



Bill Seeks Change in Status for Las Baulas Park

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A bill that would remap the Las Baulas National Marine Park in Playa Grande, in the northwestern province of Guanacaste, was recently re-introduced in the Legislative Assembly, and it has environmentalists on guard and legislators thinking hard.

The bill would reduce the status of the park to “wildlife refuge,” a designation that would allow for development within its boundaries.

Legislators rejected the effort in December of 2008 when it was initially presented as three separate bills. The new bill entered discussion in the legislature’s Environment Commission on Friday morning.

Maureen Ballestero, a National Liberation Party (PLN) legislator and president of the commission, said she had not read the new bill as of Wednesday, but she said she is familiar with the project.

“I do not agree with the change in category of a national park, or reducing a national park,” Ballestero told The Tico Times. “But, it’s clear that there are many national parks that have people (living) inside and there is an economic problem with this.”

The “economic problem” is the cost of expropriation to allow for development. Landowners inside Las Baulas National Marine Park have insisted that the land is worth approximately \$1,200 per square meter, which would bring the total expropriation cost to around \$800 million, a price too high for the government to pay (TT, Dec. 2008).

Ballestero said she agrees with a law that would find a way to obtain the land from private owners without having to use state money, what she called a “positive aspect” of the bill.

“We need to resolve the problem so the state doesn’t have to pay for the land, but I believe there are more adequate mechanisms for us to be able to make this step – to have people inside a national park.” she said on Wednesday.

Ballestero would not say whether she will support the bill until after the commission examines the details.

Meanwhile, nongovernmental groups are stepping up efforts to convince legislators that the bill should be rejected.

Randall Arauz, of the Marine Turtle Restoration Program (PRETOMA), said his group is working with various other organizations in a campaign against the bill. Negative effects on nesting habits of sea turtles are among the environmentalists’ major concerns.

The leatherback turtle population has declined by 95 percent during the past two decades. Playa Grande, which was of the nesting site for more than 1,000 leatherbacks per year in the late 1980's, now hosts only some 40 to 70 of the nesting sea turtles annually.

Researchers attribute the numbers loss, in part, to changes in nesting habitats and to destructive fishing practices.

Arauz said these are all reasons to leave the area alone.

“There are more leatherback turtles that nest at this beach than at any other in America, and they want to ruin that,” Arauz said.

“Once you start to develop a beach, there are all kinds of physical and chemical changes that can drive these turtles away.”

Arauz noted that lights from developments and solid waste from housing projects and construction processes can deter the sensitive leatherback turtle from nesting at a particular beach.

PRETOMA also cites a study by the National Subterranean Water and Irrigation Service (SENARA) that indicates the water table near Playa Grande is too shallow to sustain development.

The study, dated February 13, 2009, states that “the zone from Playa Grande to the mouth of the Estero Tamarindo sits at the base of the Huacas-Tamarindo aquifer, which is considered to be extremely vulnerable.”

The study concludes that the aquifer's vulnerability to contamination “doesn't permit any activity, with the exception of conservation and preservation.”

Nelson Marín, regional director of the Tempisque Conservation Area of the Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Telecommunications (MINAET) and a strong proponent of the bill, said the idea of the refuge is to have “intelligent, mixed development,” with “environmental restrictions that will protect sea turtles and prevent contamination.”

Marín noted that the restrictions have not yet been written, but the National Technical Secretariat of the Environment Ministry (SETENA) is working with independent organizations to develop the plans. The World Wide Fund for Nature and the Marine Turtle Specialist Group are two of the groups mentioned.

Marin said he was “not familiar with SENARA's study.”