

Saving Mangroves



Red mangroves in the Sian Ka'an UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Mangrove Warbler



We need healthy mangroves, but have destroyed up to 50 percent of all mangroves around the world in the last 50 years. This habitat could disappear completely, within as little as 100 years, if we do not act to protect it. Mangroves buffer coastal communities from flooding and storms, and provide habitat for thousands of species of birds, mammals, and marine species. Recent evidence suggests that mangroves sequester carbon more effectively than any other tropical forests.

ELAW Staff Scientist Heidi Weiskel traveled to the Yucatán twice this year to collaborate with partners at the Southeast office of Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA, Mexican Environmental Law Center). CEMDA is working hard to protect marine and coastal ecosystems from short-sighted development schemes.

"The tall, healthy mangroves within the Sian Ka'an UNESCO Biosphere Reserve on the Yucatán Peninsula are a spectacular example of what this ecosystem can look like when its protected status is taken seriously," says Heidi. "There are active fisheries in this region, as well as robust turtle and bird populations, and a thriving ecotourism industry."

Coastal developers make promises to restore mangroves, but these efforts often fail. Heidi and

Alejandra Serrano, the director of the Southeast office of CEMDA, visited a failed mangrove restoration project in Puerto Morelos (see photo).

"The local hydrology and sediment conditions were not considered," says Heidi. "The mangroves were planted without accounting for the tidal cycles or the freshwater flows at the site. The soil dried out around the plants and they could not take root and thrive."

In September, Heidi teamed up with CEMDA's new Staff Scientist, Minerva Rosette, to review plans for a major housing development near a protected mangrove forest, and an enormous tourism complex proposed for Holbox Island. The tourism complex would cut channels through pristine mangroves to increase waterfront acreage and build hotels, villas, condominiums, offices, shopping plazas, and roads, to service thousands of visitors. The project would devastate Holbox's rich fisheries and stunning landscape, and likely harm the whale shark population.

Heidi and Minerva evaluated different strategies for measuring the carrying capacity of Holbox, and the most effective way to communicate the true impacts of the proposed tourism complex to the Holbox community.

Minerva is an engineer by training and spent the past three years using GIS and other tools to help communities protect the Urique-Batopilas biological corridor.

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Heidi also worked with CEMDA Staff Attorneys Raquel Campo and Ximena Ramos. Ximena is a former ELAW volunteer who recently received an LLM in environmental law from the University of Oregon School of Law.

The key to ELAW's work is identifying strong local partners, because they know best how to protect coastal communities and the environment. We provide our partners with the tools and resources they need.

We applaud Alejandra and her team for their hard work protecting the Yucatán.



L to R: Heidi Weiskel, Minerva Rosette



Mangrove "restoration" project in Puerto Morelos.