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Belize adds another jewel in its crown as leader in ocean conservation

Belize expands its southernmost marine reserve to protect important reef ecosystem

August 5, 2020

(WASHINGTON — August 5, 2020) Belize has announced another major milestone in its efforts to protect its marine resources and ocean ecosystems.

Signed by Belize's minister of fisheries, forestry, environment and sustainable development, Omar Figueroa, a new statutory instrument authorizes the expansion of the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve and protects an important reef ecosystem known as the Corona Reef or Cayman Crown, one of the best preserved reefs in the region.

The newly expanded Sapodilla Cayes reserve now totals an area covering more than 500 square miles, with a strictly protected area in Belize's deep-sea totaling more than 350 square miles. Found south of the Sapodilla Cayes, the Corona Reef complex is considered one of the most underrepresented habitats in Belize's marine protected areas system. Believed to be a biologically important hotspot, it serves as a habitat for deep-slope snapper and bottom-dwelling species, as well as a spawning aggregation site for various large predatory reef fish, including the endangered Nassau grouper, goliath grouper, tiger

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charismatic megafauna including whale sharks, blue marlin, sailfin, sperm whales and pilot whales.

With this expansion, the size of the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve increases by seven times its existing size, encompassing a vast area of shallow coral reefs and deeper mesophotic reefs that descend into subsea canyons. The shallow reefs in the Corona area exhibit as much as 60% of live coral cover, equivalent to the healthiest reefs in the entire Caribbean. These vibrant reefs contain both threatened and endangered species of corals, along with previously undocumented reef types.

“There is consensus among partners in Belize involved in this effort that the Cayman Crown replenishment zone expansion holds exemplary benthic and pelagic habitats and associated biodiversity, and that protecting this area has the potential to help re-seed marine and coastal environments in Belize, Guatemala and Honduras, and in turn contribute to the livelihoods of local communities and economic sectors that depend on these coral reef systems,” said Nic Requena, Belize program manager, EDF Oceans.

The Corona Reef complex lies within Belize’s exclusive economic zone, and due to its proximity to neighboring countries, primarily Guatemala and Honduras, the reef complex faces a continuous threat of transboundary illegal fishing. This new protected status will allow for more effective law enforcement presence by Belize, with goals of halting IUU fishing and improving bilateral relations.

“EDF has been working closely with Belize’s fisheries department, Belizean fishers and local partners, and has been instrumental in designating the Corona Reef complex under the national replenishment zone expansion. This is a major accomplishment for EDF, its partners and Belize as a country,” stated Beverly Wade, Belize fisheries administrator.

The expansion of Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve stems from a proposal approved by the government of Belize in April 2019 for the national expansion of marine protected areas in the country’s territorial waters, which binds Belize to tripling the area under its strictly

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By honoring its pledge and expanding its strictly protected areas to nearly 12% of its waters, Belize is moving toward achieving some of its international commitments. This includes the Convention on Biological Diversity Aichi Target 11, which calls for conserving at least 10% of coastal and marine areas by 2020.

Upon the announcement, Wade proudly stated that “the expansion of the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve shows Belize’s commitment to the conservation of the Belize Barrier Reef complex and the Mesoamerican Reef system. It also shows Belize’s commitment to ensure the long-term sustainability of this important world heritage site, and its vital role in supporting local livelihoods and the national economy.”

EDF’s Requena added: “We applaud Belize’s long-standing commitment to protecting its ocean ecosystems. Our small nation has taken giant steps to ensure long-term viability of its marine resources, fishing and tourism industries — underscoring the importance of creating more resilient ocean habitats, particularly as the country is faced with the impacts of climate change. As a Belizean, I am very proud of what our government and civil society has achieved to protect our oceans for future generations.”

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