

This splendid low-profile reef system is the closest dive site to the island's major town of San Miguel.

Paradise Reef and Cozumel's more southerly adjacent reefs are protected in part by two treaties — the "1980 Underwater Reserve Treaty," which established boundaries and concurrently banned fishing, and more recently the "Ecological Equilibrium Law of 1988."

Then last August, without warning, the Mexican government announced that a multi-faceted building permit had been granted to a Spanish consortium known only as "Group H." Included within their permit was the planned construction of a marina, golf course, gift shops, a dredged artificial beach, along with the one project that would cause Cozumel's residents to never again be complacent about prior governmental assurances — a cruise ship pier on paradise reef.

This obscure group of investors concocted a study which showed that "Paradise Reef was dead," and that their plans to build would have no effect on the coral and fish that live there, because there were none.

Without question, divers who have visited Paradise Reef will denounce these bogus observations as preposterous. Paradise Reef is one of the most popular dive sites of Cozumel.



BRENDA WEAVER

This bountiful reef system stippled along Cozumel's western shore from El Presidente Hotel to just below the present cruise ship pier is also the island's most popular shore dive and night dive site. Adding insult to injury, the proposed pier was to be located dead cen-

ter of the most popular area of the reef, and clearly within the boundaries of the underwater reserve.

AN ISLAND UPRISING

What resulted when the true facts surfaced within this normally laid-back "mañana" community was nothing short of an island uprising. With construction to begin within three months of the announcement, dive operators, merchants and even the local taxi and construction workers unions banded together, gathering over 6,400 names on a petition to halt this ecologically disastrous project.

Considering that this figure represents more residents than have ever voted in any prior election, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was beginning to get the message. Then on Nov. 7, 1993, a crowd of over 2,000 supporters marched in protest to the government palace in Cozumel.

Finally, the coup de gras came when Mexico's version of "60 Minutes" interviewed dive operators such as Bill Horn of Aqua Safari, and other notable authorities.

After this nationally televised show aired, all of Mexico became aware of the clandestine efforts to deface one of Mexico's most valued natural resources. Ultimately, the Federal Prosecutor for the Protection of the Environment, jumped into the fracas. With an appeal for calm from the Governor of the State of Quintana Roo resulting, an announcement came on November 18 that the project had been terminated.

No one on the island will deny that a new cruise ship pier is needed. During a mid-week day it is not uncommon to see two ships at the existing pier with two or three other ships anchored just off San Miguel. With several suitable sites possible, each being north and outside the boundaries of the marine park, the community is eager to have the government approve and fund a site.

Unfortunately, the on-island ecologist needed for environmental approval was purportedly fired a few years back due to her censure of the conditions at the Acuario Restaurant, regarding the various marine fin-fish and turtles which lived in the then poorly-maintained tanks.

This elimination of environmental authority on the island, coupled with the inability to monitor and enforce cruise ship dumping, black coral harvesting or fishing within the park, was perhaps the

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