

VOICE

Bay Islands

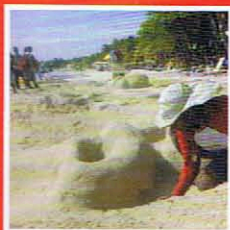
A COMMUNITY MAGAZINE



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USE IT, OR LOOSE IT

If You Can't Protect Your Own Resources it Would Be Better to Give it to Someone who Can

Sadly, the Swan Islands Marine Reserve belonging to Gracias a Dios department, are one of the most forgotten and neglected part of Honduras. While the islands are a little used resource today; its resource: surrounding reefs, animals and land could in a few decades be a priceless jewel. That is if the government of Honduras manages to protect it and doesn't fall trap to developers eyeing the islands for tourist development schemes.

The island's discovery dates back to 1520s when the Spanish named them San Millan. The Swan Islands served as a base for an English buccaneer Captain Swan and renamed after him. While Cayman Islanders knew of and used the islands in 1800s, it was an American, John White, who in 1857 claimed the islands for the US under the US Guano Islands Act.

While the guano act allowed US citizens to claim "terra nullius" islands around the world it did not specify which country would have the rights to the possessions once guano deposits were exhausted. Thus, after much back-and-forth, in 1971 US turned the jurisdiction of Swan Islands back to Honduras. The islands infrastructure: buildings, landing strip, water tanks and generator have fell into steady decline spiked up by periodical hurricane.

Today the seven Honduran soldiers stationed on Swan are not protecting the islands, but rather stranded there - 60 days at a time. They have no vehicle to get around the island, no boat, not even binoculars and have no way of confronting fish poachers even if they spotted them. Their most sophisticated piece of machinery they handle is a weed whacker. Thus the most significant impact they have is weeding a 500 meter grass landing strip that almost no one uses.

The Swan soldiers sleep on hammocks made out of fishnet in a destroyed skeleton of a building. They have few medicines and their one generator is run once a day in the evening to power the freezer that holds food supplies. The only well on the island has become salty and soldiers have to rely on water that is brought to them by boat from Puerto Castilla.

This is no way for a country to treat and equip its military. This it is no way for a country to protect its Marine Reserve and animals in it. While this is obviously a sad state of affairs, Honduran government has no incentive to change it in any way as the drug traffickers aren't seemingly interested in Swan Islands either.

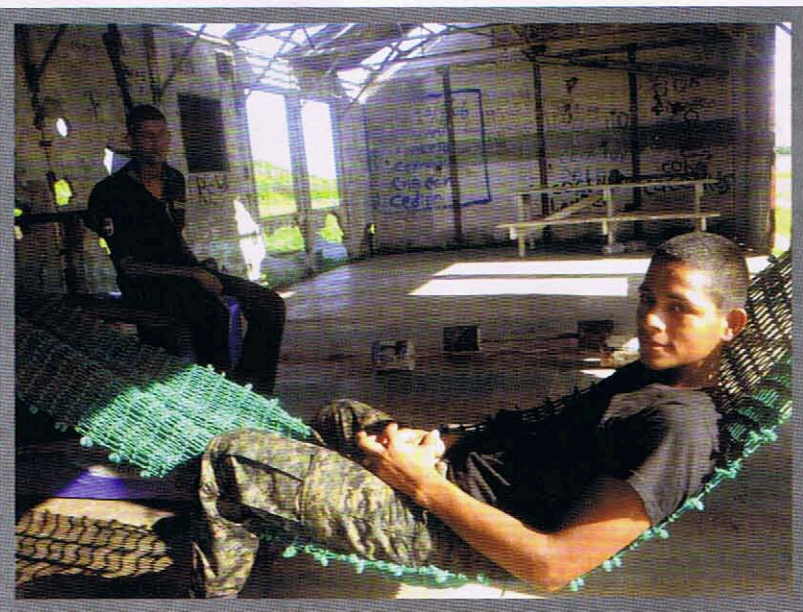
From an environmental perspective the animals living on and around them would be better off and better protected if US was running things. Swan based soldiers mention that a few years ago a group of people hunted down the once ample and large iguanas of the island. Today, the Swan Islands iguanas are small and not easy to spot.

Swan's five mile protected waters and reefs have been obviously poached as well. According to Roatan fishermen the Jamaican have been fishing the area around and directly adjacent to Swan Islands for decades, particularly the two Honduran fishing banks located 130 kilometer from Swan: Rosario Bank and Misteriosa Bank. The affects of the fishing can bee easily seen on Swan Islands: the grouper and snapper are few and afraid of humans.

Netting that could be used in fish traps have washed out on Swan's beaches and nearby reef. "It's more than likely that poachers are doing this," said Bay Islands Commissioner Evans McNab. The Honduran government has ongoing problems keeping foreign, especially Jamaican, fishermen from Honduran waters and encounters of Jamaican fishermen according to McNab are "frequent."

If Honduran government can't manage these islands maybe, after 40 years of trying, it should give the islands back to US. The US has done a fair job of administering many of the guano islands and protecting its flora and fauna. One such example is Navassa Island that US disputes with Haiti. US Fish and Wildlife Service administers the islands and its 400,000 birds couldn't be happier. From an environmental point of view I seriously doubt that Haiti could do a better job of taking care of these islands. Swan Islands Booby birds, iguana, agouti, the reefs and its fish couldn't care less who "owns" the islands as long as they are left in peace and protected. So Honduras government: protect it or give it up!

Thomas Tomczyk,
Publisher





REMOTE BEAUTY

A SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION TO SWAN ISLANDS BRINGS BACK SOME NOT-SO-GOOD FINDINGS

Swan Islands, the Bay Islands' distant cousins, face an uncertain future. They could continue to be forgotten and sporadically fished or turned into another site of a Honduras tourist bonanza - again and most likely a mismanaged one. The possibility of Honduras government actively protecting the islands is a remote one, but a coalition of scientific and conservation organizations is making an effort to influence international organizations to take notice of the islands and its ecosystem.

BY THOMAS TOMCZYK

Swan Islands are a remote and venerable habitat. They have no natural sources of freshwater and the infrastructure left by the Americans has fallen in disuse and disrepair. Honduras government has spent practically no effort to maintain the inherited buildings, water cisterns or gas tanks. Today not only are Swan Islands a military area that requires a government permission to visit, since 1991 it is a Marine Reserve with a five mile perimeter protected area. Still, protection of Swan Islands is just words on paper and Honduras has

spent little resources protecting the islands reef and habitat.

In 1520 the islands were discovered by the Spanish and named San Millan. They were later renamed after an English buccaneer Captain Swan, who visited the islands in 1680s.

Modern history of Swan Islands begun in 1840s when guano, found an amply on the islands, became a valued source for fertilizer and salt pepper used in gunpowder. The US congress stated: "Whenever any citizen of the United States discovers a

deposit of guano on any island, rock, or key, not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other Government, and not occupied by the citizens of any other Government, and takes peaceable possession thereof, and occupies the same, such island, rock, or key may, at the discretion of the President, be considered as appertaining to the United States." Over 100 islands have been claimed by US citizens under the guano act. One such American -- John White claimed the Swan Islands for the US in 1857.

Several different companies and American miners mined the guano of the islands leaving guano pits still visible today. United Fruit Company leased the islands at one point and planted thousands of coconut palms there, but a Hurricane wiped out almost the entire palm population in 1955.

The island served as a weather station as early as 1928 and in 1946 a radio navigational beacon was installed there to accompany a two kilometer landing strip. There were weekly flights between Swan island and Cayman Island and in 1960s, CIA operated "Radio Swan" on the islands that broadcast programs to Castro's Cuba.

has been full of expectations. Melanie McField, Director of Belize based Healthy Reefs Initiative, an organization that monitors the condition of reefs in the Mexico-Guatemala-Belize-Honduras region, has been trying for three years to organize a research trip to Swan Islands. The research expedition to the Swan Islands was a result of years of preparation, lobbying and fundraising. The expedition finally came together with the help of Sylvia Earl Alliance and Summit Foundation.

McField has successfully lobbied the World Wildlife Fund to include the Swan Islands as part of the Mesoamerican reef system. "It's potentially a larva source [for

fish and coral] for Bay Islands," she said about Swan islands and their, up current location- 145 miles north-east from Roatan. On July 16 "Swan Islands Expedition" departed Roatan with the aim to assess the health of reefs of the Swan Islands. The head of the expedition was Dr. Sylvia Earle, a world-renowned oceanographer, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, and founder of Mission Blue. The expedition consisted of 18 people: a motley crew of scientist, photographers and their assistants, benefactors, and wealthy businessmen. After 19 hours journey the boat arrived at an American constructed concrete dock on the West side of Great Swan.

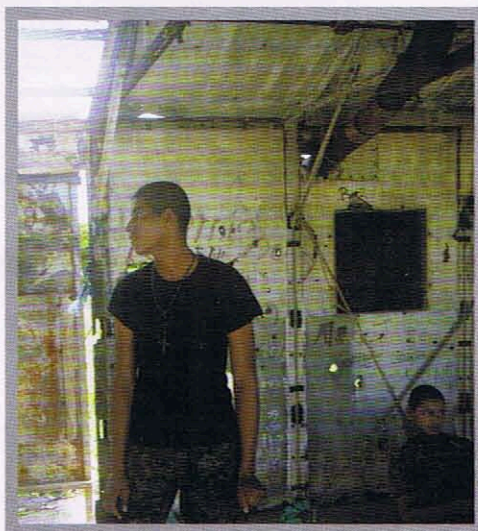


The dock of the Great Swan Island

US transferred the right of Swan Islands to Honduras in 1971 and since then the island's population has dwindled. Today only seven soldiers are stationed on Great Swan and there is no continuity in men staying on the islands. Most of them have seen the islands for the first time, and never come to see it again. As a result the island's "wardens" have little accumulated first hand knowledge of the islands and happenings around them.

The Swan Islands lie in the middle of Caribbean's Hurricane alley and almost every hurricane destined for the Gulf of Mexico passes close to, or over the islands. Another reason why Swan Islands have not been seen as a place for human settlement is the lack of water sources. The only well on the island is now salty and Honduran soldiers have to rely on rain water and packaged water brought to them by boat once every 60 days from Puerto Castilla.

A scientific interest in Swan Islands



One of seven soldiers stationed at Great Swan

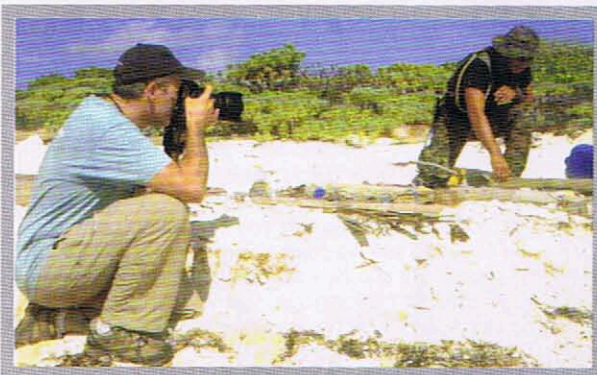
The chief goal of the expedition was to launch conservation efforts through increased awareness about Swan Islands in Honduras and internationally. Another goal was to make recommendations to Honduran government about formalizing a decree that would protect the area from fishing and tourism development.

Also part of the team was a National Geographic photographer Brian Skerry. Skerry, a 35-year veteran of underwater photography, is working on an article about Mesoamerican reef and Swan Islands were to be a part of the story. Aggressor's captain Nestor Vidotto, had to shuttle the 125 foot Utila Aggressor II boat between setting up shark traps, dropping off scientists and individual photographers.

Some scientists on the team were studying reefs, others counting fish, still others were setting up underwater video traps with chunks of fish to attract sharks. "Fish start rotting the minute they are

A Booby bird on its nest

A National Geographic photographer Brian Skerry takes photos of one of the soldiers stationed on Swan Islands. Soldiers served as guides on a reconnaissance tour of Great Swan. "We only have to throw some fish in the water and sharks will appear," said second Lieutenant Carlos Maldonado, the commander of the group on Swan Islands.



dead," explains the way bate attract the sharks Giacomo Palavicini, director of Field Operations of Roatan based Shark Legacy Project. Palavicini stuffed beer cans full of lionfish to attract sharks and other fish so they could be filmed and later studied.

"We are finding sharks almost on every time," said Dr. Rachel Graham, chief of Belizean Wildlife Conservation Society. "We are battling around 90 percent for the sharks." For the "shark scientists" one of the more exciting findings was a sighting of a Great Hammerhead, an endangered species in the Caribbean which populations have declined by 50% since the 1990s.

Working with eight researchers, McField studied nine sites around Swan Islands gathering data on the coral conditions and assessing fish quantities. The researchers would count and describe

every coral and organism they encountered.

After four days of diving the scientists were coming to some worrying conclusions. "We found a disappointingly high amount of leeching and diseased coral," says McField. "Much of it has been overgrown with macro algae." The fish like snapper, groupers were skittish -- a likely sign of them experiencing aggressive fishing. "There is a surprisingly low mass of fish for a place so remote," says McField. "We need to figure out why."

"It's more than likely poachers are doing this," says Bay Islands Commissioner Evans McNab. Jamaican fishermen use traps for groupers and snappers, and netting that could be used in setting those traps was found washed out on Great Swan's beaches and inside a cave off the islands. 10-15 years ago diving off

Swan Islands was "amazing" according to McNab.

Roatan commercial fishermen claim that it is Jamaican fishermen in small boats that fish the waters around Swan Islands. The Rosario Bank and Misteriosa Bank located around 130 km north of the Swan Islands have been a place where Jamaicans been illegally fishing Honduran waters for decades.

There is little if any effort to protect Swan Island's reef on part of Honduran government. The seven military personnel stationed on Great Swan are not equipped to enforce, or even properly monitor the illegal fishing. They have no boat, no car, not even binoculars that could help them in monitoring or enforcing the protection of the island environment.

Great Swan Island, 3 kilometers long, 1.5 kilometers wide and the nearby Booby

Cay are an important rest stop for migrating birds and nesting ground for Booby birds. Off the south-western side of Great Swan the 90 meter long Booby Cay is an important Booby bird nesting site. Guano produced by the birds was the reason for the American claim made to the islands.

Pigs and cattle were either killed or taken off Great Swan for slaughter in late 1990s. According to soldiers stationed on Great Swan, their fate was shared by green iguanas that were harvested for meat several years ago and one can no longer find the abundance on the islands. One survivor that avoids extinction is the domestic cat that has grown feral and feeds mostly on small iguanas.

Andres Alegria, expedition's scientist

Dr. Sylvia Earle, on board of the *Utila Aggressor II*, is interviewed for a blog by her foundation staff



The east end of Great Swan, looking towards Little Swan

working with Healthy Reefs, set up two photographic traps on Great Swan that captured images of Agoutis that had reportedly been sighted on Little Swan. The cameras brought back images of the animal, but they still have to be analyzed if the species could be a cousin to the Roatan Island Agouti (*Dasyprocta Ruatanica*).

The animal population of Little Swan is a mystery. Little Swan is 2.4 kilometer long and 500 meters wide and access to it is limited because of steep 30 to 60 foot cliffs that surround the long and narrow island. South side of the islands has strong currents and sporadic coral heads. Nurse sharks, barracuda comb the island's southern shores.

While the greatest value of the Swans lie in their remoteness for many people the islands couldn't be far enough. The government of President Mel Zelaya was curious of a development proposal for the Swan Islands and then President, Zelaya visited the islands in 2007.

Kevin Morill, a US developer has been lobbying several Honduran Government to develop the islands into a tourist destination similar to "Polynesia, Venice,

Monaco, England and the Caribbean (...), all from one fantastic island paradise." For the environmentalist the utopia-like mega project would spell a disaster for the environment of the island and surrounding reefs. Still, there are occasional political interest and economic interest that would like to create another tourist destination in the poor Central American country.

Following a president's visit in 2007, a group of Honduran scientists with the blessing of Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Tourism traveled on a lobster boat filled with 70 oxygen tanks. Over their seven-day-visit they produced a report and a map of the island designating tourist and commercial zones with plans for further development



Dr. Sylvia Earle prepares for her dive

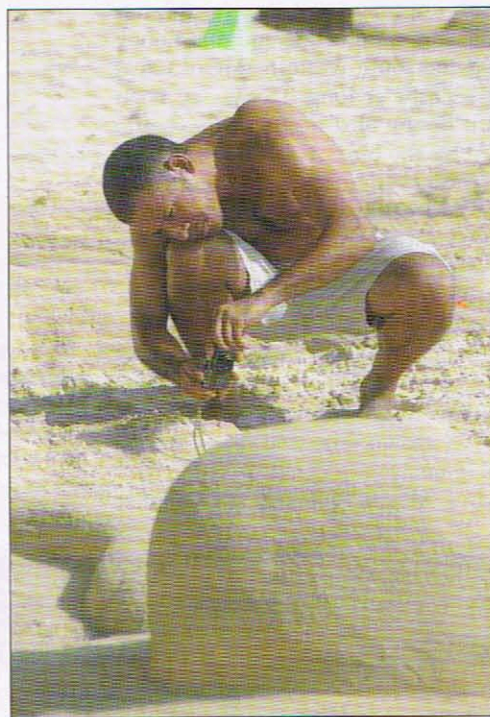
Despite some disappointments in the condition of Swan's reef and fish densities, some remain optimistic about the island's future. Dr. Earle sees Swan Islands as a "hope spot" a place in the marine environment that can thrive and sustain marine life well into the XXI century. "I love Swan Islands because it is so remote. It has a goliath grouper, tarpon and stag horn coral. If you only give it a chance it will recover," said Earle.

If the islands can just be left alone, not exploited for any purposes, in 50 years their value will be amazing. It's like bond deposits that when reached maturity it will make its holder a rich man. Still, not everyone in Honduras is that patient.



Sand Artists

The July Sand Sculpture competition in West Bay attracted a variety of first time sand sculptors and plenty of curious spectators. "We wanted to do something to do for the community," said Ricardo Delgado, manager of Bananarama, organizer of the event. The Octopus, sculpted by Rony Villeda, 21, brought in a first prize and \$75. The Mermaid, with great details, came in at number two. The Mermaid was authored by Michelle Merren, and brought in a \$20 Bananarama gift certificate to the author. By the winning Octopus: Michelle Merren, Paul Abel, Rony Villeda, Ricardo Delgado, Cori Delgado.



Swan Islands Crew

Ulla Aggressor II with 18 expedition members and seven crew has conducted a research visit to Bay Islands distant cousins: the Swan Islands. With sun setting on Great Swan: Sylvia Earl, Dustin Boeger, Shari Sant, Kip Evans, Brian Skerry, Keith Ellenbogen, Wool Henry, Thomas Tomczyk, Melanie McField, Rachel Graham, Marisol Rueda, Jenny Myton, Ian Drysdale, Andres Alegria, Giacomo Palvacini, Oscar Torrez, Roberto Pott, David Shaw.



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