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Capstone Projects

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Isla Natividad: A Small Coastal Community Faces An Uncertain Future

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ISLA NATIVIDAD

A Short Film by Beth Besom

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Abstract

Isla Natividad is a short film exploring the story of the small-scale fishing community on Isla Natividad, Baja California Sur, Mexico. The film tells the tale of fishing cooperative members and their families weighing the economic benefits of opening their small island to ecotourism activities relating to Giant sea bass (GSB) and other marine species against losing their traditional way of life. The film was made in partnership with Arturo Ramirez-Valdez, lead scientist for Proyecto Mero Gigante (PMG), as he worked with the people of Isla Natividad to guide and introduce a non-extractive economy based on ecotourism.

Background

The nutrient-rich waters of Baja California Sur (BCS) are home to numerous resident and seasonal marine species. Apex predators such as sharks, sea lions, and groupers glide through the waters. Proyecto Mero Gigante scientists work with small-scale fishing communities to develop accurate data, educate them about the lifecycle of the GSB, and understand the complex relationship between these iconic fish and the communities. Their goal is to approach preserving threatened species in ways that also allow fishermen to support their families. It is a balance that requires scientists to immerse themselves in the lives of the communities they serve.

Giant sea bass (GSB) or Mero Gigante (as they are called in Mexico) can reach 7 feet long and weigh over 700 pounds. Their lifespan is between 50 and 70 years. When populations are depleted, they can take many years to rebound. GSB form aggregations to reproduce in late summer along the coast of Baja. Isla Natividad was the site of the first spawning aggregation located in Mexico.

Arturo Ramirez-Valdez and Proyecto Mero Gigante (PMG) have been studying GSB populations along the coast of California and Mexico and the communities that harvest them. They have developed monitoring programs in collaboration with Comunidad y Biodiversidad, A.C. (COBI), the Baja California Peninsula Fishing Cooperatives, the Federation of Fishing Cooperatives (FEDECOOP), recreational fishing clubs, and the Baja California government.

Based on their research, they believe that the populations of GSB in Mexico may be threatened, although their status in the United States is critically endangered.¹ The Mexican annual catch for GSB has remained consistent at 55 tons for the last 60 years.² PMG advocates for more regulation and better stock management from the Mexican government. As part of their efforts,

¹ Ramirez-Valdez, Arturo et al., "Rewriting the Story of Giant Sea Bass", cobi.org.mx, p 29.

² Ramirez-Valdez, Arturo, "Conservation Across Borders", *American Scientist*.

they meet with fishing communities that rely on GSB for a significant portion of their livelihood. “Mero Gigante Project has developed an initiative to evaluate the economic benefits obtained from the giant sea bass commercial fishery and those obtained with ecotourism activities, specifically SCUBA diving, through the entire geographic distribution.³ They have entered discussions with Isla Natividad as part of this initiative. When Dr. Ramirez began working with Isla Natividad in 2018, he recorded the first known GSB spawning aggregation site in Mexico.

Isla Natividad is a small fishing community off the Pacific coast of Baja California Sur, México. A lease from the Mexican government allows them almost complete sovereignty over the waters surrounding their island. They are part of a successful fishing cooperative, la Sociedad Cooperativa de Producción Pesquera Buzos y Pescadores that sells their seafood on the international market. As part of the cooperative for the last 80 years, island life has developed around the fishing culture.

They harvest lobster and abalone to sell on the Asian markets. Islanders fish opportunistically between the two seasons, one and a half to two months a year. This period is when GSB are caught as bycatch of the gillnet fishery targeting other species. There are no other sources of income on the island. Wives of coop members and residents who do not belong to the fishing coop are interested in a new non-extractive industry, bringing scuba divers to the island as tourists.

Like many small fishing communities worldwide, Isla Natividad is concerned with climate change, diminishing fish populations, and the increased effort required to get their product to market. They also worry about their children's futures on the island with few work opportunities. The island is part of a federally protected area, la Reserva de la Biosfera el Vizcaino, so the town's footprint cannot expand, and the number of residents is limited to around 400. As members retire, they must leave the island and return to the mainland. If the children of current members are not interested in working in the fishing industry, they must pursue employment elsewhere. A small group was formed to bring ecotourism to the island. This film, through interviews, explores a community's desire to open its isolated island to new avenues of employment while giving voice to its fears of the community losing its essence.

Objective

The project was designed to document the fears and desires of a community on the verge of change. Through interviews with community members, the film sought to record a moment in the community's history as they prepared to open their island to tourists.

³ <http://merogigante.org/research.html>

Deliverables

- The short film, *Isla Natividad*, will be made available to the community of Isla Natividad and hosted on Ms. Besom's YouTube channel. <https://youtu.be/PgDnrEFxwLE>
- All footage and interview materials will be made available for use by Isla Natividad and Proyecto Mero Gigante on their websites and for promotional purposes.
- Ms. Besom will make an assessment of the island as a dive destination, based on PADI standards, available to Proyecto Mero Gigante and Isla Natividad.