Environmental Case Study
Saving a Gray Whale Nursery

At first glance, the Laguna San Ignacio may merely look like a shallow bay surrounded by a barren, rocky desert. But to many people, this lagoon on the west coast of Mexico's Baja Peninsula is a biological treasure. It's the last relatively pristine place where gray whales congregate each winter to mate, give birth, and nurse their calves. Pacific gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) make a round trip of about 16,000 km (10,000 mi) every year between their summer feeding grounds north of the Arctic Circle and the Baja. The warm, salty water of bays like San Ignacio give calves extra buoyancy that helps them swim and nurse, while also sheltering them from predators and winter storms.

In the nineteenth century, a whaling captain named Scammon discovered the winter calving areas in Baja. The enclosed bays that once protected the whales became killing grounds. In a short time, the Pacific population was reduced from an estimated 25,000 animals to only a few thousand. Whaling bans have allowed the species to rebound to nearly its prehunting population, a great success story in endangered species protection. In 1994, Pacific gray whales were removed from the U.S. endangered species list.

In 1954, the same year that Mexico banned commercial whaling, a sea salt extraction facility was built in Guerro Negro bay (formerly Scammon's Lagoon) and the nearby Ojo de Liebre just north of Laguna San Ignacio. These saltworks, which are now operated by Expotadora de Sal and jointly owned by the Mitsubishi Company and the Mexican government, are the largest in the world, producing 6.5 million metric tons of salt per year. Concern about the effects of this huge industrial development on both the whales and the surrounding desert caused Mexican President Miguel de La Madrid to establish the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve in 1988, including all three lagoons plus 2.4 million ha (6 million acres) of surrounding desert.

In 1994, however, Expotadora de Sal announced intentions to build an even bigger saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio. Plans called for 300 km² (116 mi²) of salt evaporation ponds carved out of the shoreline and filled by diesel engines that would pump 23,000 l (nearly 6,000 gal) of seawater per second. A 1.6 km (1 mi) long concrete pier built across the lagoon would transport the salt to an offshore loading area that would fill more than 120 salt tankers per year. The threat to whale survival from this immense operation was evident.
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One of Mexico’s leading environmental groups, el Grupo de los Cien (the Group of 100) started a campaign to stop this huge industrial development. They joined with other nongovernmental groups (NGOs), including the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), to raise public awareness and to lobby the Mexican government. The campaign took a number of different approaches. One of these was to organize whale-watching trips featuring movie stars, such as Glenn Close and Pierce Brosnan, to gain attention and educate the public about the issue. Newspaper ads and magazine articles criticized the industrialization of San Ignacio. One of these, entitled “An Unacceptable Risk,” presented the scientific value of the lagoon and was signed by 33 of the world’s most famous scientists, including several Nobel laureates.

Environmentalists also lobbied Mitsubishi directly, threatening to boycott their cars, TVs, electronics, and other products. A 1998 UN World Heritage Conference in Kyoto, Japan, provided an excellent opportunity to meet face-to-face with company leaders. Activists said to Hajime Koga, manager of Mitsubishi’s “Salt Team,” “You would never contemplate such a project in a World Heritage site in Japan. Why would you destroy one in another country?” The company was amazed to receive more than 1 million petitions, letters, and emails from all over the world, criticizing their expanded saltworks. Although the environmental NGOs weren’t successful in obtaining “In Danger” designation for the biosphere reserve at the conference in Kyoto, they did get this classification at the next meeting of the World Heritage Committee in Marrakech, Morocco, in 2000.

In 2002, Expotadora de Sal announced that it was abandoning plans for Laguna San Ignacio. Mitsubishi said it was the first time in its history that it had changed its policy because of environmental concerns. Simply blocking development isn’t enough; long-term solutions need to be economically sustainable as well as scientifically sound and socially just. The 35,000 Mexicans who live within the biosphere reserve need to make a living. In 2005, local residents and environmental NGOs signed an agreement to preserve 50,000 ha (124,000 acres) of land around Laguna San Ignacio. The Ejido Luis Echeverria, a land cooperative, which owns the land, will limit development in exchange for a $25,000 annual payment to be used for low-impact projects, such as ecotourism and whale watching. Eventually, conservationists hope to reach a similar agreement with five other ejidos to extend protection to 4,000 km² (1 million acres) of the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve. This will cost about $10 million.
Ecotourism and whale watching provide jobs for local people and help protect the Laguna San Ignacio.

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This case study demonstrates some of the steps in influencing public policy. First, you have to gather information and understand the science that informs your issue. You should recognize how, and by whom, policy is made. You must evaluate which of the many techniques for educating the public and shaping opinion can be effective. And you need to learn how to work with other groups, and to reason with those whose opinions you hope to sway.