

## COASTAL LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT IN MEXICAN TOURIST REGIONS. PUNTA DE MITA CASE IN BAHÍA DE BANDERAS, NAYARIT

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the process of coastal landscape management in the Mexican tourist region from the transformation of the landscape of Punta de Mita. This peninsula is part of the interstate metropolitan zone of Puerto Vallarta - Bahía de Banderas, located between the State of Jalisco and State of Nayarit. It is one of three coastal metropolitan zones of Mexico.

This research has a qualitative approach and adopts the concept of the *landscape* defined by the European Landscape Convention as “any part of the territory, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (Council of Europe, 2000).

The units of analysis were the peninsular zone of Punta de Mita and the actors who participated in their transformation. The information was collected through *semi-structured interviews* with key informants selected using the snowball technique, *qualitative observation*, *review of official documentary sources (plans, projects, reports)* as well as *historiographical and aerial photographs*.

The identification of the participation of each type of actor is highlighted in the transformation of the landscape: the State provides the land and enables for tourism investment; economic actors take ownership and monetize their aesthetic values; social actors are deprived of the use and enjoyment of the landscape. The symbols printed on the territory are mainly touristic and, in the

second instance, natural whose conservation represents a point of agreement between the state and the residents.

## Management of Mexican coastal tourism regions

For the year 2014, Mexico was positioned among the top ten destinations with the largest number of international tourists, 29.3 million, whose average cost was calculated to 488 USD and the destination reflects twenty foreign exchanges being used. In 2014, Puerto Vallarta and Bahía de Banderas received more than 1.6 and 1.1 million tourists respectively, of which, 1 million were international, which reflects the importance of these destinations (Secretaria de Turismo, 2015).

Since 1956, the Mexican state has been directing the management of tourist regions through the *National Trust Fund for Tourism Development* (FONATUR). This parastatal company has had different names and attributes, and currently depends on the *Ministry of Tourism* (SECTUR).

One of the most obvious transformations by that management has been the change in the ownership of land and effectively limiting access to territory that is observed in the Integrally Planned Centers (CIP) Comprehensively Planned Centers proposed since 1969 for the colonization of new coastal areas (eg. Cancun in 1974), and in areas that already showed some development and strong tourist potential such as Acapulco and Puerto Vallarta. In 2008, more than 11,000 km of Mexican coast was privatized (Dachary & Arnaiz , 2008). The construction by the beach of hotels, golf courses and luxury residences for international tourism and the high average economic sector of the Mexican population, which in 2000 represented 10% of total population (Tuirán, 2005), *actually* blocks the access to the resources of this territory for the 90% of the Mexican population.

**Figure 1 Punta de Mita territory and Corral del Risco community (red) actual placement**



Source: Córdova T. (2014).

The objective of this paper is to analyze the process of transformation of the Mexican coastal landscape from the territory of Punta Mita and the community of Corral del Risco, located in the municipality of Bahías de Banderas, Nayarit. This municipality has had an important tourist development supported by its outstanding esthetic qualities and for its contiguity with Puerto Vallarta. Now it is a part of Interstate Metropolitan zone of Puerto Vallarta - Bahía de Banderas which, along with Acapulco and Cancun, in 2010 integrated the three coastal tourist metropolitan zones officially recognized in Mexico (SEDESOL, CONAPO, INEGI, 2012).

### **The landscape as a sociocultural construct**

The *landscape* has traditionally been understood as a natural and aesthetic component of the territory, however, since the mid-twentieth century, *landscape* studies have been extended to various disciplinary fields and their analysis has had a rapid evolution. In the 90s, it began to be used as a reality transformed by man against the need to build their habitat and, therefore, a sociocultural construct. Since 1992, certain important cultural landscapes were considered heritage sites by UNESCO, for being a result of the evolution in the relationship between man and nature.

This European Landscape Convention (2000), established by the Council of Europe, defined the landscape as "any part of the territory, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Parlamento Europeo, 2000, p. Artículo 1).

According to Howard, Thompson & Waterton (2013), this definition is irrelevant, since the *landscape* refers to a part of the territory that has certain forms of organization and administration and is perceived by the population, which highlights the presence of contextual and aesthetic qualities (space). The presence of different landscapes is related to different historical forms of interaction between human activities and natural processes, therefore the history, economy and ecology are essential factors in the structure and landscape analysis.

This new conceptual construction of the *landscape* has been retouched, analyzed and complemented by various authors, mainly European (Berque 2009; Busquets, 2009; Maderuelo, 2010; Martínez de Pisón, 2009; Mata & Alex, 2006; Moya, 2011; Muñoz, 2016; Nogué, 2007 y 2008; Roger, 2007).

Geographer and director of the Landscape Observatory of Catalonia, Joan Nogué, considers the *landscape* as "a social product, as a result of collective transformation of nature and as a cultural projection of a society in a given space." This concept can help us understand the management of the *tourism landscape* as it sets out, manipulates and legitimizes social and power relations in which on it the *symbols* of the prevailing socio-economic model are printed. An essential factor that defines the *landscape* as a social construct is the existence of the observer *perception*, which projects itself on the landscape. Power relationships arise when there are different types of observers and each makes a prospective construction different from the same landscape and exerts its ability to influence its transformation (Nogue, 2007).

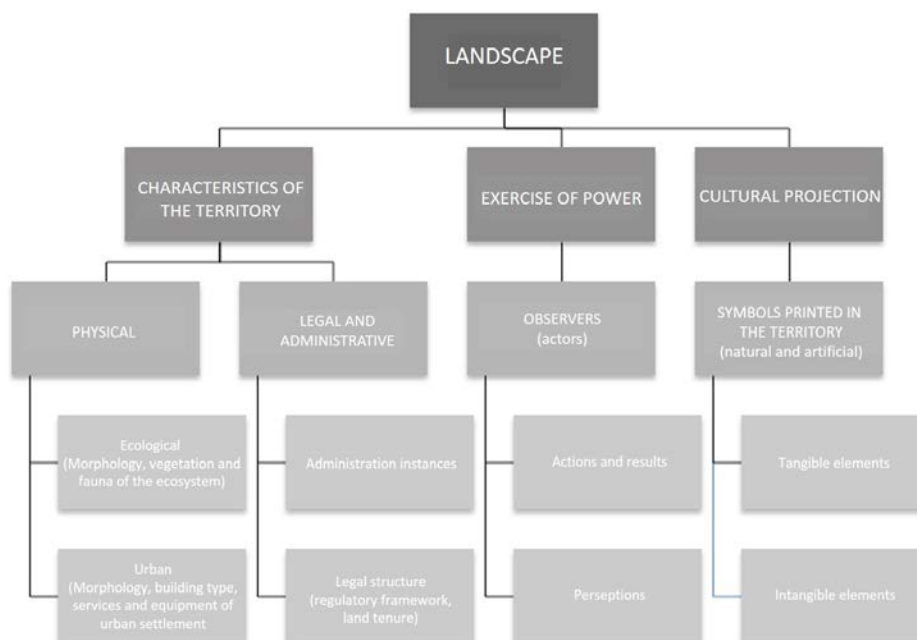
In 2010, on the occasion of the international seminar *Theory and Landscape: Reflections from interdisciplinary looks*, some of the most recognized exponents in the study of landscape in Spain, raised the need to create a critical and rigorous respect of the components and meanings of the prior *landscape* to any material or symbolic intervention reflection, noting that "the landscape is a notion complex [...], whose conceptual delimitation and critical and historical sense must be analyzed. The landscape is, or can be, a physical fact, a cultural representation, an aesthetic construction, a political category... Thus, the landscape becomes addressed as an interdisciplinary concept, as a non-reducible category to a single theoretical and epistemological framework. Its sense does not derive ultimately of a sum of approaches but hybridization of plural discourses of different disciplines and practices" (Univesitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona & Observatorio del Paisaje de Cataluña, 2009).

### Methodology for analyzing the transformation of the coastal landscape

To analyze the motivations as well as environmental and social consequences of the landscape transformation, a mixed type approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative aspects was chosen. This approach allows recognizing the objective evidences and the subjectivities of the actors involved in the phenomenon.

To address the analysis of the landscape transformation in the tourism micro-region of Punta de Mita, a mixed-type methodological model was constructed from the conception proposed by the European Landscape Convention and the theoretical proposal by Joan Nogué (2007, 2008). Three-dimensional analysis were selected: 1) *characteristics of the territory*; 2) *exercise of power*; and 3) *cultural projection*.

Figure 2 Methodological framework for the landscape study



Source: By the authors / Prepared by de authors.

The first dimension aims to determine the characteristics of the coastal territory in the two selected periods of analysis, its physical aspects (ecological and urban) and regulatory (legal framework and administrative entities). The second category allows to analyze the management capacity of the actors involved as observers in the territory projecting their aspirations in the landscape. The third category focuses on the power relations between the actors and the economic model, from identifying the *symbols* printed in the landscape. The overall results of the three-dimensional raised to analyze the sustainability of Punta de Mita from the desired perspective.

### *Study area and periodization*

The peninsula of Punta de Mita extends into the Pacific Ocean and delimits the North Bahía de Banderas, located in the municipalities of Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco and Bahía de Banderas, Nayarit. It is accessed by the branch of Punta Mita from the federal highway 200 along the coastline connecting the towns of Sayulita to the north, Higuera Blanca to the northwest, Nuevo Corral del Risco-Emiliano Zapata to the east and Cruz de Huanacastle to the southeast.

We distinguish two periods in which different degrees of human intervention in the territory can be seen: between 1949 and 1991, the landscape has a low degree of intervention and just settlement of Corral del Risco is identified; since 1992, with the beginning of the tourism project *Riviera Nayarit*, important changes in the landscape have been observed. The event that marks both periods is in 1992 with the relocation of the fishing settlement Corral del Risco due to the construction of hotel *Four Seasons Resort* by the company *Dine*, opened in 1994.

### *Unit of analysis and data collection*

The units of analysis were the peninsular zone of Punta de Mita and the actors who participated in their transformation. Land-use transformations are analyzed using aerial photographs and documents generated in the two periods, where their physical characteristics are identified, both ecological and urban. The analysis of actor participation in this transformation took several sources, which were selected according to accessibility to the information during the research process:

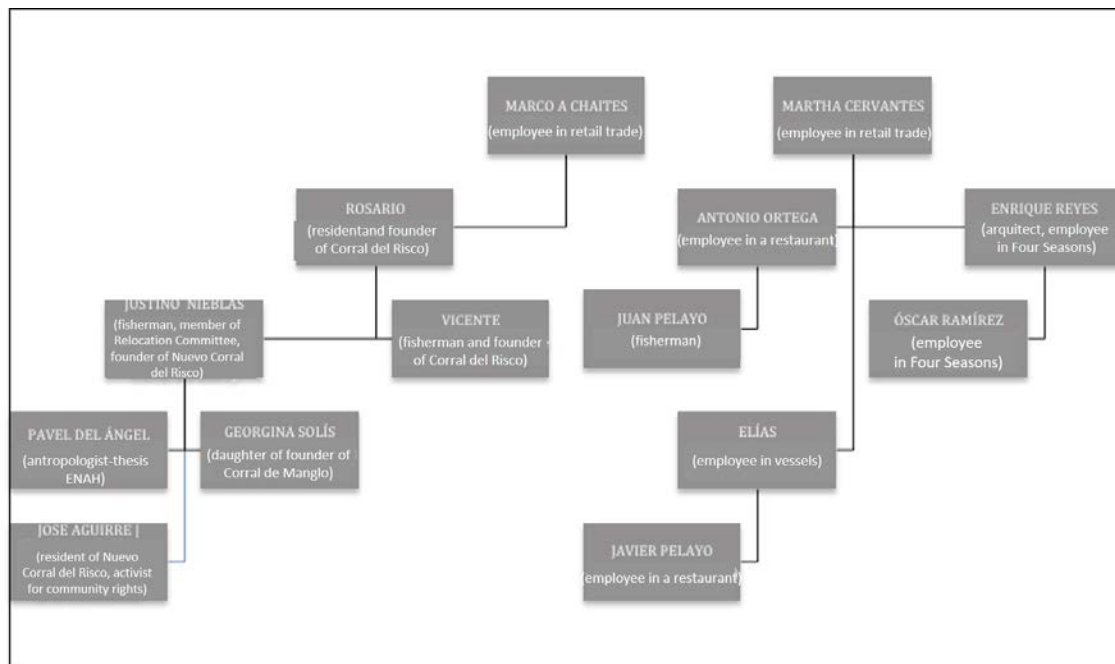
- a) *social actors* represented by residents of the town of Corral del Risco that inhabited the original town and experienced the relocation process (semi-structured interviews);
- b) *economic actors*, represented by the company *Dine* through tourism projects proposed for the peninsula of Punta de Mita and workers of the *Four Seasons* hotel (semi-structured interviews);
- c) *governmental actors* represented by the Government of the State of Nayarit, SECTUR and FONATUR (analysis of plans and projects approved for the mainland).

### *Sample selection and associated information*

The sample of social and economic actors was selected by identifying key informants in the community of Nuevo Corral del Risco who had inhabited the original settlement and experienced the relocation process. This selection was made by the *snowball technique* that

led to the integration of an information flowchart to the saturation of the categories related to the three dimensions of the research (Figure 2).

**Figure 3** Network of key Informants to the development of in-depth interviews



Source: Córdova T. (2014).

The semi-structured interview covered the three dimensions of research in both periods of analysis. The presence and the accessibility of documentary and photographic material was important which allowed to contrast the arguments of key actors giving a high degree of certainty to their testimonies.

## The encroached landscape

### *Territory characteristics and the exercise of power*

The Punta de Mita is integrated into the Sierra Madre del Sur through an irregular strip that covers the entire municipality of Bahía de Banderas. The foothills of the Sierra de Vallejo stretch to the coastal area of Punta de Mita. The coastal landscape is characterized by alternating low-lying coasts, corresponding to the floodplains and coastal cliffs, where mountainous areas extend to the sea.

The predominant vegetation found is the mangrove, which is perpendicularly distributed to the channels of the Ameca River and the communities of herbaceous and shrubby species adapted to the particular conditions of the coastal sand dunes. One can observe species of spiny forest with low scrub, which functions as a transitional area and protects the coastal forest.

Until 1992, the settlement officially known as *Punta de Mita*, and by the residents as *Corral del Risco*, was located on the east coast in front of the Las Cuevas beach, which in 1980 accounted

for a population of 364 inhabitants. In 1994, one could observe the relocation of this settlement in front of the *Playa del Anclote* and in the peninsula tourist-oriented constructions could be identified: hotels, pools, golf courses, etc. In 2000, Nuevo Corral del Risco was home to 598 inhabitants; in 2010 they increased to 2,304. This significant relative growth was due to its integration with the Emiliano Zapata zoning area for statistical purposes (INEGI, 1980; INEGI, 2010). Despite the population increase, its extension was not significant because it was already surrounded by touristic developments.

### *The Government as a landscape provider for tourism investment*

In Mexico, SECTURE is responsible for creating policies and planning tourism activities through the *General Tourist Land Use Planning Program* (POTT), while FONATUR is responsible for identifying, defining and promoting investment projects (FONATUR, 2012).

Since its formation in 1956, FONATUR had to overcome two major problems in order to manage the touristic territory: the land tenure and the prohibition of foreigners to acquire property on a stretch of 50km of the coast (Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, art. 27). With the objective to circumvent this legislation, in 1970 *the National Program of the Regularization of Communally Owned Zones* (PRONARZUE) was created, now known as *the Commission for the Regularization of Land Tenure* (CORETT, 2012), which aims to regularize the tenure of communally owned territories, as well as communal and private property illegally occupied. Official discourse tried to give legal certainty to the communal owners, entitling them with property deeds, however, the program annexed the rest of the communally owned property not used for homes and constituted a trust: A legal entity for the administration of the territory by the federal government or for assistance of the parastatal entities "... in the powers of the State to promote the priority areas of development" (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2013).

Supported by the argument to provide legal certainty to localities with potential, FONATUR initiated a process of *expropriation and regularization of land tenure*. In practice, the *appropriation* of territory in favor of the federal court gave way through the use of the *trust*, so that foreigners could manage the Mexican coastal landscape and marked the beginning of foreign investment in the Mexican tourism industry. The process of evasion of the limitations imposed by the Constitution concluded in 2013 with the approval of the amendment of article 27 of the Constitution, promoted by the coordinator of the PRI, Manlio Fabio Beltrones, who reduced ownership restrictions to foreigners, on the grounds "to eradicate the simulation of foreign ownership on the beaches of Mexico and to eliminate the intermediaries through trusts, [...] have profited from the constitutional prohibition" (El Economista, 2013).

In 1970, *the Transferring Trust of Ownership of Banderas Bay* (FIBBA) was created, through which, began the same processes in the coastal region of the state of Nayarit. It expropriated 4,136 hectares of communally owned lands of the current municipality of Bahía de Banderas (FIBBA, 2015; Gómez Encarnación, 2008).

According to community informants, Corral del Risco was, at this time, a fishing settlement that was located on the property of a cattle ranch. During the process of regularization, land

ownership was transferred by the farm to the inhabitants (Nieblas, J., personal communication, October 30, 2014).

Although we found no evidence of this transfer, in the *Regional Plan for Urban Development of Priority Zone Conurbada of the Ameca River Estuary* of 1979, a reference is made to the settlement of Punta de Mita in the location referred to by the inhabitants of Corral del Risco. Until the 2010 census, this settlement was officially identified as Corral del Risco – Punta de Mita. (INEGI, 2010)

Successively, the sector investment programs (1978-1982), began construction of the La Cruz de Huanacaxtle – Punta de Mita highway, introduced electricity to all villages, provided water services to Punta de Mita, as well as training and diverse equipping for education, health, sports and communication infrastructures such a telephone, telegraph and mail (Secretaria de Asentamientos Huanos y Obras Públicas, 1976). In the late 70's, the Federal 200 Tepic – Puerto Vallarta highway was constructed, which includes the branch that runs along the coastline to the peninsula that allows access to the beaches in the area.

In 2007, SECTUR, FONATUR and the Government of the State of Nayarit launched the *Riviera Nayarit* project, which stretched along 307 kilometers of coastline, from the Tecuala municipality to Puerto Vallarta, and gave a new boost to development of high-level tourism in Punta de Mita.

#### *The economic power of tourism*

In the 90s, the *Dine* company acquired almost the entire peninsula (688.5 ha) where the fishing settlement of Punta de Mita – Corral de Risco was originally located. In 1994, the community was relocated in front of the *Playa del Anclote* beach, changing its name to Nuevo Corral del Risco. The proposal of the *Dine* real estate company, which had the support of the Government of the State of Nayarit, consisted of granting the residents of Corral del Risco an urbanized zone with all services and housing property, in exchange for their relocation.

#### *The local population as vulnerable observers*

The negotiation process for the transfer of the community of Corral del Risco was not easy. The community had a great attachment to their way of life and depended on the natural resources for their food and income. Additionally, the community learned of the relocation once the management efforts for the construction of the *Punta Mita* resort and *Four Seasons* hotel had already been finished.

In the interviews performed on site, the informants who were residents of the old Corral del Risco shared with us how they perceived this process of transformation of the territory and the relocation. The process began with a meeting with the fisherman and inhabitants where they were informed that the area had been sold and they were going to be relocated. The majority of the community initially stood in the position of defending the land where they lived, refusing to move. (Chaites, M., Comunicación personal, 30 de octubre de 2014) Finally, the government of Nayarit sent police patrols to the residents who forcibly took them to the state headquarters in order to force them to sign documents accepting their relocation (Nieblas, J., Comunicación personal, 30 de octubre de 2014). After this incident, the community organized and created a "Board" whose members acted as negotiators and leaders of the defense movement. The real



estate company sent the plan of the new town to support its promise of the features of the zone and the dwellings they would be providing them. The relocation of the population from the old Corral del Risco was completed in 1993 and is documented in the Public Registry of Property of Bucerias, Nayarit. The last families who refused to be relocated were evacuated with construction machinery that came to destroy the old community.

Even so, the inhabitants state that *Dine* did not meet the original specifications and also that there were families who did not receive housing. (Pelayo, J., Comunicación personal, 30/10/2014) The Nuevo Corral del Risco project which provided a housing development of 20 hectares with lots of 300m<sup>2</sup> and finished homes was replaced at the last minute by a housing development of 11 hectares with lots of 162m<sup>2</sup> and houses with different dimensions and features (Nieblas, J., Comunicación personal, 30/10/2014). The homes that were originally promised at 60m<sup>2</sup> were 42m<sup>2</sup>, with a cement floor and without a kitchen (Rosario, Comunicación personal, 30/10/2014), and did not meet with the minimum conditions of comfort, with a distribution that does not allow air flow so that the community has them kept cool with trees or thatched roofs above the cornet roof to try to mitigate the heat. The perception of the community in respect to the relocation is of abuse by the authorities, they feel that they cannot trust in them as they only take care of those in power; dispossession because they cannot access the beaches and natural areas that they enjoyed before the relocation; anger, helplessness and vulnerability towards this event that overtook their ability to respond (Solís, G., Comunicación personal, 30/10/2014).

### *Cultural projection: the symbols of the landscape*

We have identified four symbolic dimensions printed in the landscape of the Punta de Mita micro-region.

#### *Symbols of transnational power of tourism: Golf courses, residences and resort hotels*

The *Punta Mita* development has been listed by the magazine *Expansion* as one of the most luxurious areas with the highest development in the region (Expansion, 2008). Its facilities have profoundly transformed the territory of the peninsula and represents the symbols of economic power in the landscape.

Two *golf courses* with 19 holes, designed by Jack Nicklaus (considered to be the best golfer of all time) are advertised on the official websites for being located in the middle of the jungle with views of the Pacific Ocean: the *Campo de Golf Pacifico* (1999) and the *Campo de Golf Bahía* (2009) which together have an area of 238 hectares.

Two Special Category (5 Diamonds) *resort hotels* were constructed: the *Four Seasons* with 173 rooms, and the *Saint Regis* with 130 rooms, opening in 1999 and 2009 respectively, including swimming pools, restaurants and other luxury facilities.

According to the master plan presented on the official website of *Punta Mita*, 12 *residential development* constructions are currently planned with a cost of over one million dollars and over 300m<sup>2</sup> of space.

### *Natural symbols of the territory, the agreement between the government and residents*

Four natural symbols have been identified for their ecological significance and aesthetic, which have been protected firstly by civil society and later, by the Mexican state.

The *Marieta Islands* are a recognized symbol by the people who have fought for their sustainability. In 1997 the SEMARNAP classified the islands as a priority area for protection (ECOPLAMB, 2004), in 2005 they were declared a national park, with a total area of 1,383 hectares (SEMARNAT, 2007). In 2008, UNESCO declared them a *Biosphere Reserve* (UNESCO, 2012).

The *humpback whales* are amongst the most impressive marine species in the region and the fishermen in the area, after more than 60 years of experience, have become so knowledgeable of their habits that they are considered field guides and recognized experts in their study with the likes of Jaques-Yves Cousteau or Anelio Aguayo.

In 1998, SEMARNAT published the Official Standard that established guidelines and specifications for the development of whale watching activities concerning their protection and the conservation of their habitat. Despite the attempts to protect marine mammals, the boost in tourism in the region has increased the anthropic pressure on its habitat (Nieblas, J., Comunicación personal, 30/10/2014).

The *marine region of the Bahía de Banderas*, including its beaches and cliffs are active landscapes recognized by residents and tourists. Since 1990 they have been listed as relevant ecosystems (ECOPLAMB, 2004, pág. 148). In 1998, the *National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity* (CONABIO), considered the Bahía de Banderas to be a priority region for marine conservation (ECOPLAMB, 2004). The foothills of the *Sierra Vallejo* form a substantial part of the landscape of Punta de Mita, which is integrated in the Sierra Madre del Sur and from 2004 is considered part of the *Priority Terrestrial Regions for Biodiversity Conservation* (RTP-62) (ECOPLAMB, 2004, págs. 148, 176).

### *Symbols of local culture*

Two types of local culture symbols have been identified: the *remnants of the distant past* as well as the *artefacts and architectures* from which the population has marked the territory.

In the area that is located in the *Archeological site of Punta de Mita* which highlights the ceremonial centers of Tintoque and El Malinal. For the local residents, these archeological remains of pre-Hispanic settlements represented symbolic references, however, after the privatization of the peninsula, they were not aware of its state (Nieblas, J., Comunicación personal, 30/10/2014). In 1994, the *Agreement of Cultural & Financial Cooperation for the Investigation and Archeological Rescue of Punta Mita* with the *National Anthropological and Historical Institute* (INAH), which was ratified in 1997 against the danger represented by the construction of the second stage of the *Punta Mita* resort. The ceremonial centers of Tintoque and El Malinal as well as other archaeological remains such as petroglyphs, ovens, and pots were analyzed and cataloged (ECOPLAMB, 2004, pp. 177, 178). It is currently not possible to access these places located in the *Punta Mita* resort.

Amongst the *artefacts* of the area that the residents recognize as symbols, one finds *El Faro* and *La Glorieta* at the entrance of the old town of Corral del Risco. The first was a reference for

the inhabitants who engaged in fishing, and the second marked the access to the far side of the peninsula and the old Corral del Risco. Other important places – the old school and church of Corral del Risco – were destroyed in the relocation of the community.

## Discussion

In the coastal landscape of Punta de Mita, the symbols of power of the Mexican State and transnational tourism companies have been established. The first established the normative bases and management tools as well as the infrastructure to provide the coastal territory with tourism potential with the necessary components to attract investment. The second introduced its symbols through the privatization of land and a profound transformation of its ecological and esthetic components.

Together, these two factors caused a cultural breakdown for the former residents of Corral del Risco in order to adapt themselves to the conditions of their new settlement, with conditions that were not only different but also of less comfort and material quality, affecting their quality of life. The privatization of beaches and other natural and man-made symbols that formed part of the culture of the inhabitants of Corral del Risco are motives of arguments that show their helplessness and anger. Repeatedly, they affirm that they do not deny the progress nor the investment of touristic businesses, however they request the respect of agreements and the support of the Mexican state.

The agreement between the State and local communities to conserve and sustain the natural symbols identified in the territory may represent the key to tighten the relationships of power and a “possible aesthetic anticipation of a reconciliation between nature and culture, in other words, of a reconciliation made by society” (Nogué 2008).

## Conclusions

The process of coastal territory management we observed in Punta de Mita is not an atypical for Mexico: SECTUR and FONATUR have been managing the development of the tourism sector since the 50s, under a strategy of expropriation and appropriation of the landscapes of major ecological and aesthetic relevance of the national territory. The *trust* was developed as a mechanism for the federal government to acquire land with high touristic potential, with a relatively low cost since communally owned property would be expropriated for public interest or in specific cases, as investment for foreign capital.

According to the Landscape Agreement (2000), the objective of landscape quality is linked to the formulation, by the competent authorities, of the aspirations of the public with regards to the landscape features of their surroundings, however, in the Mexican case the communities are not considered in this management so that in many cases they have organized to autonomously oppose the eviction and transformation of their environment. Such actions have provided mixed results, a progressive empowerment of the community in response to its vulnerability to economic powers and the State has been observed.

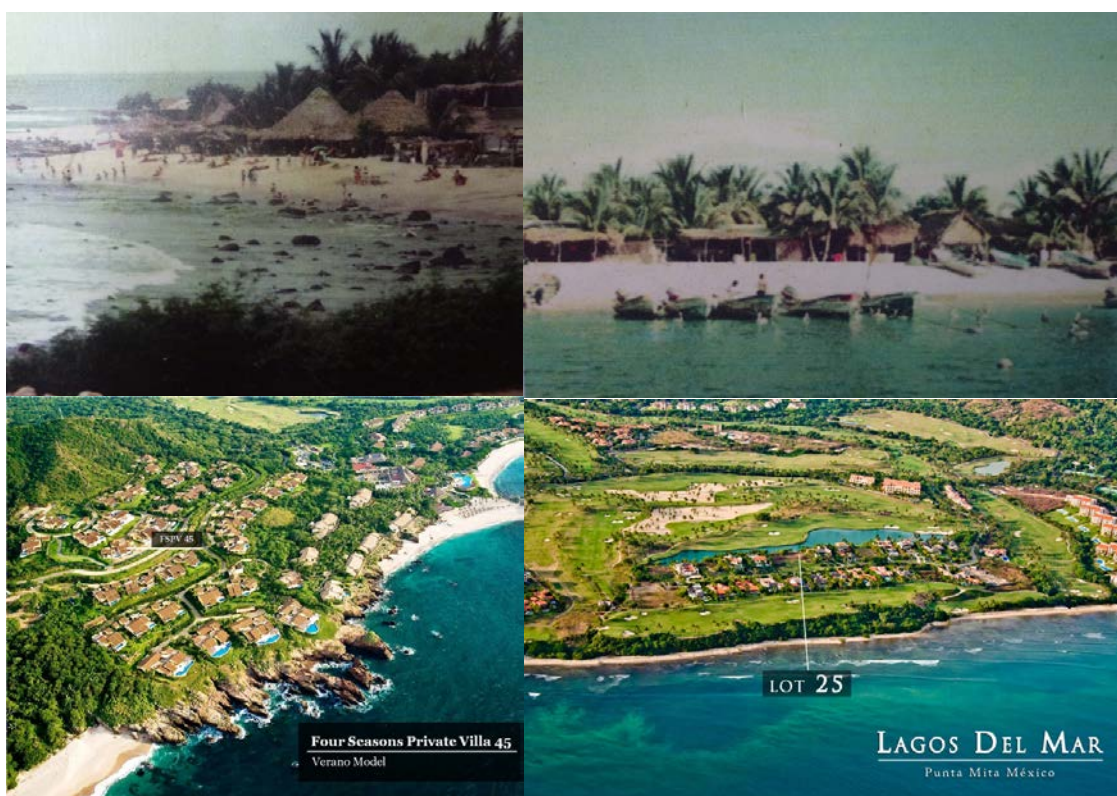
We believe that the whole planning and managing process for coastal touristic projects has to be redesigned in order to include local communities' opinions and the ultimate goal of bringing

economical and social benefits to the local population as well as ecological protection to the landscape.

The government agencies in charge of touristic development should look at other positive experience in areas that have been through the so-called boom in tourism such the Baleares Islands (Spain), where the local authorities established a series of regulations that effectively limited the touristic growth in the coastal area and promoted other forms of tourism such as tourism of quality, tourism of culture or sport tourism. (Bouazza A., 2006)

A change in the paradigm that rules the development of the tourist sector is much needed: local communities should be considered by the federal and local government as fundamental actors in the construction of the coastal landscape as well as an integral part of its cultural richness instead of dispensable accessories or even obstacles to the development like they are now.

**Figure 4** Landscape change in coastal areas of Punta de Mita, Bahía de Banderas, Nayarit.



**Source:** Upper images: ancient fishermen village of Punta de Mita, circa 1980 (Source: Cooperative o fishermen of Nuevo Corral del Risco). Lower images: Punta de Mita Resort, 2016. (Source: Dine Real Estate).

**Figure 5** Aerial image of Punta de Mita, Bahía de Banderas, Nayarit.



Source: Dine Real State (2016).

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