

## Evaluating inclusive marine conservation at scale in northern Honduras

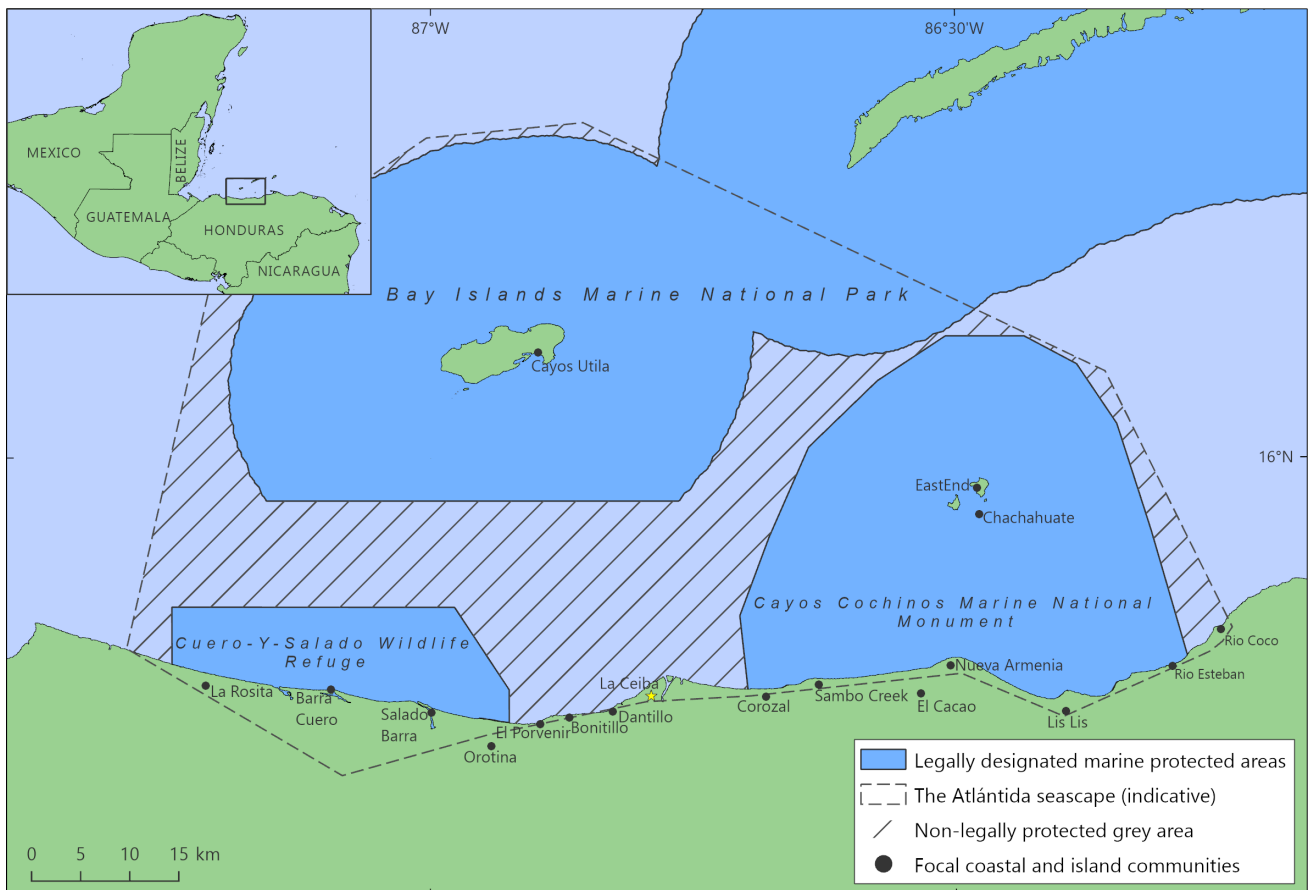
By Daniel Steadman, 26th January 2021

As conservationists, we have a tendency to only look forwards: to the next environmental challenge, the next game-changing solution, the next urgent project. Too rarely do we afford ourselves the time to look back, to pause for thought and to learn. Yet evaluation is a vital part of the conservation discipline: only by enabling and facilitating project teams to evaluate their work critically can we identify what works or adapt what does not. At [Fauna & Flora International](#) (FFI), we aim to strike a balance between planning, doing and learning, ensuring that projects have robust strategies in place that are driven by local context as well as the means to generate, analyse and reflect on a sound evidence base by which to demonstrate impact. My study presents the results of an FFI-led evaluation in 2019 of the Atlántida seascape project on the north coast of Honduras.



An inter-institutional excursion in Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge to recognise the importance of the protection it confers to marine life, led by FFI partner Fundación Cuero y Salado (FUCSA) and university members. Photo: FUCSA

The Atlántida coastal region is at the southernmost tip of the MesoAmerican Barrier Reef and encompasses the Bay Islands and the Cayos Cochinos islands. This region plays host to spectacular coral reefs, expansive mangrove forests and a bewildering array of charismatic wildlife species, from Antillean manatees and endemic iguanas, to nesting hawksbill turtles and vast shoals of yellowtail snapper. The seascape project began in 2015 and is a collaboration between FFI and five Honduran NGO partners. Three of these organizations (Fundación Cuero-y-Salado, Fundación Cayos Cochinos and Fundación Islas de la Bahía) play a leading role in managing the region's three legally established marine protected areas (see Map). The other two (Centro Estudios Marinos and La Asociación Pro Comunidades Turísticas de Honduras) focus on marine research and sustainable livelihood development, respectively.



The project was developed in response to the changes in this region following the introduction of the marine protected areas. Fishers now fish across greater distances and more frequently use each other's traditional waters. Environmental pressures from outside such as plastic pollution and sedimentation are also increasingly seeping inside the boundaries of protected sites. A newer, more interconnected approach was needed, and so the Atlántida seascape or paisaje marino project was born. It consists of five NGOs coordinating an inclusive, dynamic social network of protected area managers, government bodies, small-scale fishing associations and private sector actors to work between and beyond the confines of protected areas and, above all, to have this area identified and managed as a holistic seascape.



Fisher and his family crossing a lagoon in Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge. Photo: Fundación Cuero y Salado (FUCSA)

Given both the complex, geographically dispersed nature of the project and the need to document its impacts quickly in order to support the next stage of its development adaptively, I picked a participatory method of evaluation known as most significant change interviews. This highly non-prescriptive technique involves asking field-based project implementers and individuals from broader stakeholder organizations the simple, generic question 'what has changed?', with the intention of eliciting story-based reflections. I did this via video-recorded interviews with people from 14 organizations, representing 45% of the project's social network. I then analysed these interviews by documenting each separate story as a data point, organising those data points into a thematic framework and comparing and contrasting this with the project's intended goals, articulated using a theory of change approach.



Left: Volunteers that meet to clean beaches at Playa los Maestros Photo: Marcío Aronne. Right: A fisher, a ranger, navy personnel and partner organisation Fundación Cayos Cochinos (FCC) remove small illegal gillnets from waters of Cayos Cochinos Marine National Monument. Photo: Fundación Cayos Cochinos (FCC)

I collected 165 stories across 15 interviews, with the majority (145) expressed as positive changes. In terms of alignment with the project's intended aims, changes largely related to social capital (e.g. around how well represented people were in conservation management decisions), human capital (e.g. around how much support, training and liaison there was between managers and non-managers) and management itself (e.g. around the extent to which site zonation, monitoring and management activities were conducted collaboratively). We recorded some fascinating observations from interviewees: one NGO representative told us that a small-scale fisher dialogue mechanism set up through the project initially 'was questioned and nobody saw the point of it, since each fishing community already had a leader' but, once established, it gave fishers 'their own space to discuss their problems and [to] sit down with managers and representatives of local and national government to negotiate'. We found evidence of inter-site replication, with one NGO marine protected area manager claiming that the 'first "no-take zones" [i.e. areas of strict spatial closure within marine protected areas] established around Utila in 2018 have become more organized...learning from experiences in Cayos Cochinos'.



In Dantillo, a grey area fishing community, FFI partner organisations Centro de Estudios Marinos (CEM) and La Asociación Pro Comunidades Turísticas de Honduras (LARECOTURH) share information on fisheries management plans. Photo: Gerardo Ramón/LARECOTURH

Eighteen stories supplied tentative evidence of longer term ecological and social impact. Many of the protected sites in the Atlántida region are well-established and observations may therefore be partly the result of changes that began prior to this project. They are encouraging nonetheless, with one fisher explaining that ‘local fishers have noticed the return of some fish since implementing protection’, and another that ‘[although] I remember my grandfather and uncles used to hunt and eat manatee, managers and fishers protect the manatee now and I have noticed juvenile numbers increasing’.

The results of the study demonstrate the importance of social networks, multi-stakeholder bridging organizations and legitimate co-management in ensuring long-term sustainable marine protection. At FFI, we are committed to supporting the vital and impactful work of our Honduran partners in the Atlántida region as well as to continue enabling robust, inclusive impact assessment across all of our global marine conservation partnerships.



Yellowtail snapper fisher with his catch in Corozal, a grey area community. Photo: Gerardo Ramón/LARECOTURH

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The article [Towards ecological and social impact through collaborative governance of a seascape of marine protected areas in Honduras](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.



## Daniel Steadman

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