

Cooperation on Marine Protected Areas Management between Cuba and the United States

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Abstract

Ocean science diplomacy refers the pursuit of science and its ability to transcend politics. In the context of this article, it refers to cooperation among countries with adversarial political relationships to conceive solutions to common threats to the ocean. This paper highlights some of the science diplomacy efforts between the United States and Cuba over the past three decades. These same efforts catalyzed the political détente between US President Barrack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro that was announced on December 17th, 2014. This paper focuses on a marine protected area network that came about because of this rapprochement and which has been expanded by a group of scientists despite a return to political restrictions in 2017. The Gulf of Mexico MPA Network is a network of 11 marine protected areas (MPAs) in Mexico, Cuba, and the United States that continues to serve the shared interests of the three countries.

Keywords: Cuba, United States, US embargo, marine protected area, ocean science diplomacy, gulf of mexico

Introduction

Cuba and the United States have maintained diplomatic tension for seven decades resulting mainly from the US economic embargo against Cuba. The embargo was initially enacted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1960 as an extension of an arms embargo originally executed in 1958. The policy was a means of blocking imports to and exports from Cuba in response the Cuban Revolution. Later in 1962, President John F. Kenney extended the policy as a complete economic embargo of the country. This policy has been maintained by 12 US presidential administrations since Eisenhower. It has restricted all manner of socioeconomic exchange between the countries for generations.

One exception to the political isolation has been scientific research. Cuba and the US have a long history of collaboration in the natural sciences going back to the 19th century. Scientific cooperation has perduced the political isolation through groups of intrepid scientists between the US and Cuba who believe studying and conserving shared marine and coastal resources trumps politics. This article outlines a collaborative platform initiated in 2007 that led to the announcement of a sister sanctuary program between the US and Cuba in November 2015. This sister sanctuary program paved the way in 2017 to the creation of a trans-boundary and regional marine protected area (MPA) network between Cuba, US and Mexico, the three countries that share the Gulf of Mexico. Called the Gulf of Mexico, or RedGolfo, this network brings together MPA managers from 11 MPAs in the region to address shared threats such as climate change, oil spills, mass tourism, overfishing and others by working together on joint solutions.

Trinational Initiative for Marine Science and Research in the Gulf of Mexico and Western Caribbean

In 2007, scientists and governments from the United States and Cuba came together in Cancun, Mexico to discuss the creation of a platform to formalize and normalize cooperation in marine science. The result was the creation

of the Trinational Initiative for Marine Science and Conservation in the Gulf of Mexico and Western Caribbean (3NI) (www.trinationalinitiative.org). 3NI is a collaborative framework that overcomes political barriers to promote ongoing joint scientific research to preserve and protect the shared waters and marine habitats of this dynamic and highly connected marine and coastal region. Scientists and agency representatives from the three countries, representing six working groups, one of which concentrates on MPAs, meet regularly to plan marine research and policy outcomes that address the needs of coastal stakeholders and improve coastal and marine habitat quality in each country. The other working groups beside MPAs are coral reefs, fisheries, marine mammals, sea turtles and sharks and rays. Since its beginnings, 3NI has facilitated research and conservation collaboration through eight workshops in each of the three countries. Countless scientific publications and conservation tools, such as the Gulf of Mexico Coral Reef Report card (2019) have resulted from this trinational cooperation.

The 3NI platform has contributed to numerous regional collaborations including a sister sanctuary program that was conceived cooperatively by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Centro Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (Cuba) during a 2013 3NI meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas. During the rapprochement between Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro, initiated on December 17th, 2014, scientists recommended the creation of this sister sanctuary program to both administrations understanding that the leaders of the two countries saw environmental cooperation as the basis for bilateral cooperation that would transcend 55 years of political deadlock. This sister sanctuary program named Guanahacabibes National Park and Banco de San Antonio in Cuba and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary in Florida and Flower Gardens NMS in Texas as the four MPAs contributing to the agreement. Both the sister sanctuary agreement and a separate agreement between the US State Department and Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Relations (MINREX) were announced and signed in November 2015. The latter, entitled the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Conservation and Management of Marine Protected Areas, created a unique bilateral network that facilitated joint efforts concerning the science, stewardship, and management between Cuba and the US. Despite the return of political restrictions by President Donald Trump in 2016, both agreements remain active.

Two years later, RedGolfo was founded in at a workshop Cozumel in December 2017 when the Mexican Ministry for Environment (SEMARNAT) recommended adding seven MPAs to the network making it a truly Gulf wide effort. This was instigated by the recent approval of a Gulf of Mexico Large Marine Ecosystem projected, funded by the Global Environment Facility, which stipulated the creation of a broad regional MPA network to manage fisheries and habitat conservation. RedGolfo brought together 11 MPA managers from the three countries to informally create a new Gulf of Mexico Marine Protected Area Network. At a follow up meeting in Merida, Mexico in April 2018, The Ocean Foundation, a US based nonprofit overseeing the network, oversaw the signing of MOUs between Mexico's Protected Area Commission (CONANP) and Cuba's National Protected Area Center (CNAP). At that same meeting, a broader guiding document conceived by the 11 MPA network managers to continue advancing the goals and stakeholders of this fledgling MPA network was drafted.

Gulf of Mexico MPA Network (RedGolfo)

The newly created Gulf of Mexico MPA Network (RedGolfo) is an example of how, despite decades of stalemate caused by the US embargo against Cuba, government officials, scientists, and practitioners from US, Cuba, as well as Mexico came together in 2017 to find common ground.

The network's goal is to share results and lessons learned in building resilience to shared threats such as climate change, overfishing, tourism and oil spills. Its work is far from over with political changes in the US and Mexico and the pandemic pausing many of RedGolfo's operations. However, RedGolfo was taken a step further at the International Marine Protected Area conference in Vancouver in February 2023 where The Ocean Foundation helped leverage an historic meeting between NOAA and CNAP to continue working on bilateral cooperation between Cuba and the US on MPA related issues despite the political impasse between the countries.



Map of the marine protected areas in RedGolfo: The Gulf of Mexico Marine Protected Area Network.

Conclusions

The Trilateral Initiative and the resulting RedGolfo has served as a catalyst for international cooperation in the Gulf of Mexico. RedGolfo, despite political tension, remains a strong tool to expand research and cooperation on shared marine resources in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest enclosed body of water in the Atlantic Ocean and home to over 60 million residents in each of the three countries. Ocean science diplomacy continues to bring together scientists to transcend political tensions in the spirit of scientific discovery. RedGolfo and the Trilateral Initiative are effective platforms that provide a safe space for scientific progress.

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