

## Centro Ecológico Akumal Local NGO Conservation Efforts in Mexican Caribbean

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### Abstract

Centro Ecológico Akumal (CEA) has been working on coral reef conservation for over ten years, in Akumal, Mexico, through research, education and outreach. In the past several years, the organization's work has become more focused on addressing tourism and urban development issues as they impact directly on the health of the coastal ecosystem. CEA will present an overview of its community work, tourism education and ecosystem research efforts and the myriad tools applied to meet the challenges faced as tourism grows exponentially in the Riviera Maya region of Mexico. This includes serving as a field station for visiting research, both national and international, water quality issues, and public policy work at the community and municipal levels.

"The place of the turtle" or Akumal, in Maya, is a unique community along the Mexican Caribbean coast. It is one of the oldest tourist destinations on the mainland, built at a time when "sustainability" was not a consideration. Over thirty years ago, explorers came to search the area for sunken treasures from colonial Spain. Over the years, Akumal has been able to maintain its small size, while growing as a diving and snorkeling destination. Its population is made up of a unique blend of expatriates from the United States as well as investors from Mexico's capital and a growing number of Mayans from throughout the Yucatan peninsula, coming to the region in search of jobs. Akumal finds itself at a key point in its history, seeking to remain a small, high quality tourist destination, while finding its place among the growing number of All-inclusive hotels and golf resorts to the north and south and the accompanying urban area required to maintain these.

At the same time, CEA is working to adapt to these changes, focusing its work on sustainable tourism issues, taking a role as a facilitator to better understand impacts on the ecosystem (groundwater and coral reef), environmental education and development models for a more sustainable growth, among others.

Research in Akumal has shown that ground water contamination is having a negative impact on the health of the coral reef. Likewise, increased aquatic-based tourism is presenting negative impacts on the marine ecosystem. Finally, planned urban growth over the next twenty five years may have the potential to further degrade the quality of the coastal coral reef ecosystem.

The case study from Akumal will look at the tools and methods used to address and minimize the ecological footprint in the current of increased growth, as well as their potential, effectiveness and drawbacks. The challenges of planning for explosive growth will also be presented, as well as the community-based initiatives that may provide answers to greater effectiveness in sustainable use of the coastal and marine ecosystem in the Akumal area.

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