



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: Loving Cozumel, The reef that unites us

Destination, Country: Cozumel, México

Submitted by: Beatriz Barreal CEO & Founder of Riviera Maya Sostenible

In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

Cozumel Island, a natural treasure of coral reefs and scuba diving paradises, inspires heroic actions for the preservation in health of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System and its direct connection to human activity and the species of its magical biodiversity associated on land.



Summary:

Cozumel is a community strongly rooted to its land, its history, its reef and its jungle... it is the diving paradise in the Mexican Caribbean. An island of history and tradition.

The Mexican Caribbean, on the coast of the state of Quintana Roo, is turning its history around, and is seriously searching for mechanisms to diminish the social, economic and psychological differentials among its population, creating conditions for shared prosperity.





2023 TOP 100

GOOD PRACTICE STORY

TOP100 Competition Year 1 in Cozumel Island, has been a wave that opened the paths of connection between jungle and reefs, between citizens and companies that dedicate their lives to the protection and restoration of marine and terrestrial ecosystems, which, connected in a great tropical life system, give life to each other... and all in a great symphony, give life to the Magical Island of Cozumel. Thus, we discover that the good state of conservation* of the reef surrounding Cozumel is due to the great efforts of heroes who have committed themselves to its restoration (*2022 MESOAMERICAN REEF REPORT CARD, HEALTHY REEFS FOR HEALTHY PEOPLE).

<https://www.healthyreefs.org/cms/report-cards/>



Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Cozumel (from Mayan: Kosom lumil 'Golondrina, Land of the swallows') is a Mexican island, with an extension of 48 km from north to south and 14.8 km from east to west (647.33 km²), the third largest island and the second most populated in the country. It is located nineteen kilometers off the coast, just off Playa del Carmen, in the Caribbean Sea, and is one of the 11 municipalities of the state of Quintana Roo.

In 2016 it was included by UNESCO as part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, for its unique characteristics, part of the second largest barrier reef in the world, the only island in the world with the presence of jungle, with the largest number of bat species and samples of 40% of all biodiversity of the Yucatan Peninsula and at least 27 types of endemic vertebrates. The numerous archaeological vestiges that exist in all the surface of Cozumel show the high cultural level and social organization that the Mayan culture reached in the island. By the year 1200 Cozumel was the main link in a commercial network that reached distant areas as far as Central America and all along the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula and part of the Gulf of Mexico.

It is worth mentioning the devotion of the Cozumel Mayans to the goddess Ix Chel, deity of the moon, fertility and birth, who had her main sanctuary on the island, giving rise to a pilgrimage rite of the entire Mayan world to the island.

Today, it is known worldwide for its paradisiacal aquatic scenery among reefs and sites such as El Cielo, La Pared, Laguna Chankanaab... and many treasures that connect with the amazing diversity of underwater life of the Mesoamerican Reef surrounding an island, Cozumel Island, in the Mexican Caribbean, dressed in the amazing jungle of Quintana Roo.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

COZUMEL is an example of solidarity among its population, its roots to the land and its love for its traditions. Therefore, raising the voice to take care of its REASON FOR BEING... a reef that unites and gives life, is a great opportunity to generate more awareness and concrete actions for the protection and preservation of the natural capital of the island, jungle, sea and reef that are connected to each other.

The climatic conditions generated by global warming have affected all the corals in the world, Cozumel has not been the exception, and it is understood that these climatic conditions are largely the result of anthropogenic activities.

The search for inspiring stories in this TOP100 Competition Year 1 for Isla Cozumel leads us to find extraordinary initiatives that for decades have made conservation and preservation THEIR REASON FOR BEING.

Coral eutrophication, bleaching, damage from a category 5 hurricane like Wilma in 2005, have been factors that have hurt Cozumel's reef. However, there, with an advanced vision of conservation, a tourism company was born in 1984, SAND DOLLAR SPORTS founded by Suzanne Fernandez, recognizing from the beginning of its operations, that a part of its income from water sports related to the reef, should be allocated to the conservation of the reef. At the same time, in Cozumel, authorities and civil society, in a firm union since 1983, created the FUNDACIÓN DE PARQUES Y ARRECIFES DE COZUMEL, with the purpose of having a space for the rescue, promotion and diffusion of the cultural, natural and historical heritage of the island.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

Cozumel Island, a natural reef treasure and diving paradise, inspires heroic actions for the preservation of the health of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System and its direct connection to the biodiversity of the associated species on land.

"SAND DOLLAR SPORTS is a company that has been offering diving experiences in the reef area of Cozumel since 1984. Since its founding, Suzanne, creator of the company, was ahead of the vision, and knew, at the beginning of operations, that part of its income should be destined to the conservation of the reef. The passage of time, global warming, eutrophication, bleaching, hurricanes and tourist overpopulation... have damaged the island's natural capital. Faced with the deterioration and threat to the reef, it has taken action and undertaken a formidable mission to safeguard, protect and regenerate the barrier reef and associated species on land.

Since 1984, Suzanne has been committed to the implementation of sustainable and regenerative tourism and partnerships for the protection of the reef and its surrounding environment. Since then, she has instilled in her team the urgent need to care for and protect the natural heritage. In memory and respect to Suzanne, since John Flynn took over the company's management, they have carried out heroic work of reproduction, cultivation, anchoring of structures, recording of underwater life, generating alliances with other organizations, volunteer programs and direct involvement of tourists in the reef rescue work, with surprising results, because today Cozumel is the region in the entire Mesoamerican barrier reef in the best preservation conditions.

As a central part of its direct intervention work in the barrier reef rehabilitation efforts following the destruction by Hurricane Wilma in 2005, Sand Dollar Sports invested \$40,000 USD in the placement of 100 Reef Balls to secure fish habitat and the return of the coral reef systems that were destroyed. As part of this investment, the government stepped in and provided one million pesos to expand the area of artificial reef systems by placing more fish habitat in the surrounding area. An additional effort involved - Installation of the ZOE sculpture and buoy zoning for coral rehabilitation. Another key part of the strategy is tourist involvement and awareness of the coral rehabilitation program. Therefore, it has developed tourist experiences that include training with experts on the concepts of coral reproduction and restoration, observation of coral spawning and reproduction in the aquarium, a hands-on program on coral reef rehabilitation projects, snorkeling tour of the coral gardens to observe the coral transplantation procedure, coral collection and identification, as well as beach clean-up activities. A student contest based on gaming minecraft has even been generated to generate sculptures with electrification to attract calcium carbonate and magnesium hydroxide molecules, with shapes designed by students, who take ownership of it, and get involved in its growth.

All of the above, seeks the sum of awakened consciousness for the care and protection of the reef, residents, visitors, students and every possible person to make them participants in conservation efforts for future generations.

It is a regenerative and consciousness-raising tourism model, a new way of proposing the exploration and experience of a destination, which allows the visitor to understand and preserve the local ecosystem, while protecting the environment.

These activities are done in partnership with the local non-profit organization "Cozumel Coral Reef Restoration AC". Proceeds from this activity support the Coral Farms program in Cozumel, allowing

Cozumel Coral Reef Restoration to continue its efforts to replenish coral reefs, as well as educate and empower others to care for and improve reef health in particular, and all marine-terrestrial biodiversity in general. All participants receive the "Cozumel Coral Reef Restoration" certificate of participation.

For its part, THE PARKS AND MUSEUMS FOUNDATION OF COZUMEL carries out various programs to encourage the rescue, promotion and dissemination of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of the island. Being today in Cozumel, an engine for raising awareness and preservation of treasures with a high degree of commitment; in this story we dive to study a program of protection and education on the ecosystemic importance of bats in Cozumel. Through this program, it provides environmental education workshops in the Punta Sur natural park, the Center for Conservation and Environmental Education and the archaeological zone of San Gervasio, about the ecological and cultural importance of bats on the island of Cozumel, through field trips where the citizens in general can learn about and appreciate these flying mammals.

These initiatives together represent a sum of wills for the preservation, restoration and conservation of Cozumel's barrier reef, until achieving the good health of the reef in the Mesoamerican Reef Report 2022 of "Healthy Reefs for Healthy People").

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

Cozumel has an exemplary model of rescue, promotion and dissemination of the NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL HERITAGE OF THE ISLAND, a Foundation that is the result of the effort and participation of citizens of Quintana Roo, mainly of Cozumel, coupled with concrete actions of committed authorities, who since 1983 initiated actions in favor of the Chankanaab Lagoon, to ensure the survival and development of species of marine and terrestrial flora and fauna. Thus, growing year after year in equipment and scope, today they are dedicated to execute the previously established work in the promotion and dissemination of historical cultural heritage, conservation and environmental education, education and social assistance, with qualified and committed personnel to contribute to the improvement of our quality of life, based primarily on the tourist vocation of Cozumel.

This axis has undoubtedly created a favorable ecosystem to join public and private wills to solve the challenges of growth, tourism and the very life of a reef paradise.

It highlights the environmental awareness on the island, with the murals and environmental awareness efforts of the local population. The vision and leadership of a company like Sand Dollar Sports has been one of the key factors in this story of successful and heroic rehabilitation of the barrier reef in Cozumel, always driven by a strong awareness for the care and preservation of marine and coastal ecosystems. Maintaining the services of these ecosystems both for economic benefit and for the enjoyment of present and future generations has been present in the company's actions.

This has been reflected in the constant support of initiatives within and outside the company in the area of environmental care. The company's vision has always favored the fundamental principle that tourism activities provide the opportunity to interact in a respectful manner with the ecosystems and the local community, thus ensuring the protection of both, and that the economic benefits produced are reflected in investments for environmental preservation and in the community.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

The challenge for all stakeholders on the island is undoubtedly how to balance urban growth and tourism in its new modalities, such as cruise tourism, with the preservation of an island with various mechanisms to protect its natural capital, among others, that the Cozumel Reefs Marine Park is a Natural Protected Area and Ramsar Site, rich in terrestrial and marine biodiversity, against the advance of development.

Specifically, the protection and education program on the ecosystemic importance of bats in Cozumel, of the Cozumel Parks and Museums Foundation, has faced the prejudices and lack of knowledge that is usually held about this species, generally feared for no reason because of its nocturnal habits, and the myths of popular culture well known in contemporary fantasy literature.

At the business level, since Sand Dollar Sports, the main difficulties have been to train personnel to orient their daily actions towards more sustainable practices. Likewise, achieving the correct interpretation of the new regulations for customers has been a challenge. However, some of the initiatives have benefited the company economically by representing savings in resources and costs (saving water, electricity, purchase and disposal of plastics and fuel).

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

Locating stories of inspiration in Cozumel towards the TOP100 Competition Year 1, has been a delight of discoveries of historic actions - for almost 4 decades - of authorities and visionary entrepreneurs who have invested time, resources, talent and dedication to extend the culture of care, with extraordinary results that today, give them the qualification of the best state of health of the reef in its circle of protection of the Mesoamerican barrier reef.

Both stories converge in active coral restoration and reproduction programs, specifically by fragmentation, "wet" laboratories, electrically powered sculptures monitored in real time, rescue of fragmented corals, cleaning, among other specific activities. Also, both work hard on environmental education for both locals and visitors, with special emphasis on children, who are the seed of hope for a more sustainable world. Sand Dollar Sports, being a 100% tourism company, and the Parks and Museums Foundation, being a social action organization, also promotes conscious tourism whose income is transformed into programs for the social, cultural and awareness development of the island's population.

CORAL REEF REHABILITATION, BY SAND DOLLAR SPORTS:

- Creation of the Cozumel Coral Restoration program and project with a group of local marine biologists, in alliance with "Global Coral Reef Alliance" (GCRA), "Cozumel Coral Reef Restoration Program" (CCRRP), "Biorock" and Qualti AC
- Development of tourist experiences that include training with experts on the concepts of coral reproduction and restoration, observation of coral spawning and reproduction in the aquarium, a practical program on coral reef rehabilitation projects, snorkeling tour through the coral gardens to observe the coral transplantation procedure, coral collection and identification, as well as beach clean-up activities
- Study and characterization of reefs that are resistant to changes in the physical and chemical conditions of the water, in order to promote their reproduction
- Investment of about USD \$80,000 in ecosystem rehabilitation projects (reefs and mangroves)
- Since 1989, implementation of a sunscreen-free policy to protect corals

- Coral training program for certified divers
- Installation of ZOE sculpture and zoning with buoys for coral rehabilitation
- Travelife and GreenFins PADI certifications
- Exhibition of timely information on local culture and natural capital
- Talks and workshops for children and young people in the community (Eco Guardianes, Instituto Cumbres, DIF-PANAR, DIF-Casa Filtro, Bej Zamná Cozumel)
- Environmental education activities and linkage with institutions
- Inspirational contests with contemporary themes such as gaming minecraft to involve the student segment, even from other latitudes "Minecraft Underwater World"

FUNDACIÓN PARQUES Y MUSEOS DE COZUMEL

Its reason for being and doing becomes actions and programs to promote art, culture, environmental conservation, education and social development, in which children, youth and adults of all ages participate. It currently offers 16 artistic and cultural workshops, with 550 scholarships to students of all educational levels; it has 12 permanent conservation and environmental education programs, and has been a pioneer in sea turtle protection and beach cleaning for more than 30 years.

Specifically in the case of the work for the protection of the Island's bats:

- More than 500 people have been trained and sensitized in the different workshops and trainings carried out
- Favorable response from the island community that has responded with reports of bat rescues in the urban area of the island (+70 reports)
- Recognition of being the island with the greatest richness of bat species in Mexico and the Caribbean: 9 species corresponding to 3 families of bats
- Record of unique endemic species throughout the Caribbean
- Registration of species originating from Cuba, brought by natural phenomena
- Organization and delivery of the "1st International Course on Biology and Methods of Neotropical Bat Studies", with the collaboration of researchers from the University of Costa Rica and the University of Ulm in Germany
- Mangrove planting" program
- Active participation in coral restoration, with living laboratories

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

The model that unites wills is already a collaborative governance that values SDG 17, and in Cozumel, the collaboration of diverse actors - public and private sector - is evident, involving actors of society who are passionate about the WELL-BEING of biodiversity, recognizing it as the MAIN ASSET OF THE ISLAND.

A foundation dedicated to environmental, cultural and social education, which was born from the initiative of a committed society, 4 decades ago, together with the political will that favored this impetus, creates social, cultural and educational ties that are protecting more and more spaces, where its activity creates an echo. A company with an advanced vision, it is a spearhead to make observation tourism a participative, immersive and highly transforming tourism.

In conclusion, a model of Foundation dedicated to preserve the natural and cultural capital is an advanced example of conservation, and hand in hand with companies that make traditional tourism, an activity of awareness, CREATES A CHANGE OF BEHAVIOR IN RESIDENTS AND VISITORS, that adds



from the local, to the global solutions that urges our planet, especially, solutions that are inspired by LOVE. AMANDO COZUMEL is an example of the change that tourism can make.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

VIDEO STORY

https://youtu.be/4j_pEs8_uzg

