

# Blue Justice challenges for small-scale fisheries in Sipacate, Guatemala



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One of the biggest artisanal fishing villages in the Pacific region of Guatemala is presently found at Sipacate, Escuintla. Sipacate-Naranjo conservation area is a wetland of significant importance due to its mangrove forest cover, wildlife refuge, and biodiversity. Institutional efforts for the formal declaration of the Sipacate-Naranjo Conservation Area arose from the need to establish and define an official and participatory conservation category for the area, as framed within the Guatemalan System of Protected Areas – SIGAP. By January 1972, a detachment of the Pacific Naval Base was installed in Sipacate with the purpose of, among others, stopping the incursions of predators of maritime wealth. According to the Governmental Agreement of September 6, 1969, the Sipacate-Naranjo area was declared a National Park and in 2000, CONAP formally took over the administration of Sipacate-Naranjo National Park. Subsequently, through the National Fund for Nature Conservation (Fondo Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza – FONACON), the Master Plan 2002-2006 was implemented. To date, the area is recognized as Sipacate Naranjo National Park, managed by CONAP, under Article 89 of the Protected Area Law Decree 4-89.

**Photo:** Sipacate's fishers at work. 2019. © Wildlife Conservation Society - Guatemala

**Location:**  
Sipacate, Escuintla,  
Guatemala

**Ecosystem type:**  
Marine, Freshwater

**Main gear:**  
Gillnet, trawls

**Target species:**  
*Cynoscion reticulatus*  
*Hypanus longus*  
*Sphyrna lewini*

**Vessel type:**  
Fiberglass boats

**Number of full-time fishers:**  
Approximately 300

**% of full-time fishers:**  
NA

**Number of women fishing:**  
Approximately 20



*In the municipality of Sipacate, artisanal fishing is an open system, meaning that anyone with boats and fishing equipment can use the resource.*



However, it should be noted that Sipacate is a protected area that is solely on land; it does not extend to the sea. Currently, there are initiatives underway to turn the protected area into a marine region.

In the municipality of Sipacate, artisanal fishing is an open system, meaning that anyone with boats and fishing equipment can use the resource. There aren't currently any conservation or fisheries management initiatives in place in the area. Sipacate is regarded as a crucial habitat for sharks and rays, particularly *Hypanus longus* and *Sphyrna lewini*.

Sipacate-Naranjo currently has a team of seven people in charge of managing and protecting the area, which is made up of: an area administrator, who is in charge of directing the activities that take place within the area, five resource guards and a guard at CONAP's headquarters, which is located in the village of Paredón. The Technical Unit reports directly to CONAP's South Coast Regional Directorate, which is also attached to the central offices in Guatemala City.

In Sipacate Naranjo, effective governance in the coastal area is reinforced through the implementation of regular patrols. However, the frequency and scope of these patrols depend significantly on the available resources. The rangers patrol on land or by boat, and when they do so, they have to fill out a form reporting any actions they see (such as hunting, fishing with trammel nets, or extracting mangroves).

CONAP has the authority to seize timber resources in the event that their extraction is prohibited, as well as tools (such as chainsaws and trammel nets) that are used in such unlawful resource extraction. Patrols are conducted across the whole region, covering various zones on a regular basis. Patrols keep an eye on the resources' state of conservation as well as any potential effects that human activity may have on the protected region. Along with DIPRONA, DIPESCA, and the Naval Command, certain control and surveillance operations are also coordinated. Patrols are stepped up from July to October in preparation for the olive ridley sea turtle breeding season. This includes midnight beach patrols, sometimes with assistance from the Alternate Naval Command.

# Justice in context

## Types of justice:

- Distributive
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- **Market**
- **Infrastructure/wellbeing**
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- **Environmental**
- COVID-19 related

Few fishers own boats and most fishers are hired by boat owners. Since they must sell the product they catch at sea to the boat owners, they become dependent on the boat owners. As there is no dock and fishers must enter the sea through the bar, it is an extremely dangerous occupation, and fishers are not covered by social insurance. They also run the chance of experiencing severe weather and other natural occurrences at sea, which could endanger their life.

Generally speaking, a few fishing-related risks, including overfishing, bycatch, and the use of unlicensed gear, have been noted in the Sipacate region.

Aside from fishing, there are other productive industries that have a detrimental effect on the region: hunting, cattle ranching, agriculture, fish farming, extracting salt, and overall, an unmanaged infrastructure. Deforestation and degradation represent a latent threat at the forest level.

Additionally, there is a risk of pollution by solid waste, chemical pollutants, and sewage from land-based sources. There are some plants that grow on land that are classified as exotic species but are not invasive. Other dangers to fauna include unregulated sailing.

Lastly, the municipality of Sipacate is extremely vulnerable due to the fact that the governance and presence of the government and its institutions is weak but also because as a coastal community, the municipality is highly susceptible to climate change.

## Definition of small-scale fisheries

The artisanal fishery in Sipacate captures over 60 species, including teleosts, chondrichthyans, and crustaceans, using bottom-set gillnets and longlines. Fiberglass boats (23-25 ft, 40 HP engine) are used, with 24-48 hour trips manned by a captain and sailor. Key species include *Cynoscion reticulatus*, *Peprilus snyderi*, *Litopenaeus vannamei*, *Hypanus longus*, and *Sphyrna lewini*. This multispecific fishery supports local livelihoods and food security.



*In 2020, the protected area proposal was updated to the Sipacate Naranjo Conservation Areas. These areas take into account more conservation elements and extend the area to a marine environment.*



## Dealing with justice

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Since 2016, efforts have been underway to advance studies aimed at expanding the Sipacate Naranjo National Park into a marine protected area. From that date, studies have been conducted to update the management plan.

During the years 2017 and 2018, a characterization of fishing in Sipacate was carried out and specific work was done on the fishing gear used in the area. This work was conducted by NGOs and universities.

Universities have made efforts to conduct research on reproductive biology, trophic ecology, and contamination in the most captured species in the area.

In recent years, Guatemalan NGOs have conducted studies focused on sharks and rays and economic analyses of fishing to better understand the dynamics of fish populations.

In 2020, the protected area proposal was updated to the Sipacate Naranjo Conservation Areas. These areas take into account more conservation elements and extend the area to a marine environment.

Currently, the proposal is in its second reading for approval in the Congress of the Republic of Guatemala, which would officially establish the creation of the first Marine Protected Area in the Pacific of Guatemala.

### How to cite

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**Photo:** The landing area and boats from artisanal fishers in Sipacate, Guatemala. 2023 © Francisco Polanco-Vásquez

