



CASE STUDY:

Expanding community-led conservation for fishers in Honduras

Stretching nearly 1,000 kilometers off the coasts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, the Mesoamerican Reef is the second largest barrier reef in the world, and the largest in the Western Hemisphere. It sustains local food systems, as well as the livelihoods of thousands of local small-scale fishers. However, overfishing and other destructive practices in nearshore coastal waters threaten the health of vital ecosystems, as well as the food security and livelihoods of coastal residents.

Fishers point to irresponsible fishing practices and destructive fishing gear as contributors to the decline of their fisheries. And in 2017, Honduras opened nearshore coastal ocean waters to industrial trawling, a destructive practice that destroys habitats and depletes fish populations. Without greater protection of nearshore coastal waters, local food supply, local livelihoods, and vital ecosystems are all put in jeopardy.



The Solution:

Community-led conservation of nearshore coastal waters

With a coastal zone rich in biodiversity, and a population dependent on fishing, Honduras is a geographic priority for Rare. With the support of the Becht Foundation, Oceans5, the Blue Action Fund and other supporters—and in close partnership with our local partner, Centro de Estudios Marinos (CEM) — Rare set out to:

1. **Re-establish an exclusive area for small-scale fishers** extending 12 nautical miles from shore. This expanded 12 nautical mile zone would include protection for critical habitats and a greater percentage of species of commercial and ecological value.
2. **Empower and enable coastal communities** to lead in the management of the 12 nautical mile area. Local communities would have management plans administered by strengthened management bodies. Local communities would also agree to include a network of no-take reserves within fishing areas to allow fish populations to regenerate.



The Rare approach

Rare's work to revitalize coastal marine habitats, protect biodiversity, and secure fishers' livelihoods is centered on an area- and rights-based marine management approach called Managed Access Areas with Reserves (MA+R), a community-based management tool combining fully protected no-take reserve networks with sustainable use zones, networked at the correct ecological and governance scale. In Honduras, our goal was to use this approach as the management tool for the first 12 nautical miles from shore.



What we did

Engaged fisher communities

Rare engaged 3,800 fishers in 33 communities across 10 municipalities through the "Pescando Para La Vida" (Fishing for Life) campaign, which catalyzed local support for the adoption of sustainable fishing behaviors, and the establishment of networks of no-take reserves within fishing areas sustainably co-managed by local communities.

In parallel, Rare supported the formation and strengthening of local fisher committees and community management bodies, ensuring their active participation in drafting and validating management plans for their declared managed access areas. These management bodies now serve as the backbone of co-management agreements to protect their 12 nautical miles.



Networked local leaders

Rare built a network of aligned municipal governments to implement coastal fisheries reform across Honduras' Caribbean coast, mobilizing dozens of communities to lead and champion the establishment of community-led marine protected areas.

Nineteen mayors from Honduras have joined Coastal 500, a global network of local leaders committed to prosperous and thriving coastal communities and ecosystems. Coastal 500 members in Honduras presented a motion to reform the Fisheries Law, advocating for the declaration of the 12 nautical miles from the Caribbean coastline of Honduras as one large community-led marine protected area covering 17,000 sq km.

Rare convened mayors, congressmen, NGOs, and local authorities to socialize the benefits of the 12 nautical miles designation. These discussions, grounded in ecological and socioeconomic data generated by Rare and partners, have ensured data-based decision making and broad political support due to the technical support provided.



Policy and institutional engagement

Rare provided technical assistance to the Instituto de Conservación Forestal (ICF) and the National fisheries authority to guide the legal and regulatory pathway for declaring and managing the 12 nautical miles of the north coast of Honduras. During this process, four technical dossiers were submitted (Omoa, Puerto Cortes, Balfate, and the Atlantida polygon) for their official review and approval, while five areas are already formally established (Iriona, Limon, Santa Fe, Trujillo and Santa Rosa de Aguan).

THE RESULTS

Working with local communities and partners, Rare's effort has led to the establishment of five officially recognized community-led marine protected areas spanning 14,248 sq km of nearshore ocean along the northern coast of Honduras. These areas include 324 sq km of no-take reserves, which are off limits to all human activity.

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community-led
marine protected
areas established

14,248

sq km of nearshore ocean
placed under sustainable,
community-led management

324

sq km network of no-take
reserves off limits
to all human activity

1,290

community savings
club members

13

local governments embedding
Fish Forever principles into
municipal development plans

3,510

participants engaged in
capacity-building and advocacy
activities in 2025

Updated: August 2025.



A growing legacy

By engaging fishers and fishing communities, Rare instituted a strong belief in the tangible benefits of conservation, including increased fish stocks over time. This demand was particularly evident in Omoa, where community support for establishing community-led marine protected areas greatly expedited their implementation. Inspired by the success of Santa Rosa de Aguán, Omoa, and Puerto Cortés, neighboring municipalities are expected to seek approval for new protected areas.

With eight MA+R areas now either declared or submitted for approval, Honduras is advancing toward a fully protected 12 nautical mile zone managed by and for artisanal fishers. This legacy reflects both community leadership and multi-level government commitment, positioning Honduras as a regional model for community-led marine conservation.



Rare inspires change so people and nature thrive.

Rare unlocks the power of people to protect nature and fight climate change. We invest in people-powered, community-led solutions grounded in a deep understanding of human needs and motivations.

Ours is a distinctly human approach.

Only by unleashing the best of human nature will we ensure an abundant future on our shared planet.

Learn more at rare.org.