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## [Mesoamerican Race to Protect Parrotfish and the Reef](#)

Posted by [International League of Conservation Photographers](#) in [Ocean Views](#) on August 18, 2015

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This article is brought to you by the [International League of Conservation Photographers \(iLCP\)](#). Read our [other articles](#) on the National Geographic Voices blog featuring the work of our iLCP Fellow Photographers all around the world.

This article was created in cooperation with iLCP Partner [Healthy Reefs for Healthy People](#), one of the valuable organizations we joined with during our [2014 Mesoamerican Fish Refuge Campaign](#).



Claudio Contreras Koob 

Stoplight Parrotfish (*Sparisoma viride*) hiding amongst Staghorn Coral (*Acropora cervicornis*) colonies, IUCN redlist Critically Endangered, Cordelia Banks, Roatan Island, Bay Islands, Honduras.

In a dramatic twist to the typical fishing tournament, this friendly competition among the four countries sharing the Mesoamerican reef (Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico) rewards international players who catch less fish and protect more coral reefs. The countries are closing in on the goal of becoming the world's first ecoregion to achieve full protection of parrotfish, and results published this year show that their efforts are working.

New assessments from [the 2015 report card for the Mesoamerican Reef](#) show that parrotfish are increasing, along with the overall reef health. This is good news contrasting some dire predictions that Caribbean reefs might disappear within 20 years.

In April, Guatemala became the region's newest country to implement a ban on fishing parrotfish, following the example of Belize, which created the first

nationwide ban in 2009, and Honduras with a ban in the Bay Islands since 2010.

“This year Guatemala has joined these two countries with a new law protecting the species,” says Marisol Rueda Flores, 33, who works in Mexico with the Healthy Reefs Initiative, the publisher of the Mesoamerican Reef report. “This encouraged Mexico to start with a simple campaign about the importance of parrotfishes in the ecosystem.”



An illegally caught parrotfish, Roatan, Honduras.

Why are the beautiful birds of the reef such a key to the ecosystem’s rejuvenation? Just as flying birds allow plants to flourish by consuming locusts and other pests, parrotfishes graze and remove pesky algae that can smother corals. It’s a natural battle—a war—of parrotfish versus seaweed.

“We decided to share what has been done and what we need to continue doing to achieve this war against macroalgae and help improve the health of the reef,” says Rueda Flores of the reef report. Fleshy macroalgae is an especially difficult kind of seaweed to control, and lessons from the Mesoamerican Reef system may inspire other regions to protect the tropical fish and urchins that chomp on it.

Based on 149 underwater surveys conducted by partners of the Healthy Reefs Initiative, Honduras has the most herbivorous fish (both parrotfish and surgeonfish), while a protected zone in Mexico is suspiciously in the poorest condition. Partners in Mexico are gaining the support of fishermen and state officials to protect parrotfishes.



Surgeonfish swimming over seagrass, Puerto Morelos National Marine Park, Mexico.

“Talking with the leaders of several fishing cooperatives around the state of Quintana Roo, we realized that they used to fish them, and now they don’t find them in the same quantities. I was totally surprised since I didn’t think parrotfishes were commercialized,” says Rueda Flores. “Another big surprise was that some government officials didn’t know about the importance of this species and its role in the marine ecosystem.”

The race to save parrotfish and other algae eaters will certainly be on the agenda in Mexico City this October for the second Economic Forum on Fishing and Aquaculture.

While parrotfish are an important part of the reef restoration equation, reefs also need clean clear water and controlling nutrient pollution is the other side of this complicated equation. So stay tuned for our next blog about HRI’s efforts to improve sewage treatment in key areas of the Mesoamerican reef. Learn more about the work of [Healthy Reefs for healthy people](#), and watch the Spanish/English [video summary](#) of the Mesoamerican Reef 2015 Report Card.

[Mesoamerican Reef 2015 Report Card](#)

