

Escalera Náutica: Stairway from Heaven to Hell

by Sonya Angelica Diehn | January 30, 2003

The ostensible goal of the Escalera Náutica, or Nautical Stairway, is to develop luxury tourism in the Gulf of California and Sonoran Desert region of northwestern Mexico by catering to U.S. pleasure boaters. However, the project, like its sister development scheme the Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), would have the overall effect of expanding transportation infrastructure for the country's increased participation in the prevailing global free trade model. It would encourage privatization of land and resources, shifting the area's economy from rural subsistence to foreign speculation, while wreaking havoc on the environment.

Like the PPP in southern Mexico, the Escalera Náutica represents nothing less than a continuation of the "authoritarian insertion of Mexico into the globalization process," according to Gilberto López y Rivas, a representative of the Democratic Revolution Party in Mexico.

Mexican activists are calling the plan for northwestern Mexico a blueprint for the greatest ecocide in history, because it threatens what late, great marine biologist Jacques Cousteau called "the aquarium of the world," an area that many consider the closest thing to heaven on earth.

The mega-development entails the construction of numerous transportation corridors, including 10 new commercial ports, and the modernization of 12 others, using 222 million of Mexican taxpayer dollars. Within a 12-year timeframe, the plan aims to create air, land, and water routes, among them a string of marinas up and down the Pacific and Gulf coasts of the Baja California Peninsula and the Gulf Coast of Sonora, so that wealthy tourists in luxury boats will never have to travel more than 120 nautical miles to the next stop—thus, a "nautical stairway."

While tourism is undeniably at the forefront of the proposition, its grand scale indicates intentions to go beyond that purpose, providing infrastructure for industrialization and free trade.

Mexican President Vicente Fox's administration, which is confessedly "of businessmen, by businessmen, and for businessmen," is a major proponent of this concept. Federal and local governments—with the support of foreign investors—signed an accord on this development in February of 2002.

It envisions four expanded access routes between the new ports and the U.S. border, 20 new airports, 34 new

golf courses, dozens of new hotels, and at least 6,500 new condominiums and villas. At least eight of the new hotels would be built inside the boundaries of natural protected areas.

The project is getting underway with the construction of an 80-mile train route and superhighway across the middle of the Baja Peninsula. This so-called dry canal or land bridge would extend from Santa Rosalillita on the Pacific side north of Scammon's Lagoon, a breeding ground for endangered grey whales, to Bahía de los Ángeles on the Gulf side, which shelters a fragile cross-gulf archipelago.

In the face of such intensive commercialization, the beautiful and unique Sonoran desert would be changed forever. From habitat destruction and fragmentation to increased pollution and the introduction of invasive species and hazardous chemicals, the environmental impacts would be devastating.

Although altered in some areas by development, agriculture, and cattle grazing, the desert is still one of the largest intact arid ecosystems in the world, stretching across 120,000 square miles. It covers southwestern Arizona, southeastern California, the northwestern portion of the Mexican state of Sonora, and the upper half of the Baja Peninsula. Sparsely populated, northern Mexico holds two-thirds of the largest and wildest portions of this unique ecosystem. The Sonoran desert is home to 17 indigenous groups, many of whom maintain land-based cultural traditions.

Ranging from the arid desert of the central Gulf Coast and lower Colorado River Valley to archipelago estuaries and mangrove swamps, the Sonoran region is home to more than 800 animal species and as many as 5,000



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species of plants. It has the greatest diversity of vegetative growth of any desert in the world.

The Sonoran region boasts 40% of Mexico's conservation areas, such as the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta Biosphere Reserve, the Pinacate and Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve, Angel de la Guarda Island, Tiburón Island, Scammon's and San Ignacio lagoons and the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve. The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and Organ Pipe National Monument (both in Arizona), along with four protected areas in the northernmost part of the Mexican Sonoran Desert, form the second largest protected drylands matrix in North America.

Including the marine ecosystem sheltered between the Baja Peninsula and the western coast of Mexico, the region holds the fourth-greatest level of biological diversity on earth. Threatened and endangered marine animals, such as the vaquita (an endemic species of porpoise and the smallest of all cetaceans), totoaba (the largest species of croaker fish in the world), sea turtle and grey whale make their homes here, as do such terrestrial species as the Sonoran pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, flat-tailed horned lizard, and desert tortoise.

Backward Steps

Imagine this arid terrestrial and fertile marine zone trammled by a projected 5 million tourists. Among other things, their droning boats would disturb the migration of sea mammals, and toxic spillage of petroleum on the land as well the sea would be an eventual certainty.

Similar effects have raised criticisms of Mexico's famed Caribbean mega-resort development of Cancún in terms of sustainability, which is nonetheless considered a success story by John McCarthy, head of the National Fund for the Development of Tourism (Fonatur), who is promoting the Escalera Náutica.

But the Escalera Náutica is more aptly termed an investment proposal than a development plan. It has not fostered cooperation or input from locals and represents the antithesis of sustainable development.

The Escalera Náutica also threatens to tear apart the social and cultural fabric of the region by turning the rural population into a labor force for tourism and other industry. Indigenous and protected lands would be transformed into waste dumps and playgrounds, while an expected increase in the presence of the police and army would contribute to the militarization of the region. The

plan would increase the GDP of the states of Baja California, Sonora, and Sinaloa, but only while concentrating wealth into the hands of foreign speculators.

Like Fox's related proposal encouraging foreign firms to build power plants in Baja California, the Escalera Náutica would turn Mexico into a colony of natural resource exploitation for the United States. It represents an infusion of multinational corporations into the region and a massive push for the dismemberment of ecosystems, both of which, ironically, are pitched as attractive values of the plan.

In a twist, several interpretive theme parks that reclassify elements of the natural world as mere commodities are proposed on Baja's gulf side.

The Escalera Náutica's dependence on fossil fuel for boating, automobiles, and planes reveals the project's goal of short-term profit, not quality of life or future-oriented planning.

The Escalera Náutica ties into the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) by building up transportation infrastructure to expand terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement across the Western Hemisphere, in an unpopular effort that has earned the proposal the name "NAFTA on Steroids."

As for labor and environmental standards, the Nautical Stairway provides another route for a race to the bottom that already is marked in other areas along the entire length of the hemisphere. Docks on the coasts of Baja and Sonora will certainly see the importation of cheap manufactured components from South America and Southeast Asia, which will be transported along new highways to compete with Mexican and U.S. goods, driving employment and salaries lower. Shipments of toxic or hazardous materials refused in the United States would be sent to dock on Mexican shores, where monitoring and enforcement receive less funding.

Due to the Mexican government's repression of democratic, independently organized labor, dockworkers in Mexico are conveniently not unionized. So, increased shipping capacity south of the border but close to the United States would also allow multinational corporations to undercut the strength of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU) north of the border.

Not a Done Deal

Despite great poverty, locals in northwestern Mexico have refused bribes for improved systems of electricity,

water, and schools that would lure them to take on the Nautical Stairway. Not consulting area inhabitants was the government's first mistake; continuing with the plan, against the wishes of many, is its second. Adán Hernández, a biology student in San Carlos, Baja California, speaks for many when he says, "People here don't want to give up their lives as fishermen to become waiters and janitors."

While construction of the marina on the Pacific side of the land bridge has already begun, more than \$1 billion of foreign investments is required for the entire development. The ongoing economic recession in the United States has spelled good news for slowing this development process perhaps even long enough for a people's intervention.

In addition, the demand for the tourism and other infrastructure may have been calculated at six times its actual level, according to a recent study done by the San Francisco-based EDAW Inc. that local business and environmental organizations asked the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to underwrite.

Mexican law may also be on the side of the people on this issue, holding back the project. The Mexican government is currently in violation of Article 8 of its environmental law, which requires specific impact statements for new development projects. So far, only a general impact statement has been issued for the Escalera Náutica.

What's more, the socio-political atmosphere throughout the country is charged with discontent that has resulted in victory for opponents of grandiose government plans, encouraging fight-back efforts. For example, in July and August, government attempts to expropriate land to build an international airport were met with militant resistance from residents in Atenco, a rural town adjacent to Mexico City, which led to government capitulation on the project.

Similarly, mounting public disgruntlement over the forced insertion of northwestern Mexico and the Baja Peninsula into the global economy may stop this project.

Environmental, indigenous, and community groups in southern California, Baja, southern Arizona, and northwestern Mexico are beginning to organize resistance. On the Gulf of California, just south of the U.S.-Mexico border, residents of Puerto Peñasco blockaded a shipment of nuclear components destined for Arizona in November of 2002, signaling residents' sense of unrest.

Fondo Mexicano para la Conservación de la Naturaleza, A.C. organized a meeting with Baja business people and

Fonatur in Mexico City on Jan. 22, to offer up an alternative to the Escalera Náutica that it authored together with Alianza para la Sustentabilidad del Noroeste Costero Mexicano-Alcosta, Coastal Resources Center, Visión Ensenada 2025, Pronatura Noroeste-Mar de Cortés, A.C.; World Wildlife Fund, Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C., Conservation International, and The Nature Conservancy.

Their proposal recommends downsizing the project to fit the market, concentrating nautical infrastructure development in places with proven demand, local and regional land-use plans based on scientific criteria to protect natural resources, creation of a regional biological corridor, and elaboration of government standards for locating marinas.

Meanwhile, Pro Peninsula is researching the project and has begun community organizing in Baja California. Wild Coast is building networks against the project from Imperial Beach, Calif. A group from Hermosillo, Mexico, issued demands for basic environmental and economic evaluations of Escalera Náutica. U.S. environmental groups are beginning to pressure the Mexican government to alter or abandon the idea, while vigilant indigenous tribes are becoming increasingly wary of threats to their lands.

The tide continues to rise against nautical ecocide, and the waves have begun to lap at the doors of the decision-makers.

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RESOURCES WEBSITES

Fondo Mexicano para la Conservación de la Naturaleza channels funding for environmental projects.
<http://www.fmcn.org/>

The **Coastal Resources Center** at the University of Rhode Island works globally to help people and coastal environments thrive.
<http://www.crc.uri.edu/>

Visión Ensenada 2025 is a planning process facilitated by various stakeholders in the nonprofit Foro Ensenada, A.C. organization.

<http://www.ensenada.org.mx/english.html>

Pronatura Noroeste-Mar de Cortés, A.C. provides information for conservation in northwestern Mexico.

<http://www.pronaturanw.org/>

Pro Peninsula works to strengthen the effectiveness of organizations on the Baja Peninsula by establishing links with funding sources, providing technical assistance and organizational development, fostering collaboration, and increasing public awareness of the organizations and the issues they address.

<http://www.propeninsula.org/>

La Escalera Náutica is devoted to informing the public about this project, to protecting the considerable ecological resources that it puts at risk, and to promoting alternatives that Mexico could pursue. The site lists pertinent media reports.

<http://laescaleranautica.com/>

EDAW, with 25 offices around the world, provides professional services in the fields of design and environment, community planning, urban design, landscape architecture, and natural resource management.

<http://www.edaw.com/>

Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum provides desert natural history.

<http://www.desertmuseum.org/desert/sonora.html>

Wildcoast is dedicated to preserving the coastal lands of the Californias.

<http://www.wildcoast.net/>

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is a nonprofit NGO involved with the investigation and documentation of violations of international laws, regulations, and treaties protecting marine wildlife species. It is an active and outspoken critic of the Escalera Náutica.

<http://www.seashepherd.com/>

The **Sea of Cortez International Preservation Foundation** works to increase public awareness and motivate change in policies for the purpose of preserving the plants, animals, natural communities, biological diversity and ecological balance in the region of the Escalera Náutica.

<http://www.mexicofile.com/seaofcortezfoundation/>

ONLINE READING

“Bight Bulletin” is a quarterly publication providing coverage of the Escalera Náutica.

http://www-csgc.ucsd.edu/NEWS/BB_Index.html

“Report on Environmental Conditions and Natural Resources on Mexico’s Northern Border,” by the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM) and the Instituto de Información Fronteriza México-Estados Unidos (InfoMexus) | Americas Program, January 2003

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/rep-envt/index.html>

“NAFTA: A Cautionary Tale,” by Kevin Gallagher and Timothy Wise | Americas Program, October 24, 2002

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/commentary/2002/0210ftaa.html>

“Resisting the Plan Puebla-Panama,” by Wendy Call | Americas Program, September 2002

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/citizen-action/series/02-ppp.html>

“Development in Mexico: As Established Policies are Nurtured, the Hopes of Many Mexicans Wither on the Vine,” by Talli Nauman | Americas Program, October 2001

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/reports/2001/bl82.html>

FURTHER READING

“Northwest Mexico Marina Market Analysis” | EDAW, December 20, 2002

“Proyecto de Escalera Náutica del Mar de Cortés: Documento Básico” | Fonatur, June 27, 2002

“Programa Mar de Cortés” | Semarnat, 2002

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