



Imaging conservation: Sea turtle murals and their effect on community pro-environmental attitudes in Baja California Sur, Mexico



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ABSTRACT

Public art in Mexico has historically served as a platform for protest and social commentary. The purpose of this action research was to document sea turtle murals throughout Baja California Sur (B.C.S.), Mexico and to better understand the potential relevance of public art as an impetus for fostering pro-environmental attitudes, and the extent to which murals are a useful tool in efforts to protect the marine environment and the recovery of endangered species. Through qualitative research, we conducted 333 surveys and interviews with both adult and student participants in nine B.C.S. communities. Through descriptive narratives of participant responses, and Type I tabulations, we found evidence of outcomes that sea turtle murals may have in relation to respondent environmental attitudes about support for marine protections and the recovery of endangered species of sea turtles. Unexpected results from semi-structured interviews with respondents pointed weakly to the potential for murals in helping to shape pro-environmental behaviors towards the treatment and recovery of endangered sea turtles. The results of this action research may provide useful insights for improving management practices during future efforts to protect and restore marine environments and endangered species. That is, public participation in strategically placed community accessible art, may prove to be a valuable and innovative component of a broader suite of outreach and education initiatives used for bolstering community responsibility and empowerment for conservation of the marine environment.

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1. Introduction

The once isolated state of Baja California Sur (B.C.S.), in north-west Mexico is quickly modernizing, and subsequently facing various environmental threats associated with increased globalization. Additionally, the construction of American “Big-Box” stores and fast food restaurants—ubiquitous to the many strip malls throughout the United States—are now present throughout B.C.S., Mexico. Baja’s visual sphere on building walls, billboards, television, and the Internet is heavily utilized by the business and international development community to promote messages encouraging hyper-consumerism, hyper-individuality, expansion of mineral resource extraction, and boasts the construction of new Spanish-owned coastal mega-development projects which incorporate hotels and condominiums, desalinization plants, marinas, golf courses, and private air strips—some within the buffer zones of the federally protected Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park

(WILDCOAST, 2013). However, researchers in this study have witnessed a shift in the utilization of various public spaces, potentially as a cultural and ecological necessity, where communities, in cooperation with marine and sea turtle advocacy organizations, are reclaiming spaces for the creation of large marine conservation themed murals which espouse environmental responsibility, appreciation and protection of marine environments, and the recovery of the five species of endangered sea turtles found in the waters surrounding B.C.S.

The purpose of this study was to better understand potential attitudinal outcomes that sea turtle murals in B.C.S.—specifically those utilized by the “umbrella” sea turtle conservation organization Grupo Tortuguero (Delgado and Nichols, 2005; Schneller and Baum, 2010)—may have in affecting pro-environmental attitudes regarding protection of the marine environment and recovery of endangered species of sea turtles. While the initial effort to paint sea turtle murals throughout Baja California Sur was a component of a specific regional conservation strategy initiated by Grupo Tortuguero after its inception in 1999, sea turtle murals throughout the state are now designed and painted by teachers, students, fishermen, and artists. The original murals were painted in a

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collaborative manner with local artists (primarily artist Marcos Aragon Velásquez) and students, and continue to be created today with the assistance of Mexican students, international students, fisherfolk, fisheries communities, and researchers (Grupo Tortuguero, 2013).

By conducting qualitative research in nine B.C.S. communities, we worked to identify the outcomes of viewing sea turtle murals on the environmental attitudes of interview respondents. Environmental attitudes can be considered an individual's concern for the physical environment (with preservation and utilization dimensions), based upon affective, cognitive, and conative domains (respectively: feelings, knowledge, and behaviors) (Gifford and Sussman, 2012). With insights gained through these interview results, we then provide recommendations for the use of publicly accessible art as a potential component of future marine management and environmental advocacy campaigns worldwide. A complementary purpose of this research was to also better understand the effectiveness of utilizing Mexico's public spaces in B.C.S. for artistically promoting protection of endangered species of sea turtles and the marine environment. As such, our literature review works to draw a parallel between notable public art and muralism in Mexico, which was historically used as a platform for social protest and commentary. Using this understanding of the historical context, we're able to recognize how advocates of the marine environment (in Mexico and globally) might find success in capitalizing on this method. It is in these public spaces where we worked to explore the extent to which the public (including fisherfolk, fisheries agency personnel, educators, students, children, etc.) has free access to information, the opportunity to gain awareness of the importance of this global issue, and to potentially adopt pro-environmental attitudes regarding marine protection.

1.1. A brief history of sea turtle exploitation in Mexico

Historically, much of the economic activity of B.C.S. has centered on exploitation of marine resources. Despite decreasing productivity due to the overexploitation of marine resources, species such as lobster, abalone, shrimp, shellfish and sardines continue to play an important role in the state's economy. Historically, sea turtles were also a traditional local food item consumed in B.C.S. (Delgado and Nichols, 2005). Following the Spanish colonization and the conversion of most Mexicans to Catholicism, turtle meat became an important meal during Holy Week, as well as other familial celebrations such as Christmas and Quinceañeras. For decades, sea turtles were commercially harvested in B.C.S. for an international market, and Mexican-caught sea turtles accounted for 50% of the global market in the 1970s until the collapse of sea turtle populations in the 1980s (Marquez et al., 1982; Marquez, 1990; FAO Fishery Department, 2000). Unsustainable sea turtle harvest rates in Mexico resulted in a subsequent sharp decline in sea turtle populations, and in 1990 the government of Mexico (via Presidential Decree) declared all five northwestern endangered species of sea turtles as protected from kill and capture (DOF, 1990). Despite the ban, sea turtles continue to be captured and consumed illegally; an entire adult green sea turtle will sell for about \$100–\$200 USD (anonymous interview respondent, 2008). NGOs have responded by working through grassroots campaigns and targeting community involvement in the issue, and have spread the message that cultural appreciation can come in the form of protection rather than consumption. Although ongoing threats to sea turtles in B.C.S. and the recovery efforts instigated by governmental agencies, NGOs, and fisheries communities has been discussed elsewhere (Schneller and Baum, 2010), the specific role of public art in the environmental education efforts has been underappreciated.

1.2. The history of muralism in Mexico

Mexico has a long history of utilizing the visual arts for political advocacy and communication, which contextualizes the potential for adopting public art as a tool for marine protection. Before the post-revolutionary murals of Los Tres Grandes (The Three Great Ones: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros), José Guadalupe Posada's graphic broadsheets were distributed throughout the revolutionary turn of the century in Mexico (Montgomery, 2004). While Posada's illustrations are mostly known for their satirical *calaveras* (skeletons), which mocked bourgeois attitudes during a time of social strife, the legacy of his work lies in its "broad accessibility and purported universal language" (Coffey, 2002, p. 9). Posada's never intended his broadsheets, which were essentially the first form of mass media, to be sold to international galleries or collected by Mexican dilettantes. It was a popular art, created to reveal the politically corrupted, socially immoral, and the daily struggle of the *campesino*.

Von Blum (1993) writes that the Mexican Revolution "Set the stage for the major democratization of artistic audiences by systematizing the public space for disseminating political artworks" (p. 463). Los Tres Grandes had access to the public walls of schools, government buildings, and other municipal buildings and, with inspiration and influence from Posada, used these walls to comment on, attack, or support political and social movements of their time. These murals: "served as the artistic means to educate a largely illiterate populace about history, politics, and society," thus "fundamentally [altering] the elitist character of visual creation" (Von Blum, 1993, p. 463). This muralism movement demonstrated that public spaces were a viable option for advocacy and education, a medium for communicating pressing social issues to a large group of potential stakeholders and allies.

While Von Blum (1993) discusses the use of public art as a means for advocacy, he also draws a connection between art of the politically driven and art of the environmentally aware. Speaking about Mexican environmental art (but not specifically of muralists), he mentions: "[environmental] artists use traditional and innovative forms to mobilize public awareness of the impending catastrophes that few political leaders are willing to confront" (Von Blum, 1993, p. 462). He asserts that the importance of public art is as a "new vehicle of visual expression" through which it can attract and invite a new "non-elite" audience to engage in reflection and critical thinking, actions which could result in positive participation in one's community.

1.3. Public art and democracy

Posada's broadsheets and the muralism movement in early twentieth-century Mexico utilized art to convey information and ideas that were both accessible and legible by the general public. McCaughan (2002) argues that this satisfied a function of democracy, because it not only inspired public debate, but it "helped to create a greater sense of entitlement among broad sectors of the population and to redefine politics as an arena for the masses" (p. 101). The murals, McCaughan (2002) continues, challenged previously elitist notions of artwork and instead represented "Mexicanness" and "the people," which created an avenue for involvement of the masses in political and social movements (p. 101).

Conrad (1995) offers that murals are a form of democratic art, "art that is accessible to all, that relates to current or historical events or experiences, and that expresses deeply felt aspirations or visions for the future," (p. 98). He notes that murals have capabilities that are simultaneously educational, didactic, expressive, provocative, and strengthening. Similarly, drawing from

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