

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABLE OCEANS

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SESSION SIX: CROSS-SECTORAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Photo credit: Nick Hall

The Pescadero Program: Strengthening the Marine Conservation Field in Northwest Mexico

Northwest Mexico

1) What is the focus of this project?

Launched in 2014, the Pescadero Program aims to strengthen the institutional and leadership capacities of civil society organizations in Northwest Mexico through a comprehensive capacity building program that combines training, coaching, leadership development, and learning projects.

Jacques Cousteau called the Gulf of California “the world’s aquarium,” due to the region’s incredible biodiversity, including reef fish, sharks, whales, marine turtles, and the vaquita – the world’s smallest porpoise. Yet, sadly, overfishing, poaching, coastal development, and other extractive industries have threatened the resiliency of this region and driven many species to the brink of extinction.

2) Which organizations and other partners are involved?

The Pescadero Program emerged from a series of conversations between civil society organizations (CSOs) and donors who had been working on marine conservation issues in the region for over a decade. Although great successes had been achieved, both organizations and donors recognized that, in order to advance and sustain major progress, they needed to strengthen the resiliency of CSOs in the region. With this in mind, five funders – The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Helmsley Trust, the Marisla Foundation, the Sandler Family Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation – offered to support the implementation of a multi-year program to address the most pressing CSO capacity building needs.

The program is managed by the Northwestern Fund (FONNOR) under the supervision of the Mexican Fund for the Conservation of Nature (FMCN), an independent, non-profit organization founded in 1994. FMCN’s mission is to support and strengthen efforts for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in Mexico. In 2013, FMCN fostered the creation of the regional fund FONNOR.

3) What activities or tools have proven successful in building capacity?

The five-year initiative has five capacity building priorities: 1) Strengthened organizational governance, management, and administration; 2) Increased leadership capacities of mid-level and senior leaders; 3) Increased revenue diversification for long-term program sustainability; 4) Improved positioning in the sector through strong communications and public relations strategies; and 5) Clear strategic plans that define the mission, goals, and programs for each organization, and support the evaluation of programs.

The Pescadero Program balances capacity building through workshops with personalized support from experts. The model consists of offering workshops open to all Pescadero Program CSOs to impart a basic

understanding of a topic, followed by one-on-one time for key organizations to apply the concepts learned at the training. Pescadero Program staff work to identify needs for individualized support and opportunities for mentoring and exchanges between organizations.

The central objective of the program is to strengthen the effectiveness of CSOs to guarantee their sustainability in the long term and make them more effective players in the decisions that impact the conservation and sustainable use of the region's valuable marine natural resources. These CSOs must be institutionally robust in order to continue and maintain their progress to date. Currently, 28 CSOs are included in the program from states including Baja California, Baja California Sur, Nayarit, Sinaloa, and Sonora (see map). These local and regional CSOs have played a fundamental role in generating awareness and drawing public attention to marine conservation issues, demanding accountability, defending the public good and environmental values in the face of unsustainable coastal development, and in assisting local communities to improve the management of their natural resources. A further 22 local CSOs (bringing the total to 50) have participated in one or more workshops.

An online organizational self-assessment tool called the Institutional Effectiveness Index (IEI) is used to both assess the needs of the organizations, tailor personalized capacity building support for individual organizations, and measure, at the aggregate level, the increased strength of the marine conservation sector in the region. The IEI helps CSOs diagnose their capacities and identify areas that need improvement.

As a result of the Program's interventions, there have been changes in the organizations' structure and more conscious institutional design and planning. In general, CSOs are prioritizing capacity building. Through surveys, comments, and reports, the following results have been captured:

- CSOs have acquired the tools and knowledge to design their fundraising and communication strategies. Non-traditional strategies are incorporated, as well as key actors and sectors otherwise overlooked.
- CSO's executive directors and administrative staff now have knowledge of relevant administrative, legal and human resource issues and have gained abilities required to take the necessary steps to address them.
- CSOs have acquired skills and abilities at the executive level to improve organizational governance, especially in terms of board management.
- At the individual level, through leadership training, organizations have middle and high ranking staff who have gained knowledge and developed leadership skills. The CSOs' leaders are more confident in their role as leaders within and outside the organization and are more conscious of their leadership styles and the impact it is having in their organizations and communities.

4) What challenges have been experienced, specifically related to maintaining a focus on capacity building and/or replicating the project in other areas?

Most organizations have welcomed the support of the Pescadero Program, although the larger groups have not participated as actively as the smaller organizations. In general, a group of ten organizations has made the most progress in improving their capacities. These CSOs are all part of one-on-one consultancies and, in most of the cases, their Directors and/or board members are heavily involved in the program's activities.

The Pescadero Program's focus on multiple aspects of capacity building over a five-year horizon is visionary and unique for Mexico's conservation CSOs, many of which are still small and undeveloped. However, capacity building is challenging to measure and connecting this work to specific conservation impacts is difficult. Surveys and comments reveal that the program is having a positive impact for many CSOs. This impact will be formally documented through a midterm evaluation of the program, running from June to October 2016.

5) What are the next steps for the project?

The Pescadero Program has created a unique space for the CSOs to gain new organizational capacities, but it has also become a forum for CSOs from the region to interact, exchange knowledge and experiences, offer peer support, and motivate collaboration in the region. As we move into the second half of the program, the trust and sense of community built to date will be further leveraged to foster greater collaboration and action on marine conservation at the regional scale in Northwest Mexico.

<http://www.programapescadero.org/> (in Spanish)

Map: Location of the Pescadero Program CSOs



Group of CSOs working during a Pescadero Program training



Conservation leaders from northwestern Mexico