lions sun themselves on sea-washed rocks.

Isla Espíritu Santo supports five species of mammals and reptiles that are found only on this island. It also boasts fifty-three species of regionally endemic plants that occur exclusively on Gulf of California islands.

Migratory and regional birds also inhabit Isla Espíritu Santo, including great blue and green herons,



Finback whales and a myriad of aquatic species inhabit the island's ocean waters. © S. Olof

snowy egret, osprey, turkey vultures, red-tailed hawks, kestrels and great-horned owls. Its surrounding waters contain well-preserved coral reefs, resident colonies of sea lions, five species of marine turtles and a myriad of aquatic species characteristic of the Gulf of California's outstanding marine biodiversity.

Part of an archipelago system in the Gulf of California that includes 900 islands, Isla Espiritu Santo is one of the most ecologically significant islands in the region. In recognition of their importance, the Mexican government designated the islands a federally protected area and a United Nations Biosphere Reserve.

### **An Unoccupied Island**

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that humans lived on the island as long as 40,000 years ago, but it has largely been left unoccupied for many years. Until recently, the island had been an ejido, or communal piece of property, that was given to Mexican landowners under earlier land reform programs.

Today, Isla Espiritu Santo is inhabited only temporarily by passing fishermen from La Paz, as well as tourists who visit the island in limited numbers. Travelers from all over

the world come to camp, hike, snorkel, scuba dive and kayak the island's coves and canyons.

### **Looming Development**

The pressure to develop the islands of the Gulf of California has intensified in the past decade due to a dramatic increase in tourism in La Paz and surrounding areas. In recent years, Isla Espiritu Santo's ejido landowners parceled out lots on the island and placed them on the speculative land market oriented towards tourism development. Developers soon began eyeing the island for tourism projects and several bungalows were constructed. Continued development would have destroyed the island's sensitive habitats and pristine landscapes.

Although Isla Espiritu Santo and the other islands of the Gulf of California are managed by the Mexican park service as protected areas, 12 of the largest and most biologically diverse islands are privately or communally-owned. As a result, these islands remain at risk for large-scale tourism development.

Others threats facing Isla Espiritu Santo and the Gulf islands include: introduction of exotic species; uncontrolled and unsustainable fishing

practices; and private and commercial development on properties encumbered by federal use restrictions.

### **What the Conservancy is Doing**

When tourism development began to threaten the previously unspoiled Isla Espiritu Santo, the Conservancy and its partners stepped up their efforts to protect this island and others in the Gulf of California. In February 2003, the Conservancy collaborated with the Mexican government and local and international non-profit conservation organizations to raise funds and purchase Isla Espiritu Santo. The purchase set an important precedent in Mexico for collaborative conservation and put Isla Espiritu Santo under the permanent protection of the Mexican parks service.

The Conservancy and its partners are now working to protect 10 other biologically critical islands throughout the Gulf of California through acquisition, conservation easements and other conservation mechanisms. The Conservancy is also working to: develop and implement tourism impact monitoring programs and sound tourism management practices; ensure long-term financial support for site management; decree a marine protected area surrounding Isla Espiritu Santo; decree the island archipelago as a World Heritage Site; eradicate exotic species; and improve the capacity of protected area staff and local conservation groups to manage the islands.

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