

Mexico: Yucatan Coastal Wetlands

# PEZ MAYA/SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE

## Coastal Development Threatening Gateway to "Where the Sky is Born"



**ecoregion** Mexico Mangroves; Quintana Roo Wetlands; Yucatán Moist Forests; Central Caribbean Biogeographic Region

**targets** mangroves; coral reefs; coastline; east tern; osprey; crocodiles; loggerhead; hawksbill; leatherback and green sea turtles; roseate spoonbill; manatees

**stresses** coastal development; inappropriate wastewater management; overfishing; unsustainable farming and ranching

**strategies** strengthen partner organizations; work with landowners to establish conservation easements; acquire critically threatened private land; promote sustainable land use and development practices with local authorities, communities and businesses

**results** purchased 64-acre Pez Maya property; completed and implementing five-year conservation plan for the reserve with partners and government

**partners** Amigos de Sian Ka'an; National Commission for Natural Protected Areas; Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve staff; local landowners

**2005 funding need** \$400,000 for land stewardship; \$300,000 for conservation programs

**leveraging opportunity** TNC Wilson Challenge Grant Program



The boundaries of Pez Maya contain almost two miles of pristine coastline. © E. Porter

Just 90 miles south of the vacation mecca of Cancun in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo lies Pez Maya, a postcard-perfect paradise. These 64 acres form a protected link between the Caribbean Sea and the interior of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, which at 1.6 million acres is Mexico's largest protected coastal wetland. Known as the place "where the sky is born," Sian Ka'an provides refuge to more than 100 species of mammals, 1,200 species of plants and 320 species of birds.

The boundaries of Pez Maya itself contain almost two miles of coastline and comprise a breeding ground for

threatened and endangered species like the osprey, American crocodile, manatee, and loggerhead and green sea turtles. Each year, from April to June, endangered migrant least terns establish a colony on the sandbank created by the mouth of the lagoon, one of only two breeding grounds known to exist in the Yucatan.

Nourished by the mangrove swamps farther inland, the coastal waters in front of Pez Maya harbor one of the most pristine coral formations in the entire Mesoamerican Reef system. These waters provide crucial habitat and are world-renown for their abundance of "sportfish"



Pez Maya serves as a breeding ground for loggerhead and green sea turtles. © N. Sefton

species such as tarpon, bonefish and snook. Wading-bird species such as the roseate spoonbill, white ibis, magnificent frigate bird and common black hawk depend on the shores of Pez Maya as their feeding ground.

### The People of Sian Ka'an

An estimated 1,400 people reside within the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve in small family ranches along the coast and in the reserve's two fishing settlements, Punta Allen and Punta Herrero. Another 1,500 people reside in the immediate area and regularly use the biosphere reserve's resources.

The primary economic activities supporting Sian Ka'an residents are fishing and at a smaller scale, agriculture and ranching. The reserve has also seen significant growth in the development of tourism activities such as sport fishing and ecotourism. Resource extraction also occurs regularly and includes wood and palm leaf extraction for domestic purposes and hunting for both self-sustenance and illegal commercial purposes.

### Encroaching Development

Far and away the greatest threat to conservation in Sian Ka'an is coastal

development. By 2006, the 80-mile swath of development that extends from Cancun to Tulum is projected to almost quadruple its capacity for tourists, increasing the number of hotel rooms to 80,000. Pez Maya lies a mere 15 miles south of this stretch and several developers have tried to acquire the property. With zoning designations as small as 100 meters, Pez Maya's shoreline was threatened to be subdivided into as many as 20 parcels.

Aside from coastal development, inappropriate fishing, agriculture and poor wastewater practices are also an ever-present threat to the coastal wetlands of Sian Ka'an and Pez Maya.

### What the Conservancy is Doing

Over the past decade, a partnership between The Nature Conservancy and Mexican conservation organization Amigos de Sian Ka'an (ASK), has ensured the protection of Sian Ka'an and the mosaic of plants, animals and natural communities it supports. The partners have worked with local communities in and around the preserve to promote sustainable resource use and "best" land use and development practices. ASK has been fundamental in de-

veloping cutting-edge, science-based information and recommendations to control and manage tourist development along the coast. Most recently, the Conservancy, together with ASK and the Mexican government's Commission for Natural Protected Areas, completed a five-year conservation plan for the reserve.

### Protecting Pez Maya

Moving forward with their strategy to preserve the biological integrity of Sian Ka'an, the Conservancy and ASK purchased the critical coastal area of Pez Maya on January 22, 2002. ASK now owns the title to Pez Maya and the Conservancy holds a conservation easement on the property.

The Pez Maya purchase has allowed the Conservancy and its partners to establish a critical barrier between the biosphere reserve and the unprecedented tourism development that is encroaching south from Cancun at a rapid pace.

### A Groundbreaking Purchase

The Conservancy and ASK are currently in the midst of a fundraising campaign to complete the financial obligations tied to the Pez Maya acquisition. As one of the first private conservation projects in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Pez Maya is groundbreaking in many ways and is a source of empowerment for the private conservation community of Mexico.

#### contact information

The Nature Conservancy  
Mexico Program  
Steve Walker, Director of Resources  
711 Navarro, Suite 410  
San Antonio, Texas 78205  
tel +1 [210] 224.8774  
fax +1 [210] 228.9805  
[nature.org/mexico](http://nature.org/mexico)