



CONSERVATION
INTERNATIONAL

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President

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His Excellency
Vicente Fox Quesada
Presidente Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos
Palacio Nacional Patio de Honor
Col. Centro
Mexico, D.F. 06067
Mexico

Dear President Fox:

I write to ask for your support in helping to preserve one of Mexico's biological treasures, the Island of Cozumel. Conservation action is especially urgent on behalf of the Critically Endangered Cozumel Thrasher (*Toxostoma guttatum*).

Isla Cozumel is an area of considerable biological importance. The island has been separate from the mainland of the Yucatán Peninsula for several million years. Also, Cozumel is sufficiently distant from the mainland (15 kilometers) to prevent frequent dispersal of many organisms, including terrestrial mammals and some birds. The biological isolation of Cozumel has resulted in the local evolution of numerous distinct species and subspecies. Among the birds, at least three unique, endemic species are present: the Cozumel Emerald, the Cozumel Vireo, and the Cozumel Thrasher. In addition, Cozumel hosts another fifteen birds that are unique to Cozumel at the level of subspecies. The presence of these unique populations, along with large numbers of other resident and migrant species, makes Cozumel one of Mexico's Important Bird Areas, as recognized by CONABIO. The island is also one of the world's 218 Endemic Bird Areas, as designated by BirdLife International. As is the case for many Endemic Bird Areas, Cozumel also harbors other organisms found nowhere else, including in particular at least three endemic and endangered mammal species.

Of the birds unique to Cozumel, the Cozumel Thrasher appears to be in greatest need of immediate protection. Although sometimes difficult to observe because of its preference for dense vegetation and its shy habits, this species was relatively common until the late 1980s. After Hurricane Gilbert devastated Cozumel in September 1988, thrashers became much less common. The last definitive scientific records of the species occurred in 1994 and 1995, when Patricia Escalante Pliego and Tania Macouzet captured three individuals during a survey of the bird community. Soon after, Hurricane Roxanne hit Cozumel in October 1995. Between that date and 2004, no thrashers were definitively observed, although a few possible sightings were reported. In June 2004, a field team working under the direction of Dr. Juan Martínez-Gómez of Endémicos Insulares A.C. and Dr. Robert Curry of Villanova University observed at least one Cozumel Thrasher (on four separate occasions), demonstrating that the species still exists. However, the same group also searched large areas of Cozumel, during field surveys totaling more than one month, without finding additional thrashers. This information suggests that the Cozumel Thrasher is now one of the rarest wild bird species in all of Mexico, and therefore it is also one of the rarest bird species in the world. There may be only a handful of these birds still alive.

The Cozumel Thrasher appears to face at least three conservation threats. One of these, periodic habitat destruction caused by hurricanes, is natural and unavoidable. The effects of hurricanes, however, may interact with the other two threats: loss and alteration of habitat resulting from human development, and predation by introduced boa snakes (*Boa constrictor*). As the human population on Cozumel has grown, large areas of habitat have been cleared or fragmented for residences, farms, and commercial development (hotels, shops, golf course, etc.). While considerable forest habitat remains, the accelerating rate of clearing and its pattern across the island both represent threats to surviving populations of thrashers, as well as other forest animals. Loss of habitat could exacerbate the effects of hurricanes on native species. Meanwhile, boas have become abundant since their introduction on Cozumel in 1971. These snakes now occur in all major habitats across the island, often at high densities. Even though no direct evidence of boas preying directly on Cozumel Thrashers exists, boas have been shown to be important predators of nestlings and adults of another similar species, the White-breasted Thrasher, on the island of St. Lucia.

It seems highly probable the rarity of the Cozumel Thrasher is a result of boa predation, perhaps in combination with effects of hurricanes and human-caused habitat changes.

To date, no conservation action has been taken specifically to aid the Cozumel Thrasher. The species appears to prefer both medium height semideciduous forest and low deciduous forest. There are no reserves on Cozumel at present that intentionally preserve large sections of these types of habitat; the island's ecological reserves, at Punta Sur and Chankanaab, include only small areas of terrestrial vegetation. Meanwhile, no organized effort to control the boa population has been initiated.

Opportunities exist, however, to preserve habitat likely to be valuable to Cozumel Thrashers – and to other threatened members of the fauna – by adding formal wildlife protection to areas where substantial pieces of forest habitat remain undeveloped, because of the incidental protection provided by other activities. Important areas of this type on Cozumel include (1) the San Gervasio Mayan ruins; (2) the municipal water collection system in the center of the island and the surroundings of the water treatment plant at the north west, managed by CAPA (Comisión de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado); (3) vegetated areas surrounding the adjacent military air base and civilian airport; and (4) habitat surrounding the existing golf course at the northwest end of Cozumel. In all of these areas, declaration of formal protection of the wildlife and forest could produce a critical core of habitat for the thrasher population, with little if any alteration of existing uses (and at minimal cost). The thrashers would almost certainly benefit as well if the archaeological site at San Gervasio could be expanded, through the mandate of INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) to include more of the ruins and habitat to the north and west of the existing archeological reserve.

In addition to habitat protection, conservation action is needed to limit or reverse the effects of introduced species on Cozumel. Top priority is the introduced boa constrictor: immediate action should be taken to decrease the abundance of this species, for the sake of songbirds such as the Cozumel Thrasher, as well as other unique animals such as the Cozumel raccoon and the Cozumel coati. The best strategy would be to combine a program of eradication of boas with

careful scientific study of their effects on native birds and mammals. Control of other introduced animals and plants may also be needed, pending research on patterns of invasion and on impacts to native organisms.

Time is of the essence and strategic partnerships among federal, state and municipal governments, academic groups, and local NGO's, such as the Fundación de Parques y Museos de Cozumel, are required to provide legal protection to the areas mentioned above and to enable effective management schemes. These actions may very well be the last chance of survival for the Cozumel Thrasher before its global extinction.

Respectfully,



Russell A. Mittermeier
President

- cc: J. Cárdenas, Secretario del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales
- cc: Jorge Soberón, Secretario Ejecutivo, CONABIO
- cc: Exequiel Ezcurra, Presidente, INE
- cc: Ernesto Enkerlin, Presidente, CONANP
- cc: Felipe Ramirez, Director, DGVS