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# Efforts under way to help salvage Mexico's Sea of Cortez

June 14, 2000  
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TUCSON, Arizona (AP) -- A. Bates Butler III has been fishing for 30 years in Mexico's [Sea of Cortez](#), once teeming with grouper, hammerhead sharks, yellowfin tuna, barracuda and manta rays.



AFP PHOTO

Exploited and overfished, the sea -- also known as the Gulf of California -- is now in danger of becoming barren. Butler, a former U.S. attorney, and a group of Arizonans and Sonorans have formed a nonprofit organization to help Mexico preserve its marine resources.

**Overfishing is threatening the amount of marine species in the Sea of Cortez**

They'll discuss the sea's precarious health and urge Mexico to create a Sonora Marine Park near Guaymas, Mexico, when the Arizona-Mexico Commission meets Friday.

"We don't see the sailfish that we used to see, we don't see the marlin, the dorado are down. We haven't caught a tuna in the last two summers," said Butler, a member of the commission. "And if something isn't done soon to protect the natural resources -- the fish and other sea life -- there will not be a commercial fishing industry and there will not be a sports fishing industry or a dive industry."

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Experts say commercial fishing in the sea has overharvested many species, particularly through tuna boats that employ miles-long baited lines or so-called gill nets, indiscriminately snaring and killing marlin, dorado and sailfish as well as tuna.

"The problem is not with the fishing but the way it's being done," said Francis Gilbert, development director for the Sonoran Sea Aquarium being planned in Tucson.

In addition, too many small shrimping boats, and commercial shrimp farming, have placed intense pressure on the shellfish. Some mangrove swamps or estuaries -- critical natural habitat for shrimp, crabs, fish and plant life -- have been eliminated by commercial shrimp farms and by development.

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Mangrove trees are cut for wood, and polluted waste waters discharged from shrimp farms alter the brackish water's delicate balance.

"The main problems are the economical problems of this country," said Artemisa Castro, a marine resource management scientist in Guaymas who has spent her last 15 years focusing on the Sea of Cortez. Until early this year, she ran Mexico's National Shrimp Research Program in Sonora.

"Possible destruction of some species is only an environmental consequence, but the real cause is our economic policies which drive us to different management strategies," she said. "It has a lot to do with the society and the government."

Those decisions mean the long-term future of the sea is being sacrificed for the immediate, she said.

"We have to make things change," Castro said. "Things will never change from top to bottom, they have to change from bottom to top."

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