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DESTINATIONS

first ecological wake-up call for the island's residents.

PARADISE PRESENTED

Through all this, a ubiquitous feeling now exists on Cozumel. Darwin Zapata, owner of Equalizers Scuba Center, echoed the feeling of the community by stating, "Our government was on a rapid course to selling us out."

As the saying goes, "With every dark cloud there is a silver lining." During our visit to the island in December, one could sense a new environmental consciousness from nearly everyone we encountered. Diving with four different divemasters, there was a pervasive feeling that the residents of Cozumel are now the guardians of the reef.

Since the government provides no methods such as a marine patrol to enforce the laws set forth by the two treaties, reality has set in. As the self-appointed guardians, divemasters now conduct extensive pre-dive briefings to stress the importance of buoyancy control and protection of the reef. Without question there is a new eco-awareness sweeping the island.

One question still exists. What can we as dive travelers and eco-tourists do? As a diver, the answer is quite obvious: proper weighting and buoyancy control; a conscious effort to avoid fin damage; and never collecting marine organisms in designated sanctuaries.

As a tourist, one's economic impact on travel destinations is highly prized by governmental tourism authorities. This is why, when this story first broke, the fax machines lit up at The Dive House and Aqua Safari dive shops on Cozumel. Divers who became aware of this impending atrocity began faxing letters of protest to these environmentally outspoken dive operators.

Hundreds of letters were forwarded to the secretary of urban development, the governor, the President of Mexico and to the World Wildlife Fund, which ironically had honored the president with The Golden Arches Award for environmental sensitivity.

The dive operators and residents of Cozumel should be applauded for alerting the domestic and international media and visiting divers and causing an increase of support in time to curtail this project. The voice of one, or a few, would never have stopped this project. But, the voice of hundreds of dive travelers has a tremendous influence on political-environmental decisions. ▀