



## Press release on the construction of the maximum-security prison in the Swan Islands in Honduras.

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**Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI)** is a unique international collaboration of more than 70 coral reef research, management and conservation organizations dedicated to safeguarding the Mesoamerican Reef in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. The program began in 2004, based on collaborative vision and the development of measurable indicators of reef health and social conditions linked to reef health.

The Swan Islands reef is considered a "Hope Spot" by the international scientific community, led by renowned Dr. Sylvia Earle, as it is a critical area for ocean health. Its geographical location and its proximity to important marine currents make it a key point for connectivity between the different areas of the Greater Caribbean, which is why it is a critical area for the health of the ocean. In addition, it has more than 25 species of scleractinian corals, which are protected under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Within these we can highlight elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*), deer horns coral (*Acropora cervicornis*), lettuce coral (*Agaricia agaricites*, *Agaricia tenuifolia*), pillar coral (*Dendrogyra cylindrus*, which are almost extinct in other areas of the Caribbean), brain coral (*Diploria labyrinthiformis*), star corals (*Montastraea cavernosa*, *Orbicella annularis*, *Orbicella faveolata*) which are reef builders. While many of these species are threatened by the stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD) in other parts of Honduras and the Caribbean, the isolation of these reefs in the Swan Islands could be safeguarding healthy colonies which would be of great benefit to reefs of the Caribbean as a whole. It is crucial to have a scientific expedition to the Swan Islands, which haven't been surveyed since 2013 by HRI, before the emergence of the SCTLD. There are also commercially important fish species such as snappers like dog snapper, (*Lutjanus joco*), mahogany snapper (*Lutjanus mahogoni*), gray snapper (*Lutjanus griseus*) and yellowtail snapper (*Ocyurus chrysurus*), including species critically endangered like nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) and in vulnerable populations numbers goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*). We also find other critical marine megafauna including sharks such as Caribbean reef shark (*Carcharhinus perezi*), nurse shark (*Ginglymostoma cirratum*), and great hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna mokarran*), which formerly were reported as plentiful on these islands.



HRI therefore clarifies our position on the proposed construction of the maximum-security prison in the Swan Islands:

1. We join the statements made by the professional associations linked to the environment, in which the fragility of the terrestrial and marine ecosystems of Swan Islands is a major concern for Honduras and the Caribbean biodiversity. Swan Islands' 3056-91 presidential agreement, clearly states that no activities other than those with science and education purposes are allowed within the area. The use of land for agricultural and livestock purposes, hunting, fishing, the extraction of any product or subproduct from the flora and fauna, sub-soil and coral reefs are totally prohibited. All of HRI's Eco-Audits have included this area as Honduras' largest fully protected Marine Protected Area (MPA) and the 2012 and 2015 Report Cards included reef data and MPA boundaries. The Swan Islands is the only fully protected MPA covering a substantial area (459 km<sup>2</sup>) versus the two other fully protected zones of ~ 10km<sup>2</sup>.
2. The Reef Health on the Swan Island for 2012 Reef Health Report Card shows that of the 9 sites monitored, 3 had a fair score, 4 were in poor condition and 2 in critical condition. In the 2015 Report Card, 2 new sites were added, making a total of 11 monitoring sites, with 1 site in good condition, 3 in fair, 5 in poor and 2 in critical condition. As noted in our expedition reports, the frequency of hurricane track across this area and the continued illegal fishing are likely contributors to this lower than expected reef health. We consider it of vital importance to generate updated information by revisiting these sites (which have not been monitored in the last ten years due to the extremely high costs of doing any work in this remote area). We would welcome an opportunity to re-survey these sites and potentially additional deeper sites might be more protected from hurricane impacts that give greater representativeness to the Reef Health Condition of the Swan Islands.
3. Sites that are classified with the Reef Health Index as critical, poor and fair, are not to be considered doomed or lost but to have the urgent need for necessary surveillance, protection and restoration efforts to recover their health and secure the region's connectivity.
4. HRI has not been part of any conversation with the government of Honduras, in which the data generated from the Swan Islands were discussed in relation to the construction of gray infrastructures of any kind in the Swan Islands. The state of Honduras has ratified the protocols on oil spills, Specially Protected Areas and wildlife and land-based sources of pollution of the Cartagena Convention, the waters of the Swan Islands are class 1, meaning it will require tertiary sewage treatment- a very costly and high energy demanding operation for this remote location.
5. The lack of any food, drinking water or energy resources on this remote island adds to the exorbitant cost and economic constraints of locating a prison in such a remote location, increasing the global carbon



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footprint associated with importing energy, water and food continuously to this remote island. It also raises the potential to increase illegal fishing activity if food supplies from the mainland are interrupted due to some unforeseen circumstance.

6. There are many other considerations that would also need to be taken into account, such as the frequent passage of hurricanes across that represent a hazard for human life.
7. Healthy Reefs for Healthy People aims to encourage initiatives that promote reef health and resiliency throughout the region. We remain willing to discuss our scientific technical information with the local, national and regional authorities of the Mesoamerican Reef System as they consider various socio-economic and environmental scenarios and opportunities.
8. We encourage the government of Honduras to form the inter-institutional and intersectoral technical committee to review, under technical, scientific and financial criteria, the feasibility of proposing this project, and to bring all potential collaborators in a meeting to share their perspectives and data, in these decisions.

Kind regards.

Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative



Claudia A. Guerrero BSc. ( HRI-Honduras Coordinator) [guerrero@healthyreefs.org](mailto:guerrero@healthyreefs.org)

Melanie McField, Ph.D. (Executive Director HRI) [mcfield@healthyreefs.org](mailto:mcfield@healthyreefs.org)