IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2014 **(archived)**
Finalised on 29 September 2014

Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Coiba National Park and its Special Zone of Marine Protection. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Coiba National Park and its Special Zone of Marine Protection

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Panama
Inscribed in: 2005
Criteria:
(ix) (x)

Site description:
Coiba National Park, off the southwest coast of Panama, protects Coiba Island, 38 smaller islands and the surrounding marine areas within the Gulf of Chiriqui. Protected from the cold winds and effects of El Niño, Coiba’s Pacific tropical moist forest maintains exceptionally high levels of endemism of mammals, birds and plants due to the ongoing evolution of new species. It is also the last refuge for a number of threatened animals such as the crested eagle. The property is an outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research and provides a key ecological link to the Tropical Eastern Pacific for the transit and survival of pelagic fish and marine mammals. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2014 Conservation Outlook

Significant concern

The conservation outlook for the site is of significant concern due to pressures that impact ecological processes, biodiversity, threatened species, and other species of particular conservation concern. Serious threats exist within the Property from unregulated fishing, increasing tourism activities and unregulated coastal development On-going absence of a clear management framework and a management plan for the Special Zone of Marine Protection, absence of a coastal zone development and conservation policy, weakness of law enforcement and slow progress on resolving issues repeatedly underlined by the Committee since the description lead to serious concern regarding protection and management of this site. The combination of numerous threats and weak management represent a serious concern for conservation of the site’s Outstanding Universal Value.

Current state and trend of VALUES

High Concern
Trend: Deteriorating

The current state of World Heritage values are of high concern because of illegal fishing, despite progress made with regards to the removal of cattle.

Overall THREATS

High Threat

Overall threats from unregulated and illegal fishing, increasing tourism activities and unregulated coastal development are of high concern, whereas the naval base is considered to have only minor impacts. The potential regulation change allowing further developments within the property is also of particular concern.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Serious Concern

Despite the World Heritage Committee’s repeated requests for its finalization, a Management Plan for the Special Zone of Marine Protection (SZMP) remains to be completed. This on-going absence of a clear management framework, absence of a coastal zone development and conservation policy, weakness of law enforcement and slow progress on resolving issues repeatedly underlined by the Committee since the inscription lead to serious concern regarding protection and management of this site.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

► Outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research and a key ecological link to the Tropical Eastern Pacific

Criterion:(ix)

Despite the short time of isolation of the islands of the Gulf of Chiriquí on an evolutionary timeframe, new species are being formed, which is evident from the levels of endemism reported for many groups (mammals, birds, plants), making the property an outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research. Furthermore the Eastern Pacific reefs, such as those within the property, are characterized by complex biological interactions of their inhabitants and provide a key ecological link in the Tropical Eastern Pacific for the transit and survival of numerous pelagic fish as well as marine mammals. (SoOUV, 2005)

► High variety of endemic species

Criterion:(x)

The forests of Coiba Island possess a high variety of endemic birds, mammals and plants. Coiba Island also serves as the last refuge for a number of threatened species that have largely disappeared from the rest of Panama, such as the Scarlet Macaw. Furthermore the marine ecosystems within the property are repositories of extraordinary biodiversity conditioned to the ability of the Gulf of Chiriquí to buffer against temperature extremes associated to El Niño/Southern Oscillation phenomenon. The property includes 760 species of marine fishes, 33 species of sharks and 20 species of cetaceans. The islands within the property are the only group of inshore

islands in the tropical eastern Pacific that have significant populations of trans-Pacific fishes, namely, Indo-Pacific species that have established themselves in the eastern Pacific. (SoOUV, 2005).

Other important biodiversity values

► Other international designations

The Park lies within a Conservation International-designated Conservation Hotspot, a WWF Global 200 Eco-region, a WWF/IUCN Centre of Plant Diversity and in one of the world's Endemic Bird Areas. (UNEP-WCMC, 2011)

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

High Threat

Unregulated fishing, unplanned tourism activities and coastal development adjacent to the site constitute a high level of threat to its values.

► Housing/ Urban Areas

Low Threat
Inside site

The clearing of land on Montuosa Island for residences, banana plantations, and the use of this area as a base for tourism and fishing was a worrying trend regarding land use within the property (35COM.Coiba.SOC). Even though the construction project is dead appears to have been abandoned, the damage can still be seen (IUCN Consultation, 2014).

► Fishing / Harvesting Aquatic Resources

Very High Threat

Inside site

Commercial, artisanal, and sport fishing within the property are taking place illegally and are a key threat to the property. The full extent of these activities is currently unknown and there is no adequate control. While artisanal fishing is decreasing, sport fishing is rapidly growing, not regulated within the property and seems to target areas of high endemism and spawning areas. Industrial fisheries also capture yellow fin tuna, listed on the IUCN red list as ‘near threatened’ (Mission report, 2014).

► Livestock Farming / Grazing

High Threat
Inside site

A significant amount of cattle run wild on Coiba Island degrading native vegetation and causing erosion, which in turn causes siltation of reefs adjacent to the Island (35COM.Coiba.SOC; Mate, 2010). However, the State Party is addressing the issue and plans to have all cattle removed from the island by the end of 2014 (38COM.Coiba.SOC).

► Other

Low Threat
Inside site

The naval base on the main island is considered to have little impact on the site and has not been a source for introduction of alien species, wildlife trafficking or agricultural production. Biosafety training shall be part of the navy training as of January 2015. Moreover, the navy is also contributing to the surveying of the park to limit illegal fishing practices and thus can help to control fisheries in the property (Mission report, 2014).

► Tourism/ Recreation Areas, Tourism/ visitors/ recreation

High Threat
Inside site

Unregulated development of tourism activities facilitates uncontrolled visitation to the Property (Mate, 2010) and large hotel complexes and infrastructure improvements in the coastal region opposite the park are increasing rapidly. The lack of a tourism strategy and plan to ensure developments do not impact the site’s OUV is a key problem. Coastal

development could exacerbate recreational and sports fishing pressures and significantly increase water pollution (SOC report, 2011). Illegal tourist camp sites are still present on Coiba Island which contradicts the Management Plan regulations (IUCN Consultation, 2014).

Potential Threats

High Threat

The new regulation proposed poses a threat to the integrity of the property and could set a precedent.

► Housing/ Urban Areas, Tourism/ Recreation Areas

High Threat
Inside site

New regulation is currently in development that could allow coastal development in the park, particularly on the small islands in the northern part. This could affect the integrity of the site. The proposal also simply overrules existing management plan regulations and could set a precedent in changing regulations (Mission report, 2014).

► Storms/Flooding

Data Deficient
Inside site
Outside site

Given that the Gulf of Chiriquí is generally protected from the effects of the el Niño current it may be relatively protected from the severe weather events associated with climate change effects. Specific data is lacking, however.

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Serious Concern

While studies of local communities were undertaken during preparation of

the Management Plan, little systematic follow-up has taken place, and information regarding the Park and of the decisions of the Management Council has not been circulated adequately (Scientific Committee, 2011; Suman, Mate, and Samonte-Tan, 2010; ANAM, 2009). There seems to be little cooperation between the management and fishing communities and local communities in coastal areas.

► Legal framework and enforcement

Serious Concern

Governance of the Property is entrusted to a Management Council. However, decision-making by the Council has been hindered by the high turnover of Council representatives, their irregular participation at meetings and the lack of participation of local government representatives. The Council's shortcomings have been exacerbated by a lack of public information regarding the Property's management plan, the regulations on resource use that it imposes, and the decisions of the Council. Law enforcement has been made more difficult by the lack of information, and by inadequate staffing, funding, and lack of patrol craft. (Scientific Committee, 2011; Suman, Mate, and Samonte-Tan, 2010; ANAM, 2009)

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Data Deficient

Data deficient

► Management system

Some Concern

A management plan for the National Park was developed in 2009, but current levels of funding, staff, and facilities are inadequate to implement the plan (UNEP-WCMC, 2011; ANAM, 2009). This plan is expected to expire by mid-2014; negotiations are ongoing for a renewal and extension beyond 2014. However, a Management Plan for the Special Zone of Marine Protection (SZMP) remains to be completed, despite the World Heritage Committee's repeated requests, as early as 2005, for its finalization (SOC report, 2013).

► Management effectiveness

Serious Concern

There is no management system in place for the SZMP. The current plan for the rest of the property requires updating. Overall, reports of unregulated increases in commercial, artisanal, and sports fishing, lack of effective surveillance and monitoring, limited engagement with stakeholders and local communities indicate a low level of management effectiveness (35COM.Coiba.SOC).

▶ Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Some Concern

Implementation of Committee decisions has been spotty and slow. For example, the Management Plan and associated fishing regulations for the SZMP have not yet been finalized and approved; no clear fisheries monitoring system for the Property has been developed; inappropriate coastal development opposite the Property has not been regulated;
Progress is being made in removing cattle from Coiba (38.COM.SOC).

▶ Boundaries

Mostly Effective

Current marine boundaries may not be large enough to conserve the ecosystems of the region. (UNEP-WCMC, 2011)

▶ Sustainable finance

Serious Concern

Current levels of funding are insufficient to implement the management plan (UNEP-WCMC, 2011; Scientific Committee, 2011; Mate, 2010; Mission report, 2014).

▶ Staff training and development

Mostly Effective

Staff requires additional training and development to be able to efficiently implement the management plan (Mission report, 2014).

▶ Sustainable use

Serious Concern

Provisions for the sustainable use of the Property for conservation, tourism, and fisheries are adequately covered in the management plan, but the Plan is not being implemented. (UNEP-WCMC, 2011; 35COM.Coiba.SOC; Scientific Committee, 2011, Mate, 2010; ANAM, 2009).

► Education and interpretation programs

Data Deficient

Data deficient

► Tourism and interpretation

Data Deficient

Data deficient

► Monitoring

Some Concern

Some monitoring programmes exist; e.g. initial monitoring of fish populations indicate that the populations of some species are increasing (Guzman, 2010) but illegal fishing doesn't allow full recovery. But overall, surveillance and monitoring is scarce and not systematic (Mission report, 2014).

► Research

Mostly Effective

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and Conservation International have provided support for research activities with respect to the Property, especially in developing the Management Plan. The Panamanian Secretaría Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación (SENACYT) has been funding research on Coiba and is now building a research station on the island.

Overall assessment of protection and management

Serious Concern

Despite the World Heritage Committee's repeated requests for its finalization, a Management Plan for the Special Zone of Marine Protection (SZMP) remains to be completed. This on-going absence of a clear management framework,

absence of a coastal zone development and conservation policy, weakness of law enforcement and slow progress on resolving issues repeatedly underlined by the Committee since the inscription lead to serious concern regarding protection and management of this site.

► **Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site**

Some Concern

Unregulated tourism development along the coast adjacent to the Property is not being dealt with effectively.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

► **Outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research and a key ecological link to the Tropical Eastern Pacific**

High Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

Illegal fishing, feral cattle, and other introduced species on Coiba Island have the greatest impact on ecological processes in the Property. Unless regulated, these impacts will worsen over time. (UNEP-WCMC, 2011; Scientific Committee, 2011; Mate, 2010; ANAM, 2009)

► **High variety of endemic species**

High Concern
Trend:Deteriorating

Illegal fishing, feral cattle, and other introduced species on Coiba Island have the greatest impact on ecological processes in the Property. Unless regulated, these impacts will worsen over time. (UNEP-WCMC, 2011; Scientific Committee, 2011; Mate, 2010; ANAM, 2009)

Other important biodiversity values

▶ Other international designations

The Park lies within a Conservation International-designated Conservation Hotspot, a WWF Global 200 Eco-region, a WWF/IUCN Centre of Plant Diversity and in one of the world's Endemic Bird Areas. (UNEP-WCMC, 2011)

Summary of the Values

▶ Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

High Concern

Trend: Deteriorating

The current state of World Heritage values are of high concern because of illegal fishing, despite progress made with regards to the removal of cattle.

▶ Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values

High Concern

Trend: Deteriorating

The current state of other biodiversity values associated with other international designations for the site is of high concern because of illegal fishing and despite progress made with regards to the removal of cattle from Coiba Island.

Additional information

Key conservation issues

▶ Unregulated fishing

National

The lack of regulations for fishing in the SZMP and lack of enforcement capacity constitute a serious threat to the Property's values (Suman, Mate, and

Samonte-Tan, 2010; 35COM.Coiba.SOC)

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► Is the protected area valued for its nature conservation?

The Property protects Coiba Island, 38 smaller islands and the surrounding marine areas within the Gulf of Chiriqui. Protected from the cold winds and effects of El Niño, Coiba's Pacific tropical moist forest maintains exceptionally high levels of endemism of mammals, birds and plants due to the ongoing evolution of new species. It is also the last refuge for a number of threatened animals. The property is an outstanding natural laboratory for scientific research and provides a key ecological link to the Tropical Eastern Pacific for the transit and survival of pelagic fish and marine mammals. (World Heritage website)

► Fishing areas and conservation of fish stocks

About 50 local artisanal fishing vessels are permitted to fish within the Property. It is estimated that fishing employs about 400 people directly and about 9,000 people indirectly in communities that are within the area of influence of the Property. In 2008, 62 boats entered the Property for 231 sport fishing trips; fishing for billfish is practiced in the SZMP, and for multiple species in the National Park. (Management Plan, 2009).

►

Researchers from the International Cooperative Biodiversity Groups Project (ICBG), funded through the National Institutes of Health, with partners in the pharmaceutical industry have collected marine and terrestrial samples for bioprospecting from the Coiba National Park for the last ten years. Some active molecules have been identified from the park.

► Outdoor recreation and tourism

Around 7,000 tourists visited the Property in 2008 mainly for recreational diving (10 dive operators visit 31 sites), beach activities, fishing and visits to the Park Headquarters and vicinity on Coiba Island; 4 cruise ships also visit

the Park on a regular basis (Management Plan, 2009)

Summary of benefits

At the international and national level, conservation is the major benefit, while in the area of influence of the Property, the major value is for artisanal fishing and tourism (sport fishing, recreational diving, visits to Coiba Island), all of which contribute significantly to the local economy.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	CI, UNEP, ANAM, STRI		Marine Conservation and Sustainable Development Corridor: Galapagos-Cocos-Coiba-Gorgona-Malpelo Islands
2	Mar Viva, ANAM		Strengthening of fishermen’s organizations and communities.
3	Natura-MarViva		Integration of fishing cooperatives around the goal of responsible fishing and marketing of fish products.
4	Natura-ANCON		Rural community tourism in the area of influence of Parque Nacional Coiba-Golf de Chiriquí, and implementation of the tourism program of ARTURIS (Association of Sustainable Rural Tourism)
5	PNUD, STRI, INDICASAT		Promoting the Application of the Protocol of Nagoya on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit Sharing in Panama

REFERENCES

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1	35COM.Coiba.SOC
2	Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente. 2009. Plan de Manejo del Parque Nacional Coiba, Sitio de Patrimonio Natural de la Humanidad.
3	Guzman, Hector. 2010. Final Report to Conservation International Marine Management Science Program. Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.
4	IUCN Consultation, 2012.
5	IUCN Evaluation, 2005.
6	Mate, Juan. 2010. Parque Nacional Coiba, Panama – Node Report. Science to Action Project, CI.
7	Mission Report, 2014.
8	SOC Report, 2014.
9	Scientific Committee, Coiba National Park. 2011. Letter to the Coiba National Park Management Council.
10	Summan, D, J. Mate, and G. Sanmonte-Tan. 2010. Coiba National Park Governance Analysis.
11	World Heritage Website. http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1138.