

The native islanders of San Andres, Old Providence and Santa Catalina: Dreaming between two worlds

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The Archipelago of San Andres, Old Providence, and Santa Catalina is Colombia's only oceanic and West Indies Department. These islands with a total land area of 57 square kilometers and a population of 80,000 are a microcosm of the regional situation - from farm and pastureland to tourist centers, and from the small traditional settlements of Old Providence to the overpopulated urban sector at the north end of San Andres.

First settled by English puritans in 1629, the islands were conquered by the Spanish in 1641, soon retaken by the English, and subsequently faded into obscurity following the end of the conquest of the Spanish Main, era of privateering, and settlement of the wider Caribbean region.

Development policies of the last four decades have resulted in massive environmental degradation, especially in San Andres, and a growing loss of ethnic identity. The environment and culture of Old Providence and Santa Catalina have remained more intact but the possibility of large-scale development by outside forces remains a reality of the current situation. The people of the archipelago are confronted by the same threats that are destroying ethnic and biological diversity of islands throughout the world -- overpopulation, urbanization, increasing pressure on natural resources and ecosystems, poorly planned development, and the resulting loss of ethnic responses, self-reliance, and cultural identity.

During the visioning process, the people on Old Providence chose ecotourism as their central platform of tourism development and as an essential component for the implementation of the SEFALOWER Biosphere Reserve. Their aim: to maintain control of their present and future and leaders of their own development process. On the other hand, native islanders on San Andres Island – currently an ethnic minority on their own territory – dream about recovering their insularity and identity if their biologic and ethnic diversity could be protected, respected, and allowed to flourish in future development planning.