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Dispatches from the Field: 26 August 2015. Puerto Aventuras, Mexico, along the Mayan coast

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Editor's note: Dispatches from the Field is a new feature in which Tundi will be introducing us to places, experiences, issues, and solutions from her ecosystem-based management and ocean planning work around the world. It will be a bi-monthly feature that will alternate with her Tundi's Take pieces.

26 August 2015. Puerto Aventuras, Mexico, along the Mayan coast

I, along with 30 other Sustainable Oceans Lab* compatriots, have just stumbled out of vans that brought us from the small fishing town of Punta Allen located on a small island off the Mexican Caribbean coast to our conference center in Puerto Aventuras. We've been on a Learning Journey – not a field trip, but an expedition to help us think beyond our biases and past experiences and look at a community and its marine management challenges with a fresh set of eyes. For some of us, it's not easy letting go of our preconceptions. Having first worked in this region 30 years ago and written about the success of the Punta Allen fishery ever since, I've been trying hard to not be arrogant, to push aside the feeling that I already know the place and its story. But, guided by our very able facilitators, we've just experienced what is for some of us a known place as if we'd seen it for the first time.

Right now we're tired, queasy, shell-shocked – partly from the jarring 90 km journey from the peninsular village that takes a full 4 hours due to the rutted, washed-out dirt and sand road. But we're also off-balance from the experience of moving between the unreal, contrived, garish, and wholly unnatural atmosphere of the mega resort where we are meeting (a resort built atop what was some of the most beautiful mangrove, cenote, and scrub that I have ever seen – of which there is now not even a trace) and the real world. Punta Allen is as real as it gets – an iconic fishing village that has become a case study of how a coastal community maintaining strong links to the sea can prosper from self-regulation. Like everywhere in the real world, life is complicated there, and all is not as it seems.

The community has evolved its practices and institutions largely in isolation from the teeming, touristic world to its immediate north. Locals organized themselves into a fishing cooperative decades ago, and the town grew to depend on the sea for two main sources of livelihood – fisheries and ecotourism (early on, fly-fishing for bonefish and tarpon, now bird-watching and snorkeling as well). The community's primary source of income is a live spiny lobster fishery in which free divers scoop adult lobsters from small structures called 'casitas' that give lobsters shelter. By parceling out tracts of the sea to members of the limited-entry cooperative, they've created real buy-in and fostered a strong conservation and sustainability ethic. The town is small but neat and prosperous; open doors and unlocked boats suggest crime is non-existent. And virtually every person we pass on the street or on the water greets us with a broad smile.

An uncertain future

But the Punta Allen case is also messy. The apparent harmony we see obscures a history of fits and starts in the cooperative's self-organization and periods of financial ruin and discord. The future is uncertain as well. Some recent disappointing harvests raise questions about the lobster fishery's sustainability. If the road is improved, development pressures may well test the will of the community to resist mega-development (though the town is deep within the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, which one would hope would stave off the kind of horrific resort development taking place along the rest of the coast). There is the Kanan Kay (Mayan for 'guardian of the fish') Alliance**, a coalition of 46 diverse stakeholder groups working to make the region's seas and livelihoods more sustainable. But as with all such efforts, the alliance's fate is uncertain, depending on funding, leadership, commitment, and good will.

And, finally, then there are the bigger issues: climate change, its impact on the reefs and the fishery, and sea level rise and storm risk that make the community more vulnerable. And what is to become of the very real but not well-understood current threat – waves and waves of Sargassum weed washing ashore, creating huge stinking mats of sulfurous decay that threaten both tourism and coastal ecosystems? There is a theory that these massive inundations of weed affecting the shorelines throughout the Antillean islands, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean are the result of increased nutrient discharges from the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers in South America. If so, this phenomenon could well be the poster child for the need for an integrated approach to managing ecosystems and illustrate why preserving idyllic communities like Punta Allen may require real and lasting EBM, at a scale much larger than we're used to considering.

Maybe the most important lesson of the Learning Journey is that we still have a lot to learn, even about the places we thought we knew so well.

*Learn more about the Sustainable Oceans Lab including team members and implementing institutions at <http://sustainableoceanslab.org>.

**Learn more about the Kanan Kay Alliance at www.alianzakanankay.org/en.

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