

Getting Connected and Protecting Baja through.....PRO PENINSULA By Nanette Hayles

Interview with Chris Pesenti co- founder of Pro Peninsula

Chris, please tell us who is Pro Peninsula and what do you do.

Pro Peninsula is basically a support organization. We build relationships with communities and the people and groups working within those communities to protect and preserve their natural resources.

As a U.S. based nonprofit organization, our mission is to empower communities and organizations on the Baja California peninsula to protect and preserve their environment. Pro Peninsula envisions the creation of a network of strong and effective environmental organizations backed by an educated and active public working towards the common goal of environmental preservation. To this end, we work to provide technical assistance and organizational development, establish links with funding sources, foster collaboration, and increase public awareness of the organizations on the peninsula and the issues they address. Pro Peninsula is led by a dedicated board with backgrounds in science, law, conservation, outreach and advocacy, employs staff members in the U.S. and Mexico experienced in international environmental policy, science, community-based conservation and non-profit management, and is supported by an active and dedicated membership.

How did you get started?

Kama Dean and I started Pro Peninsula as a graduate school project at UCSD's Graduate school of International Relations and Pacific Studies in 2001 with a work plan and a vision to preserve one of the world's last truly wild places. What began as a dream has now grown into one of the leading conservation efforts on the Baja California Peninsula.

....since that time we've gone from two people working out of our apartments, to an organization of ten people and offices in La Paz and San Diego.

Is Pro Peninsula still affiliated with UCSD?

Ann Brownlee, an adjunct professor at UCSD is a Pro Peninsula board member. Co-Director Kama Dean is on the advisory council of Strategic Community Consulting, a non profit focused student group at IR/PS (our graduate school).

What really attracts me to your group is that it seems you can work on both sides of the border....which makes your group, in my opinion, very unique. Is this assumption correct???

We are different from most groups in that we are a US based 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation with our principal office in San Diego, while our focus is the Baja California peninsula. On the US side of the border we help educate the public about environmental issues on the peninsula, getting the word out, and helping people get involved. In Mexico we support community based conservation activities through the gathering and distribution of information and knowledge, cultivating networks, and empowering individuals.

So Americans should have no problems with making donations because you are U.S. based?

Donations made by U.S. citizens to Pro Peninsula, a registered 501c3 non profit corporation, are tax deductible to the fullest extent allowed by federal law.

Could donors from Baja California Sur have their money help the problems specific to this area?

If you are talking about Mexicans supporting their local projects in Mexico, absolutely, and many people do. That said, the infrastructure of formalized community support for environmental conservation is relatively new in Mexico. The tax incentives don't exist in the same way that people in the US are used to. There is a big push for the development of more community foundations. There's also an effort called FOSANP (South American Fund for Natural Protected Areas) to raise funds to support national parks management and infrastructure. Apart from that, it's getting to know the people working in your area and getting involved in the projects.

But donations that come through you, could donors have their money be utilized for a specific project?

*****Yes, that's happened in the past, a donor will choose to sponsor a specific community's participation in the Grupo Tortuguero, or to fund another specific Pro Peninsula project.

Chris, please talk to us about five current projects that Pro Peninsula is working on in Baja California.

Marine Conservation in Cabo Pulmo

In collaboration with Pro Peninsula, concerned citizens in the local community formed *Amigos para la Conservación de Cabo Pulmo, A.C. (ACCP)* to conserve Cabo Pulmo National Park's precious natural resources. The park is home to both nesting and foraging sea turtles, as well as the northernmost coral reef in the Pacific. Pro Peninsula has supported the group's passage from the startup development stage to becoming a leader of conservation efforts in Cabo Pulmo. The group recently brought on Eréndira Valle, a long time volunteer with the group and documentary film maker, as director.

With Pro Peninsula's support, ACCP carries out several vital projects within the national park including:

- v Coral reef monitoring
- v In-water sea turtle monitoring
- v Sea-turtle nesting beach protection
- v Community outreach and education

Sea Turtle Conservation- Grupo Tortuguero

Five of the world's seven species of endangered and threatened sea turtles inhabit the Eastern Pacific. Very little is known about the overall abundance of sea turtles in this area, and tens of

thousands of turtles are poached from Baja California waters each year to feed the black market demand for their meat, eggs, and shells. This mortality is compounded by the drowning deaths of turtles in fishing nets and on long lines along the peninsula coasts. In 1999, the Grupo Tortuguero was formed, and a multi-year monitoring project was initiated at six sites along the peninsula and in San Diego. Monitoring is now carried out at 11 sites along the peninsula and on mainland Mexico. Each of these sites was chosen because they are significant foraging and/or nesting sites, as well as poaching hotspots.

The project is coordinated by Pro Peninsula, and carried out by community members in partnership with local non-profit organizations. We work with the members of the Grupo Tortuguero to manage and advance the sea turtle monitoring project, promote and complete community-level outreach and education, and organize biannual network meetings.

ProCaguama

Pro Caguama is an integrated approach to reducing mortality of North Pacific loggerhead turtles in Baja California Sur. This community-based sea turtle bycatch reduction project focuses on research, fishing gear modification, tailored fishing techniques, and community outreach and education to reduce mortality of loggerhead turtles in Bahía Magdalena. ProCaguama has been embraced by local communities and has been overwhelmingly successful in creating positive conservation attitudes in Bahía Magdalena and throughout the peninsula since 2002.

Ocean Connectors

In 2005 Pro Peninsula started the 'Ocean Connectors' education program, collaborating with the Grupo Tortuguero, and supported by the California Coastal Commission. This unique program links San Diego students with students in Michoacán, Mexico, where some of the green sea turtles inhabiting South San Diego Bay are believed to migrate to nest. Ocean Connectors includes scientific and cultural topics, giving an interdisciplinary and global perspective to conservation, and emphasizing how nations can communicate and work together to protect endangered species. This program is given to classrooms with bilingual or Spanish-speaking students, enabling students to use their Spanish-language skills to interact with the Mexican students.

Promoting Environmental Education throughout the Californias

Pro Peninsula supports environmental education (EE) efforts throughout the Californias as the bi-national coordinator for the Consejo de Educación Ambiental para las Californias (CEAC), a bi-national, community-based network of environmental grassroots organizations, research institutions and government agencies dedicated to advancing a culture of sustainability through EE. CEAC has worked successfully in the border region for the past seven years, and currently runs a number of successful projects, all dedicated to strengthening and/or promoting community EE programs and organizations in the border region. CEAC is the only bi-national network dedicated to EE in Mexico or the U.S., and is often looked to as a model at conferences and meetings.

Please give me two specific examples of current interaction Pro Peninsula has with already existing environmentally concerned Mexican groups related to the above five mentioned projects.

One example is the Annual Grupo Tortuguero Meeting we hold in Loreto. It gives an opportunity for the community - Mexicans and foreigners - to embrace and celebrate the vital conservation work being done in the community and get involved whether as project volunteers, financial supporters, or in-kind supporters. On a different note, last year, in collaboration with groups and individuals from La Paz, Pescadero and Todos Santos, we put on the Encuentro Ambiental y Campeonato de Surf de Pescadero. It brought a lot of people together to have fun, learn about their natural resources, and get involved - whether at the beach cleanup we held, or with some of the groups that were present. If your talking specifically about the development of community foundations, that's not what we do. I would steer you to Anne McEnany with International Community Foundation (ICF) also based here in San Diego.

I've lived in Baja California Sur for 16 years and have seen many environmental changes in just this short time, what environmental issues/challenges does Pro Peninsula have in it's vision "to preserve one of the world's last truly wild places?"

In my (humble) opinion, the most important issues are: Conservation of endangered species and their habitats, Fisheries - preserving the survival of small scale/artesinal fisheries, Threats from poorly planned and/or misguided coastal development, Preservation of open lands and public spaces, Planning for and mitigation of demographic growth and all that that entails (water, air, sewage, etc). The local populations are the thread that runs through all of these issues, and their decisions they make will decide how these issues play out for future generations.

There is a growing concern here about building on the dunes...please comment and do you have any available information on dune protection..... what happens when the dunes are weaken and/or destroyed. We in Todos Santos, are particularly concerned because the volume of water that is being held by the dunes is tremendous. Rumor has it that's why they can't build a marina here, the volume and depth of water to too great...the big fear here is, that building and tampering with the dunes will weaken the them...the damage would be an catastrophic ...please comment.

As environmental law goes, internationally, Mexico has one of the better structures around. Unfortunately, there are many things that are lacking - a *norma* for sand dunes is one of them. So, that sets up a potential clash between developers and communities and people who want to preserve the dune ecology.

As I imagine you are already aware, the dunes provide valuable habitat to fragile plant systems and other living species. They also play an important role in preventing coastal erosion. When that dune structure is altered, the system of protection is open to breaking down, endangering those habitats, and anything else in the potential path of destruction (homes, people?). You mention construction of a marina. Have you seen the results of the breakwater build in Santa Rosalíita?

No I'm not aware please tell us.

That project was rushed through skipping much of the environmental review required by Mexican law and the design was deeply flawed. I'm not an engineer, but anyone visiting the site can clearly see the marina filling up with sand. Sadly enough, the sand down the beach where the

local inhabitants live has been carried away. The marina will need to be redesigned and rebuilt, or continually dredged.

Thanks Chris for this valuable information, hopefully we will use it and help preserve Baja, one of the last “jewels” of the planet. We can already see some of the effects of NOT ACTING on environmental issues that threaten our planet, specifically all the hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. Some scientists seem to believe that the cause is the 2% rise in ocean temperature triggered by environmental damage. Care to comment

***** I think that we all need to worry about things that we can control. On a global level, yes, global warming is something for which we all share responsibility. But it disturbs me even more when we directly cause irreparable damage to our own natural resources, where the immediate affects take place right before our eyes. What is the future value of a coastline, and to whom does it belong? What is the value associated with natural systems like estuaries and barrier dunes? What is the value of ensuring that small-scale fisheries endure, and what happens if they don't?

As an environmentalist, what did you think of the Film the Day After Tomorrow...another Hollywood thing?

*****Honestly, I don't really consider myself an environmentalist – maybe that is because I don't like labels. I just think of myself as someone that tries to be more aware in my actions and decisions. If I am a human, I am going to think about the effects of polluting the air I breathe and the water that gives life to all around me. If I am a fisher, I'm going to think about the consequences of fishing species to the point where they can't recover. It's a question of awareness and thinking critically about the outcomes and long-term consequences of our actions. I don't have an opinion about that movie, but if it gets people asking questions, then it has served a purpose.

In closing, please tell us about one of your most memorable experiences in working with Pro Peninsula

*****Sharing four days with the Seri Indians in Agua Blanca for their leatherback turtle release ceremony was one of the most memorable experiences of my life - not just of working with Pro Peninsula. For four days we became Seri. They painted our faces, taught us to dance and play their games. As Cleotilde, the Seri elder said, they were far from home and we became their community. It amazed me how people so far apart (literally and figuratively) could be brought so close together through their efforts and desire to preserve a species. I am truly one of the luckiest people because I work with and meet some of the most wonderful people on the planet: gringos, Mexicans, native tribes, kids and adults alike.

For more information please visit www.propeninsula.org, or www.grupotortuguero.org
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