

Insight

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JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune

Pristine coastline like this on the southern edge of San Quintin in Baja California is falling prey to pressures of development. The region faces a critical moment in which it still can control the outcome.

Baja's coastline faces growth and possibly Titanic disaster

By Larry Herzog

PLAYAS DE ROSARITO, Mexico — Like the movie filmed along its coast, Baja California is sailing into the North American and global psyche at giga-byte speed. Long a destination for Southern Californians searching for an unspoiled sea amid an exotic foreign setting, Baja has been catapulted to international stardom by the filming of the mega-hit movie "Titanic." Las Vegas, Cancun, Palm Springs, the French Riviera, step aside. Rosarito

Beach was recently cited by *Playboy* magazine as one of the new hot spots in North America for spring partying.

But, few people realize how quickly the once pristine Baja coastline is about to be developed, and how easily its delicate coastal ecology may soon be destroyed by the resort complexes, the condos, town houses, high-rise buildings, hotels, theme parks, and shopping centers that will soon line the coastline from Tijuana to San Quintin.

This region faces a crucial moment in which it can still control the outcome, in which there is a choice between "Miamiization" of the coast, and controlled

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See **BAJA** on Page G-4

Will growth mean a boom or a Titanic disaster?

Continued from G-1

development within some ecological guidelines. In the 60-mile stretch of land between the two big cities (Tijuana and Ensenada) lie secluded beaches, sea cliffs, estuaries, lagoons, bays, canyons, mud flats, spits and coves. But this space is surrounded by nearly 2 million people, and more will arrive. The coastline is finally being divided among investors, speculators and developers under the somewhat unsteady hand of government. Land that for three decades remained either vacant or in agricultural use, almost overnight has been blanketed by "lotes" (lots for sale) signs. The late 1990's robust California economy has jump started the NAFTA-fueled, real estate growth machine and it is aimed at the Baja coastline.

The question that must be asked here is: how much coastal development can be accommodated, at what rate, and in what form? How much will be too much?

The most glaring ecological problem may be water. A few statistics: 7.8 million tourists visit the three coastal cities each year, with about 1.5 million making it beyond Tijuana, as far south as Rosarito and Ensenada. Hotels and other tourist activities are known to consume more water than native users. About 25,000 Americans live in resort housing along the coast, and the Mexican government projects a demand of some 30,000-60,000 more second homes in the next decade.

By 2010, according to the new master plan for the city of Playas de Rosarito, over 160,000 Americans could be residing along this coast. The city of Rosarito alone, which has nearly 100,000 inhabitants today, is projected to mushroom to

as high as 439,000 residents over the next decade. Combined with the escalating population of the other nearby Baja coastal cities and towns, the region should collectively surpass 3 million early in the next century. With all of the large cities in the southwest border region competing for scarce and expensive fresh water, how will the Baja coastal region get enough to service its exploding population, plus all of the new golf courses and mega-resort projects slated for the northern coast?

Among the resorts planned: a \$40 million marina/pier complex at the Rosarito Beach Hotel; the \$20 million Baja Studio complex, soon to be expanded, and possibly accompanied by an adjacent theme park under discussion, the multimillion dollar residential/Marriott hotel complex at Real Del Mar, which is projected to build out at 4,000 luxury homes; an \$11 million up-market housing/hotel complex at Punta Piedra (near Ensenada); a \$30 million artificial lake, residential-aquatic theme country club complex at Puerto Salinas (Ensenada outskirts); an \$82 million super resort condo-tennis-golf club at Bajamar; and a \$40 million marina/shopping district called Ensenada Cruise Port Village. These projects, totaling nearly \$250 million, are only the first wave.

Other environmental hazards await. Rosarito's thermoelectric power plant is petroleum-fueled, and a major source of air pollution. PEMEX installations threaten residents with toxic chemical spills. Fish processing plants in Ensenada need to modernize their operations to cut down on toxic waste runoff and noxious odors. Sewage spills occur weekly.

Most environmental planning experts in Baja say there is no overall control or

regulation of sewage treatment now. Numerous hotels and other developments are registered as having their own sewage treatment facilities. However, no one knows exactly how often these facilities are utilized, and what the level of treatment is. In towns and smaller villages along the coast, unregulated waste dumping occurs. On the new development sites, grading and destruction of natural hydrological features (gullies, natural water runoff, etc.) causes land erosion, flooding and fragmentation of the coastline ecosystem.

Many of these problems can still be fixed, but they must be part of a concerted effort on both sides of the border. In Southern California we learned too late the folly of not regulating the development of our coastline; we paid the price with nuclear power plants, high-rise buildings, freeways, and high-density development along our shores. We have still not solved the problem of runoff pollution on our beaches. This part of Mexico has the advantage of history — its Baja coastline is still somewhat intact. Baja can avoid the mistakes we made north of the border, but it needs our support.

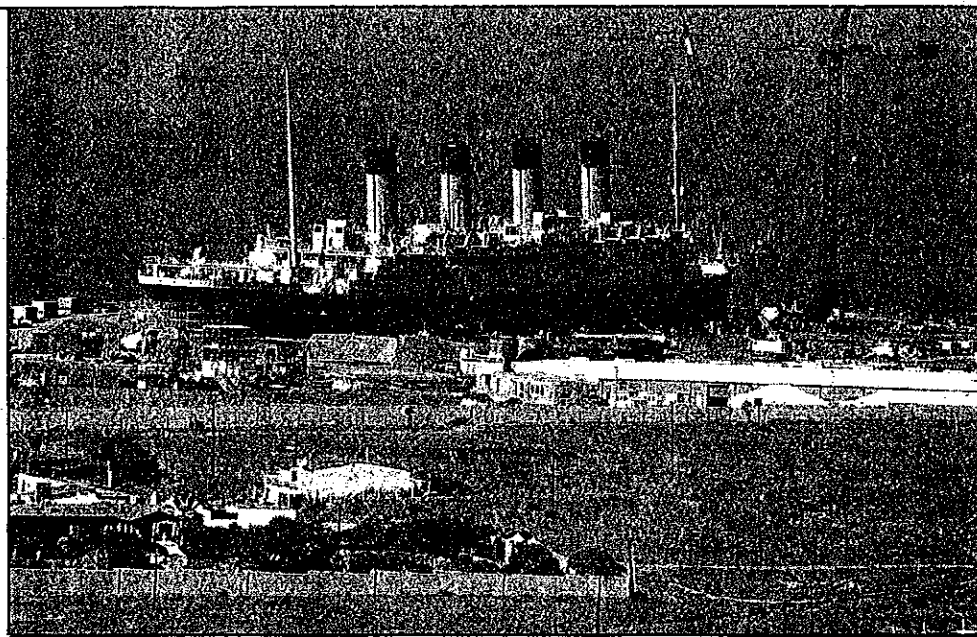
Since we are both future consumers of the Baja coastline, and in many cases partners in investment and design of the new towns that will line the coast, San Diegans and Southern Californians must become part of the solution.

But at least one recent case suggests we have a long way to go. Several years ago, the Los Angeles film production company Fox Studios, owned by billionaire Rupert Murdoch, made the decision to build a Baja Studio complex at Popotla, just south of Rosarito. One might have hoped that, on this lovely site overlooking the turquoise Pacific Ocean, Fox would move in as a good neighbor, alongside the small fishing village of Popotla. Surely one of the world's leading producers of scintillating images on the big screen could appreciate the importance of the "real world" community landscape it was to become part of: a delicate ecology amid a backdrop of fishing towns, rolling hills, and the sea.

Yet, Baja Studios arrived in the form of a montage of what can only be called oversized ugly grey metallic sheds. It then surrounded itself with chain link fences, guard houses and a bland con-

Mexican fishermen put their panga in the water at Punta Baja at San Quintin. Creeping development along the coast is pushing out this type of fishing.





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The filming of "Titanic" in 1996 at Fox Baja Studios south of Rosarito Beach heightened interest in Baja California for work and play.

crete block wall that looms over the little fishing hamlet of Popotla. Villagers routinely refer to it as the "Berlin Wall."

Ugliness aside, Fox Baja attracted a cult of tourists, who swelled nearby towns, filling hotels, and leaving hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.

During the filming of "Titanic," the studio reportedly used chlorine to keep the water in its gigantic pool clear for filming. The chemicals, according to some residents, killed off local marine life. One Popotla fisherman told the media during filming, "I'm a skin diver. I go down there now and everything is burned by chemicals. What's it worth — your livelihood, your family, your culture, your place?" Subsequent reports have varied: one study showed the production of local fish dropped from 15 million tons to 2 million tons the year after filming. Mexico's tourism agency, SECTUR, claims new studies absolve Baja Studios, but the matter remains unresolved for many.

In another part of the world — Thailand — Fox Studios is engaged in a similar battle with local ecologists and residents. On an island called Phi Phi Leh, the film company bulldozed portions of the seashore in a national wildlife area to create the stage set it needed for a movie called "The Beach." Locals reportedly sued the film studio and the Thai government, whose Royal Forestry Department was said to have broken its own laws to give Fox a permit to transform the beach. Thai environmental experts say that the loss of native vegetation could endanger the parkland ecology when the next season of typhoons sweeps through.

As the new millennium approaches, we have the chance to embrace a concept developed over the last two decades — sustainability. The growth of the northern coast of Baja California is inevitable, and that is not all bad. Mexico has every right

to milk the benefits of expansion made possible by the valuable natural resources of its coastline on the Baja peninsula, and in the spirit of NAFTA, businesses, investors, architects, environmentalists, planners and citizens from both sides of the border should be part of the process.

But all actors in the development process must recognize that the Baja coastline is a finite and delicate resource, and that tradeoffs must be made in the scale and style of development, and the preservation of both natural resources and regional culture. Why should a new AM-PM center in Rosarito so strongly mirror the U.S. prototype?

To its credit, the Mexican government is rapidly developing an environmental and urban planning expertise at the local level, and a formidable array of talented tourism experts, ecologists, scientists, and policy analysts. But decentralization and local control are very new to Mexico: Playas de Rosarito only recently became a municipality, and Tijuana's new independent planning office, IMPlan, was just formed in January, 1999. In the meantime, big development plans are in motion, and the government is forced to play catch-up.

But, help can also come from north of the border. We must recognize that the coastline from Los Angeles to Ensenada is a single binational ecological region. The users and investors come from both sides, and live north and south of the border. We can jointly contribute to developing the region in a sustainable way. Whether we arrive here as consumers, kayakers, campers, tourists, homeowners, or investors, we can no longer view northern Baja California as somehow disconnected from our homeland; we are part of the same future.