
Conserving the Beauty of Baja

By Bryan and Sergio Jáuregui, [Todos Santos Eco Adventures](#). *This article was originally published in the [Journal del Pacifico](#).*

Niparajá is the god of the now-extinct Pericu Indians of Baja California Sur whose mandate is to care for the oceans and the land. It is also the name of the dynamic conservation organization that, since 1990, has been engaged in the same tasks, working hard to protect the oceans and lands of southern Baja for a vibrant and sustainable economy. The organization has been successful on a variety of projects over the years, and two recent achievements in particular demonstrate how powerful previously disenfranchised local voices can be.

The Battle for Balandra Bay

Balandra Bay is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful beach areas to be found anywhere in the world. The waters are fantastically blue, the beaches stunningly white, the mangroves thrillingly vibrant and the iconic mushroom rock formation that sits at the mouth of the bay an instantly recognizable symbol of the city of La Paz. For generations of La Paz citizens Balandra Bay has simply been the town beach. It is where everyone in La Paz learned how to swim and it is where everyone in La Paz goes on a free summer afternoon. But very few people in the city realized that their beloved “town beach” was in fact privately owned, and had been for decades.



Balandra Bay

That all changed abruptly in 2005 when the owners began soliciting designs from architectural firms throughout Mexico for a major development at Balandra Bay, a project that would include a hotel, golf course, beach club and vacation homes. The potential for a

world-class resort is undeniable, and many of the firms responded with thrilling designs. But a partner in one of the solicited firms sits on the board of Niparajá, and the owners got quite a different design concept from that organization – namely, how to build a social movement.

At that point in time little had been done to protect the public spaces that people come to La Paz to enjoy. A few years before a resort complex had been built in El Mogote, a sand bar in the Bay of La Paz. Despite strong local opposition the owners were issued permits to build, and the citizens of La Paz were bitter. While ultimately the owners were forced to abandon the project for environmental noncompliance, they had already created a large group of buildings that are no longer maintained (some of them actually occupied), a tough daily visual reminder of what can go wrong with some development efforts.



Mushroom Rock at Balandra Bay

So when the owners of Balandra Bay announced their intentions to create a large resort complex, citizens and city government alike were galvanized to prevent a repeat of El Mogote. Niparajá helped direct that strong social discontent into a strong collective action through the creation of Colectivo Balandra. It involved thousands of citizens, scientists, researchers and NGOs, all committed to preserving Balandra Bay in a pristine way for public enjoyment. They organized a huge media campaign – “A mi me importa Balandra (I do care about Balandra)” – creating TV spots featuring everyone from the lady everyone took piano lessons from as a kid, to a popular local ranchero band, to favorite local luchadores, to the local water polo team (although that spot was later deemed too racy and wasn’t aired). Local bands gave free concerts in the streets and raised tons of money for the effort, while volunteers worked the crowds relentlessly to collect over 30,000 signatures on a petition to save Balandra.

That the public wanted to protect Balandra from development became very clear to all involved, but the federal government believed the area was too small for it to focus on and suggested a more local solution. The state, however, does not have the authority to declare places like Balandra protected as the water and beaches to 20 meters above the high tide line are under federal jurisdiction. The municipal government of La Paz therefore took matters into its own hands and declared the area around Balandra a protected area. But the action was easily annulled as the municipal government had no authority to create a protected zone. That is, they had no authority until Colectivo Balandra stepped in, got the law changed and gave them the authority. 6 years into the battle to save Balandra Bay, the municipal government of La Paz declared it a protected area.

It was an exciting, but short-lived victory. During a period of electoral transition in the municipal government, the owners of Balandra pressed their case and won back 80% of the land that the city had declared protected. It was then that all parties involved realized that Balandra was going to be shielded from development in any meaningful, long-term way, the federal government would have to take action.

It was now November 2012. The citizens and government of La Paz had been battling for Balandra for 7 years. For 6 of those years Felipe Calderón had been president of Mexico and his government was fully apprised of the situation. It was now the final days of his presidency and Colectivo Balandra was desperate to obtain federal protection from him; there was no way to know when or if the new government of Peña Nieto would focus on such a relatively small local issue. But the papers sent to Calderón for his signature simply lay on his desk. The clock ticked. Soon it was November 30, 2012, the last day of Calderón's presidency. The party faithful were gathered for a last dinner with no actionable items on the agenda. But Carlos Mendoza Davis, a senator from BCS, stood up in the middle of the meal and made an impassioned plea for the federal protection of Balandra Bay. He recounted how he had learned to swim there then how his children had learned to swim there and how Balandra was an integral part of the public life of La Paz, the capital of BCS. He made those gathered feel what a deep loss it would be to the community to give the land over to development. He made Calderón feel what a great thrill it would be to end his presidency with a declaration of Balandra's protection. This feeling carried Calderón back to his office where, in one of his very last acts as president of Mexico, he signed the paperwork that made Balandra Bay a federal Area of Flora and Fauna Protection. One crucial voice, at one critical moment, channeling thousands of voices united over millions of hours to preserve a pristine location central to the identity of a city. The god Niparajá was certainly smiling.

Cabo Pulmo: Who Gets the Money?

In many cases local communities embrace development. When the Spanish developer Hansa Urbana announced plans to build Cabo Cortés, a massive development with over 30,000 hotel rooms on the shores of the Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park, many of the residents of Cabo Pulmo initially loved the idea. They had overseen the effort to have Cabo Pulmo declared a protected National Marine Park – it is home to the Sea of Cortez’s only living coral reef and a UN World Heritage Site – and benefited from the



Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park. Photo by Carlos Aguilera

subsequent revival of the area’s fisheries and ecotourism industry. They saw the Hansa Urbana project as an exciting extension of what they had been doing and a great way to move their tourism industry into high gear. They loved the vision of jobs, infrastructure and prosperity that Cabo Cortés appeared to offer. In a town of meager resources, limited electricity and often impassable roads, it was a wildly appealing prospect. To some.

But there were those in the community who believed that the development would essentially destroy the very resources that the local citizens had fought so hard to protect in the first place, namely the Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park. (To get a sense of scale, the Hansa project envisioned 30,000 hotel rooms while all of Los Cabos today has only 17,000. In addition to the development itself, they would have to build a city for roughly 30,000 people to staff the development. The water needs alone for a project this size are staggering.) They also believed that most of the economic benefits of the project would flow to outside interests and do very little for the livelihood of the town. These citizens reached out to Niparajá and a coalition of like-minded organizations , who began working to develop a large community sustainable development process in Cabo Pulmo.

In the meantime the legal and media teams were scoring big points and Hansa sold the development rights for Cabo Cortés to a Spanish bank. In response, Greenpeace in Spain went out and met with individual Spanish retirees whose pension plans were being invested in Cabo Cortés via the bank to inform them of the risky nature of the investment and thereby bring more pressure to bear on the project. Actions such as these combined with the unraveling Spanish economy, Hansa's poorly constructed environmental impact assessment, and the collective outrage of global environmental groups ultimately bankrupted the project in late 2012.

But they'll be back. So Niparajá is working with the local Cabo Pulmo community on alternatives to combine social and economic development with the health of the Park. Not only is the continued resurgence and well-being of Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park important in and of itself, but a healthy marine park that attracts visitors is also one of the best ways for local businesses to prosper and have the means for controlling the destiny of their community. As Tim Means, one of the founding board members of Niparajá puts it, "The most practical reason for local communities to preserve their natural resources is that they can make more money that way. Visitors will pay to enjoy the pristine natural beauty of Baja. If that is destroyed, what reason would they have to come here?" Adds Amy Hudson Weaver, Director of Niparajá's Marine Conservation Program, "Beautiful colonial cities, colorful traditional handicrafts, indigenous peoples living a unique way of life – none of these are found in Baja. People go to mainland Mexico for these things. People come to Baja first and foremost to enjoy our unspoiled nature. If that is destroyed, by accident or design, then the whole economy of BCS is at risk."



Moving Forward

Theodore Roosevelt once famously quipped, “If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn’t sit for a month.” Development will happen in BCS and groups like Niparajá and communities like Cabo Pulmo see that it can be positive for local residents. But to ensure that it is, Amy Hudson Weaver believes that the citizens of BCS need to take hold of their development destiny by embracing the legal tools at their disposal, namely municipal planning and zoning. There are 17 major approved development projects on the East Cape alone, and no organization has the resources to ensure that they are all implemented with the least environmental impact and greatest financial benefit to local residents. Municipal zoning plans and regulations have been created for Los Cabos and La Paz, but never implemented. Few of the other municipalities or districts in BCS have developed any sort of plan at all. If BCS is to be successful in preserving its resources for future generations, Niparajá believes the communities should decide now what they want developed and how, before outside forces decide it for them. Otherwise, in a few years time we’ll all be kicking ourselves in the pants and not able to sit for a very long time.

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