

# cabo pulmo

You'll Love Her Way

Story by Jenna Cavelle





photos: Erik Cutler

**enchanting.**  
**beautiful.**  
**nurturing.**  
**forgiving.**

**F**or all of this and more, we have fallen in love with her spirit, her ocean, her reef, her animals and her people. And it happened so fast that we didn't know what hit us — we found ourselves deeply heart-broken at the possibility of getting it all wrong, falling short, and losing her forever.

As grand as she is, Cabo Pulmo is equally vulnerable. If ever we leaned into her for sustenance or craved her inspiration, she has been there without hesitation. But we have not returned the sentiment. We've raped her reef, polluted her waters, littered her shores and forgotten her people.

She deserves our restitution, for we have not treated her as she has treated us. We should feel small because we are. Nevertheless, we are her children and her guests. She has nourished, taught and hosted us well.

**We know what to do and the time is now...**





photo: Erik Cutter

**Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park — her precious resources give rise to her name. We arrive at dark. This is my first time visiting Cabo Pulmo and the consensus among our group is a night swim in the sea—the single event that marked the beginning of my love affair with Cabo Pulmo.**

CABO PULMO IS LOCATED JUST 60 miles north of Baja’s tourism epicenter, Los Cabos. This jewel of the East Cape region of Baja California Sur stretches five miles from the northernmost tip, Pulmo Point to the southernmost tip, Los Frailes. Surrounded by undeveloped desert and a stunning mountain range, the pristine beaches of Cabo Pulmo give way to a shallow bay that cradles one of three living reefs (the only hard coral reef) in North America.

The Cabo Pulmo Reef has eight fingers of hard coral reef, providing a safe haven for many of the 800 species of marine animals found throughout the Sea of Cortez. The rich biodiversity of the area is unparalleled and as a result was targeted by overzealous sport and commercial fisherman during the 80’s. Abusive over fishing and a tremendous decline in fish population caused great concern in the local community, who subsequently lobbied the government to protect the region. Moreover, a series of studies at UABCS were directed by lead biologist

Dr. Oscar Arizpe to provide strong evidence supporting the biological relevance of Cabo Pulmo and the Sea of Cortez. Dr. Arízpe was the first scientist to perform systematic research on the marine animals. Based on his findings, on June 15, 1995 President Ernesto Zedillo declared the 7,111 hectares and waters surrounding Cabo Pulmo a National Marine Park.

Although conservation efforts are headed in the right direction, federal enforcement and financial aid remains scarce and the quest to protect Cabo Pulmo National Park falls heavily on the shoulders of the local community of just 113 residents. But the people here are positive and last year La Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, also known as CONANP, appointed the first official Park Director, Carlos Narro to direct conservation efforts in the park. It’s a massive undertaking but local citizens and international conservation groups are working together with the new park director to implement programs such as park enforcement, reef monitoring, nest monitoring for sea turtles and beach clean-ups.



photo: Rogelio Magos

## An Earth Kind Community — However few, one by one, it's the people that are changing Cabo Pulmo.

Spend even a modicum of time interacting with the people of Cabo Pulmo and you'll experience a community rooted in family and united by a common goal to protect their home. The small town of concerned citizens, young and old alike, are taking positive action whenever, wherever, however possible.

A local dive shop owner speaks of a donation program he's integrating into his business to help raise money for park enforcement. Another concerned individual patrols the park alerting visitors of simple rules like no fishing or anchoring in the park. Children can be seen collecting trash and making signs that display park rules. Biologists, conservationists, media and tourists attend community meetings to share ideas and support efforts being developed by the local community.

From friendly gatherings to ecology programs to simply enjoying the park, a strong sense of community is what binds the people of Cabo Pulmo together. The question is, can they bring about the change required to preserve their home for future generations?

## Conservation and Education — The youth of Cabo Pulmo are making a difference.

Unlike the sea, our relationship to the earth is seldom as deep, yet we live because the earth lives. Conservation is the preservation, management and care of natural and cultural resources; a process that requires education and application for it to work. We cannot protect that which we do not understand. In the expansion of our minds and the wake of our hearts, the quest to protect Cabo Pulmo has begun to take shape.

On the beach of Cabo Pulmo a young Mexican boy approached a man who was littering the shore. Softly and respectfully he spoke, "Excuse me sir, please do not throw trash here. This is where I live."



photo: Erik Curter

A local recalls this incident to illustrate how children in Cabo Pulmo are "thinking green" and working to make a difference. Conservation is serious business to these kids and the children in Cabo Pulmo are local heroes. Mindful and generous; they participate in beach clean-ups, sell wristbands to raise money for the park, patrol turtle nesting sites and release hatchlings.

## Instinct and survival — The baby sea turtles' successful journey to the sea is a miracle and the children are their angels.

I step out of my bungalow for an afternoon walk to find a group of boys piled atop a canary yellow ATV, arms flailing and shouting "Tortugas! Tortugas!" We grab the cameras and follow by car. After a few miles, we abandon the car and walk down a long stretch of secluded beach that bends around the northern tip of Cabo Pulmo. We approach the boys as they sift through nests of sand. Patiently and carefully, they prepare a total of ten hatchlings for their difficult journey.

The first hatchling scrambles instinctively toward the sea. The boys step aside and the other turtles follow. In awe, I watch their tiny bodies push through the thick, wet sand. It takes nearly half an hour for them to reach the shoreline where they encounter rough waves difficult to penetrate. Each time they try to enter the ocean, a powerful wave slams their bodies against the sand, hurling them back to

**OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT:** Sometimes called an eagle, the Crested Caracara (*Caracara Cherway*) is a striking, medium-sized falcon with a long tail and broad wings and behaves like a scavenger, feeding alongside vultures. **OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:** A water level view of the Cabo Pulmo Marine Park reveals its amazing beauty and the rough topography of the surrounding desert. **TOP:** Local Mariachis perform at Tito's, one of Cabo Pulmo's oldest restaurants. **BELOW:** Cardon cacti stand as sentinels against a backdrop of searing reds, oranges and purples—typical of the vivid sunsets seen throughout the Sea of Cortés.

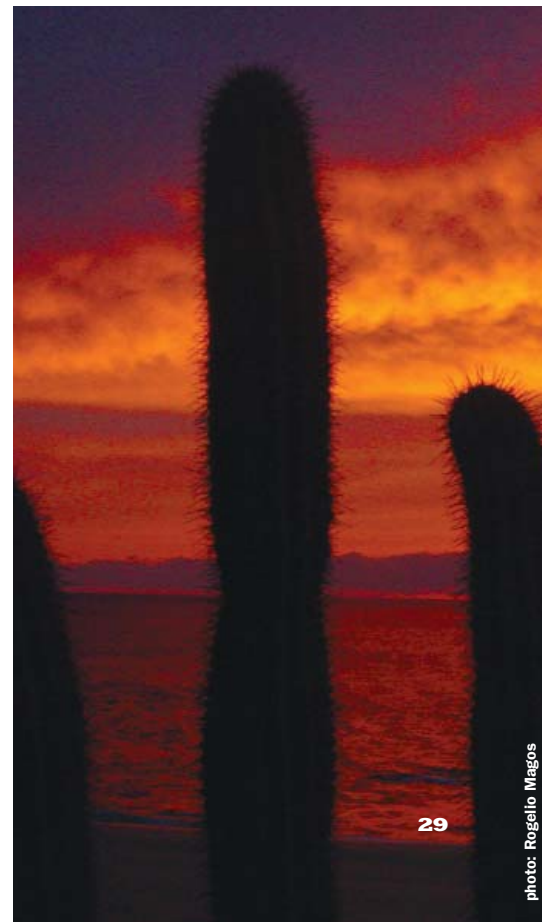


photo: Rogelio Magos



photo: Erik Cutter

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Minutes after having reached the surface, baby turtles bring smiles to those who are lucky enough to see them just after birth. • Divemeaster Carmel Lamar and Guide Chuy Lucero team up to keep clients safe while educating them about the reef. • After the adult turtle lays her eggs, the nests are marked by young conservationists and then carefully monitored to assure that the greatest numbers of hatchlings survive. • Buried for six weeks nearly two feet deep under heavy sand, several hatchlings rest after having dug their way to the surface.



photo: Rogelio Masos



photo: Erik Cutter

where they started. This goes on for over an hour. I was certain with each subsequent blow that this would be the wave that would knock the life out of them. Their determination was staggering and in the end, all ten turtles made the sea their home. The fact these turtles make it this far is a miracle and the children are their angels.

**Diving and Snorkeling — Swim free, dive deep and just feel the sea open up.**

Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, founded by Cole Barrymore, features a full-service dive center. Lively hosts indeed, Cole and his team of Padi-certified divemasters know how to serve up fun and adventure in heaping supply. Our morning with Cole began gliding through the warm, blue waters of the marine park in a traditional Mexican boat called a *panga*. Our original plan was to head north along the reef, but we gladly switched gears when someone observed a sea lion feeding on a large bait ball of green jacks.

I'd never seen a sea lion feeding before and I was moving so fast from the excitement, I could barely get my snorkeling gear on. I finally fixed my mask and fins and fell backwards into the ocean. I swam alongside the large bull sea lion in close proximity for such a long while that I lost all sense of time. The sea lion's labors were, for the most part, all about breakfast. But to my delight, he took several breaks, swimming and dancing like an ocean ballerina in perfect sync, first with me, then back to chasing jacks and then with me again.



photo: ERIK CUTTER

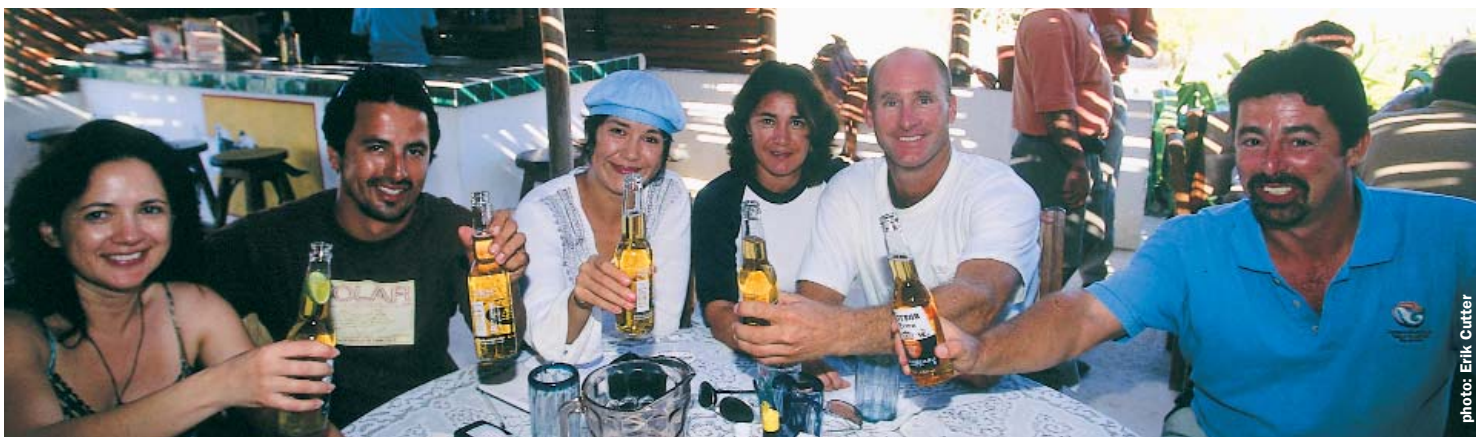


photo: Erik Cutler

Later that afternoon, we joined Rogelio Magos, manager of Cabo Pulmo Divers, another dive operation on the south end of town. We made our way to the sea lion colony at the southern tip of the park called Cabo Frailes. As we approached the point, our captain, Manuel Castro Flores and Rogelio scoured the area; they were looking for something. We steered slightly inland to a rock cove where a man was fishing with a handline.

Rogelio addressed him politely and warned, “There is no fishing allowed in the marine park, this is a protected area. If you do not stop fishing I will report you to the authorities and you will be subject to a \$500 fine.”

At first, the fisherman did not budge so we moved in closer and took a few pictures to document the incident and show him that this was serious. Finally, he pulled his line from the water and left in a huff. Rogelio was frustrated as the incident emphasized the concern about the lack of park enforcement. I was impressed how skillfully and politely that Rogelio handled the situation and realized that these people really do want to make a difference. I found out later that Rogelio and the community donate generous amounts of their time to patrol the park whenever possible. In the high season when it’s busier and they are working long hours, it’s extremely difficult to find time to monitor the park.

At the end of the long day, we found ourselves on the beach at La Palapa, a local hangout that serves up great tacos and plenty of cold beer.

### Mario Castro — A fisherman evolves from hunting to become a leading protector of the park.

The next afternoon, I joined Roger for a hike along the bluffs overlooking Los Frailes to hear the story how Mario Castro, owner of Cabo Pulmo Divers, first began his work. A crimson sunset exploded in the distance. The flaming sun ending its effort by melting into the tepid sea, but not before painting every cloud in the sky.

The Castro family’s presence in Cabo Pulmo extends back to the early 1800’s when Mario’s grandfather Jesus Castro Foil, enjoyed celebrity status as a famous pearl diver at the height of the pearl fishing industry. Jesus’ success entertained big ideas of fame and fortune among divers in nearby communities. Before long, pearls were over harvested and the fishing trend that followed determined the future of the Castro family. The demand for sharks during WW II ignited a brutal fishing frenzy in Cabo Pulmo that resulted in over fishing so severe that its impact on the shark population is still noticeable throughout the Sea of Cortez today.

By the early 80’s, the decline in marine life had become so devastating to Cabo Pulmo that it threatened the very survival of the community. Consequently, Mario was unable to work locally so he set off to find work as a fishing boat captain in Cabo San Lucas. There were no positions available so Mario took a job as a dive boat



photo: Kyle Ponsford

**TOP:** Concerned community members meet often to discuss ways in which to manage and protect Cabo Pulmo’s sensitive resources. **CENTER:** From left, Rogelio Magos, divemaster and Mario Castro, owner of Cabo Pulmo Divers, Jenna Cavelle of Baja Life and Cole Barrymore, owner of the Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort. **BELOW:** Educational programs and lots of family support goes into the protection of the reef which influences budding young environmentalists to get involved.



photo: Erik Cutler



captain. Sport diving allowed Mario to explore his relationship with the ocean in a deeper way and within a month he became a divemaster, returning to Cabo Pulmo shortly thereafter.

Mario recognized that sport diving provided the community with an opportunity to prosper without harming the environment. And in 1985, he opened Cabo Pulmo Divers, an eco-tour business, promoting sustainable tourism in the area that would soon become recognized as Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park by the Federal government.

During those years, another tragic threat to the marine life in Cabo Pulmo occurred as the growing demand for sea turtles promised very poor fisherman a lucrative income. Locals quickly began targeting sea turtles, killing them by the thousands every week, contributing greatly to their current endangered status. Today, due to the efforts of marine biologists, conservationists and community educational programs aimed at educating the fisherman, sea turtle populations are on the rise in Baja California Sur.

**Food and Accommodations —  
To enjoy delicious food with  
interesting people and to  
sleep soundly in a faraway  
land surrounded by beauty is  
what makes travel so magical.**

Cabo Pulmo's remote setting and small town charm distinguishes it from other towns in southern Baja where massive resort complexes and tourist megaplexes reign as the preferred vacation spot. Cabo Pulmo is off the power grid making all development in the area dependent on the use of solar power—a fitting energy source in a place where the sun is almost always shining.

Most properties in Cabo Pulmo maintain a consistent level of service and amenities. I spent my time at the Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort; a quiet bungalow village operated by the Barrymore family who have led the community in responsible

real estate development for over 30 years. Phase I of their master-plan extends from the main road down to the shores of the Marine Park and is positioned right in the heart of the town. It's here you'll enjoy wandering pathways framed by brightly painted walls and matching bungalows brushed in apricot, turquoise and lavender. The residences are also available for rent for extended periods and feature private beaches and gardens, viewing decks, barbeques, full kitchens, baths and master suites. Prices range from \$49 to \$79 US dollars per night.

Dining options in Cabo Pulmo are limited so consider bringing a few groceries with you to take advantage of the fully equipped kitchens provided in most of the bungalows in town. There are only a few restaurants in operation and I enjoyed the food and ambiance at each. Caballeros, near the center of town, features traditional Mexican cuisine and serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. At La Palapa, a beachside patio restaurant serving lunch only, you can feast on seafood tacos while taking in the best ocean view on the beach south of town. Tito's, located at the northern entrance to Cabo Pulmo, just reopened and flaunts the skills of celebrated Los Cabos executive chef Alfredo Rosas. During our stay, Alfredo prepared a delicious gourmet dish of Chiles en Nogadas for our group. Nancy's is also a good call, especially when fresh tuna and scallops are available. Whether you opt to grill seafood in your private garden BBQ or venture out to dine with the locals, rest assured that food and spirits are central to celebrating the joy of living in Cabo Pulmo!



# a biologist's perspective

Swimming in the Unknown Where Everything is Possible

TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT the marine environment, the threats and what is being done to protect the Park, Baja Life welcomed marine biologist and former Cabo Pulmo resident, **HÉCTOR REYES BONILLA** to answer the following questions:

**BL: What are the different types of reefs?**

*HRB: In general, there are three kinds: barrier, fringing and atoll. In western Mexico and the eastern Pacific, most are fringing reefs, but one atoll exists at Clipper-ton in the Revillagigedo Islands 300 miles south of Los Cabos.*

**BL: The Cabo Pulmo Reef is known as a hard coral reef. How is this different from a typical coral reef?**

*HRB: Other than the one I mentioned before, there is generally no accepted nomenclature for coral reefs. For many people, Pulmo is not a "true reef" as corals barely modify the bottom topography (a characteristic of all "true reefs" in the Caribbean and Indo Pacific). We believe that Pulmo functions as a reef in that the fish and invertebrate assemblages depend greatly on the physical structure and energy provided by the corals.*

**BL: What are the greatest threats to the Reef?**

*HRB: Fishing was the main problem until 1995 when the area was declared a National Marine Park by the Federal government. Today, we fear that large-scale tourist development complexes (a lá Los Cabos) would cause irreversible damages, especially because of the input of nutrients and excessive use of the area.*



**BL: What is the state of the Reef now compared to 10 years ago when it was first declared a National Marine Park?**

*HRB: It's much better now. Fish communities (species richness, abundance and size of organisms) are among the best in the entire Sea of Cortez.*

**BL: What direction do you see development taking in Cabo Pulmo and how will that affect the health of the Reef?**

*HRB: Some representatives of the state government and many developers want to pave the Corredor del Cabo del Este from San Lucas to Cabo Pulmo and even further to the north in order to continue their large-scale tourism policy. Cabo Pulmo locals are opposed to this and want a more relaxed approach using small bungalows and limiting the number of rooms for rent in the bay. As the locals own most of the land, it is hoped they will be able to diminish the potential damages.*

**BL: Should there be restrictions and guidelines put in place for developers to help protect the Marine Park and the Reef?**

*HRB: There are restrictions already included in the Management Plan. Basically, it considers limitations on the size of hotels or bungalows, total number of rooms and tourists at one time and other regulations involving water use and treatment.*



above photos courtesy of Rogelio Magos



**TOP AND CENTER:** Once hunted almost to extinction, the sea lion colony at Los Frailes, located at the south end of the Park, attracts snorkelers and divers eager to cavort with the friendly and often playful marine mammals.

**BOTTOM:** At Tito's, master-chef Alfredo Rosas prepares traditional Mexican cuisine such as Chiles en Nogadas — flavors that will surely keep you coming back for more.



above photos Erik Cutter

**BL: What is a Management Plan and how does it work?**

*HRB:* In Mexico, a management plan is the main tool that determines the kind of uses that are acceptable in protected areas. It is important to mention here that the law in Mexico forbids “no-take” zones. In other words, all protected areas should be able to produce some form of economic benefit to their residents. However, in the core zones (“zonas nucleo”) of the park, extractive activities are prohibited.

**BL: How does silting, sewage and human waste affect the Reef?**

*HRB:* Silting is natural during the summer as storms create rain that fills the arroyos, discharging tons of sediment from the Sierra de la Laguna into the bay. However, it is a normal situation and causes little concern. Sewage and human waste are very well controlled in the town, although in camping areas south of the bay, it can represent a problem on certain days when visitors arrive in flocks (Semana Santa and summer vacations).

**BL: What methods do scientists use to determine the health of the Reef? What is a Reef Monitoring Program? Is there one in place and if so, how does it work and who is leading it?**

*HRB:* The health of any reef is a very difficult thing to establish. In general, it is considered that a healthy reef contains many fish and

invertebrate species, high coral cover, low algal cover, and no apparent diseases or other kind of perturbations. Most monitoring programs thus measure these traits in the field and compare results from time to time. The analyses provide evidence of the state of the reef that can be used by managers to do their job and make any decisions required. Pulmo has no official monitoring program, however, UABCS (our laboratory) has been taking a census of fish, corals, gorgonians and echinoderms since 1987, and with more intensity after 1997, when the ENSO caused a severe coral mortality.

**BL: What are the current conservation programs in place to support the Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park, and who is leading them?**

*HRB:* There are many programs in operation, funded by NGOs, the government and academic institutions. Among the most successful are those related to turtle nesting, monitoring of marine communities and environmental education to locals and visitors.

**BL: Why is there no appointed Park Enforcement officer patrolling the Park?**

*HRB:* It is very difficult to do because the plan was not in place and there is little funding. Now, there is much more attention from PROFEPA and the Mexican Navy, and also a member of the park staff on site at La Rivera, who visits Pulmo at least twice a week.

**BL: Is there a check-in point or signage at a nearby port that boaters are required to visit prior to entering the park?**

*HRB:* No, and it is one of the goals of the managers for 2006.

**BL: What is the significance of the Cabo Pulmo Reef compared to other Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) throughout Baja?**

*HRB:* As surprising as it may seem, there are just a few marine protected areas in the southern Gulf of California which include Cabo Pulmo, Loreto and Cabo San Lucas. Cabo Pulmo is the only one with significant

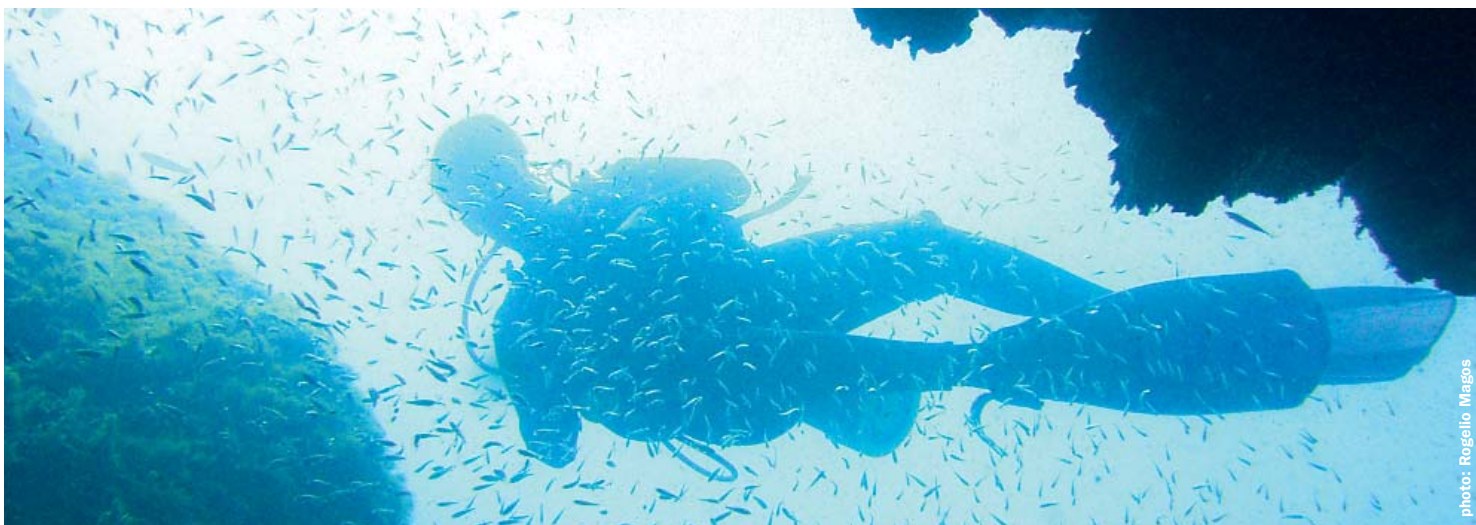


photo: Rogelio Magos

coral cover and it is small enough that local people have been involved with fairly successful conservation efforts. Even when the locals disagree on how things should be done with regard to conservation, they generally share the same objective, to conserve the area as well as they can as it is their patrimony. No other protected area is viewed that way by the local residents.

**BL:** How did you first come to experience Cabo Pulmo and how do you feel about it?

**HRB:** I visited the reef for the first time in

1985 and was taken with its beauty and the richness of the marine communities. Also, the experience of building personal relationships and working, teaching and fishing with the local families was wonderful; they have shared with us their knowledge and love for the reef and in return they know much more about the living marine communities from our information. I love the area.

**Q:** What do wish for the future?

**HRB:** For things to continue in the positive direction they are headed now and that the next El Niño events don't hit the area so hard! ■

## DIVING / ACCOMMODATIONS

### CABO PULMO:

**Baja Bungalows**  
www.bajabungalows.com

**Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort**  
www.cabopulmo.com

**Cabo Pulmo Divers**  
www.cabopulmodivers.com

**Pepe's Dive Center**  
www.pepesfoundation.faithweb.com

**Reinhard's Casas**  
www.reinhardscasas.com

### LOS FRAILES:

**Hotel Bahia Los Frailes**  
www.losfrailes.com



► **Héctor Reyes Bonilla** studied Marine Biology (UABCS, 1990), has a M.S. degree in Marine Ecology (CICESE, 1993) and a Ph.D. in Marine Biology and Fisheries (University of Miami, 2003). He has done research in coral reef communities in the Pacific coast of México since 1993, and particularly at Cabo Pulmo reef, an area from where he has obtained data for seven of his 54 peer-reviewed papers. He leads the Reef Research Group of the Mexican Long-Term Ecological Research Network (MEX-LTER), and his main interests are macro ecology of reef associated fauna (especially related to distribution and functional diversity of corals, echinoderms and fishes) and the effects of large-scale perturbations (especially El Niño) on community structure.

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► **Dr. Oscar Arizpe** has been working in Cabo Pulmo for nearly 20 years. He began as a research student studying biological community structures (fish, corals, equinoderms and mollusks). In 1991, realizing the extent of the reef degradation, Oscar began integrating social, economical and environmental elements into a natural protected area proposal that was submitted in June 1995. Since then, having become the first researcher to perform any systematic research at Cabo Pulmo, Oscar has provided assistance as the main consultant in the development of the current management plan.

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