

CASE STUDY

BUILD & CONNECT 2025

Legislative Reform to Recognize Coral Reefs as Priority Ecosystems under Mexico's Environmental Law.

July, 2026

MAR+Invest





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mexico is taking a crucial step to protect its coral reefs... through the General Law of Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection (LGEEPA) by formally recognizing coral reefs as priority ecosystems for conservation. The reform establishes a clear legal definition of coral reefs, enhances protection and restoration measures, aligns Mexico's national legislation with international commitments, and provides a stronger legal framework to enhance the long-term resilience of these vital ecosystems.

This matters because healthy coral reefs protect coastal communities, support tourism and local jobs, and sustain the marine life that many people depend on for their livelihoods.



Location: Mexico



Sector: Marine Conservation

Background

Often referred to as the rainforests of the sea, coral reefs are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems on the planet.

Like tropical rainforests, they are characterized by their extraordinary richness in species, high productivity, complex ecological interactions, and remarkable beauty.

Coral reefs face increasing pressure from human activities, particularly in densely populated coastal areas. Pollution, unsustainable fishing practices, coastal development, sedimentation, and untreated wastewater degrade reef ecosystems, disrupt their natural balance, and reduce marine biodiversity. (Goreau, 1979).

Within this global context, the Mesoamerican Reef System (MAR) is of exceptional importance. Stretching along the coasts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, it is the largest barrier reef in the Northern Hemisphere and one of the world's most valuable marine ecosystems, according to the Inter-American Development Bank. (Ruiz de Gauna et al., 2021)

From coastal development to environmental policy every choice influences the health and resilience of this vital ecosystem.

Protecting the MAR requires strong legal frameworks and coordinated action among governments, legislators, civil society, academia, and the private sector to remove barriers and secure its future for generations to come.

Build & Connect Program

As part of this effort, the **Build & Connect (B&C)** program, led by MAR+Invest partner Sureste Sostenible, advances nature-based and market-driven solutions across the MAR region through training, tools, and collaboration opportunities for regional leaders. In the 2025 cohort, the program worked with 15 leaders — public officials, legislators, and civil society representatives — to develop public policies that could reduce barriers for Businesses and Ventures with a Positive Impact (BVPI+) in the Mesoamerican Reef.

The five-month program led by Sureste Sostenible with guidance from the International Conservation Caucus Foundation (ICCF Mexico), focused on building capacities for effective public policy design for the conservation of the Mesoamerican Reef. The curriculum covered the full public policy cycle, including



financing mechanisms, advocacy strategies, equity and human rights approaches, and public policy innovation. It concluded in November 2025, with 14 of the 15 participants graduating and developing 14 public policy proposals across the MAR countries (Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras).

Participant Profile: Kevin López

One of the program participants, Kevin Armando López Agustín, is a Legislative Advisor at the Senate of the Republic of Mexico, where he coordinates the analysis and drafting of environmental legislation. Specializing in biodiversity and marine governance, he has contributed to the General Biodiversity Law and more than 150 legislative opinions on topics including forest management, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), wildlife, urban planning, and waste management, while working closely with government, academia, and civil society.

Impact in the MAR: How the Public Policy Creates Positive Impact

This initiative proposes a legislative reform to strengthen the protection of the Mesoamerican Reef by formally recognizing coral reefs as priority ecosystems under Mexico's General Law of Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection (LGEEPA). By integrating coral reefs into environmental policy and planning, the reform supports stronger conservation measures—including ecological zoning, marine protected areas, and restoration strategies—to address threats such as pollution, unsustainable coastal development, and climate change.

Kevin's proposal aligns Mexico's legislation with international commitments, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty adopted in 1971 to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands.



It also creates opportunities for greater institutional coordination, scientific research, and environmental stewardship. By clarifying government responsibilities and reducing regulatory barriers, the reform establishes a stronger legal framework for coral reef conservation, restoration, and sustainable investment across the Mesoamerican Reef region.



Martin Leglize

Key Changes Introduced by the Legislative Reform

Feature	Before the proposal	After: A Legal Framework
Official Recognition	Article 3, Section XIII Bis of Mexico's General Law of Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection (LGEEPA) recognizes coral reefs only as a general component of coastal ecosystems, alongside beaches and dunes, without highlighting their specific value.	Beyond the general list in Article 3, coral reefs are explicitly recognized as "priority ecosystems", establishing a precise legal definition that mandates specialized protection.
Scope of Action	Current regulations lack direct references, mandatory sanctions, or specific strategies to protect reefs as vulnerable systems.	Enables the creation of specific public policies, management plans, and restoration programs based on their new legal status as a priority.
Financial Tools	Legal ambiguity and the lack of a priority status limit the allocation of specific funds for reef-focused conservation projects.	Provides the legal basis to justify the inclusion of reef protection and restoration within specific federal budgetary programs (PEF ¹) and financial incentives.
Community Role	Ambiguous regulations hinder the ability of local communities and the private sector to lead long-term conservation strategies with legal certainty.	Grants legal certainty to CSOs ² , cooperatives, and local communities to articulate and lead restoration initiatives with a clear and functional regulatory framework.

¹ PEF (Federal Expenditure Budget / Presupuesto de Egresos de la Federación): This is the official annual document that outlines the allocation of public funds by the Mexican federal government.

² CSOs (Civil Society Organizations / OSCs - Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil): These are non-profit, non-governmental groups, including community organizations and cooperatives, that work toward social or environmental goals.

Measurable Results & Achievements

These actions help put coral reefs on the national agenda and create momentum for better protection.

This is a regulatory proposal addressed through Congress (the Legislative Branch) that seeks to establish a long-term regulatory change. Once approved, the mechanisms established by law would remain in place regardless of changes in government. These actions help put coral reefs on the national agenda and create momentum for better protection.



"I feel very privileged to belong to this cohort and to be part of a network of experts who are passionate about the conservation of the MAR. They broadened our perspective, which is crucial for scaling and strengthening our strategies".

Kevin Armando López Agustín

1. Promotion, through Senator Maki Esther Ortiz, of a Point of Agreement urging SEMARNAT, PROFEPA, and the Government of Quintana Roo to strengthen the conservation of coral reefs in Mexico and the MAR, in november 5, 2025 MAR+Invest partners participated in the dialogue "Voices for the Mesoamerican Reef System: Toward a Regional Agenda Based on Science, Cooperation, and Legislation" at the Senate of the Republic in Mexico City.
2. Promoting a legislative pathway to recognize coral reefs as a priority ecosystem within Mexico's environmental legal framework.
3. Contribution to strengthening national-level discussions on coral reef conservation as a matter of environmental governance and sustainability.
4. Establishment of political and institutional momentum to support reef protection through legislation.
5. Creation of enabling conditions for a more integrated and operational public policy on coral reef conservation at the national level.

Next Steps

The proposal establishes a phased implementation timeline:

- Conduct an updated stakeholder mapping across government, private, and social sectors.
- Initiate multi-level political dialogues in federal and state congresses.
- Organize interinstitutional roundtables during the legislative session, to be implemented from September to December 2026.
- Advance the formal submission and legislative discussion of the reform.

REFERENCES

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