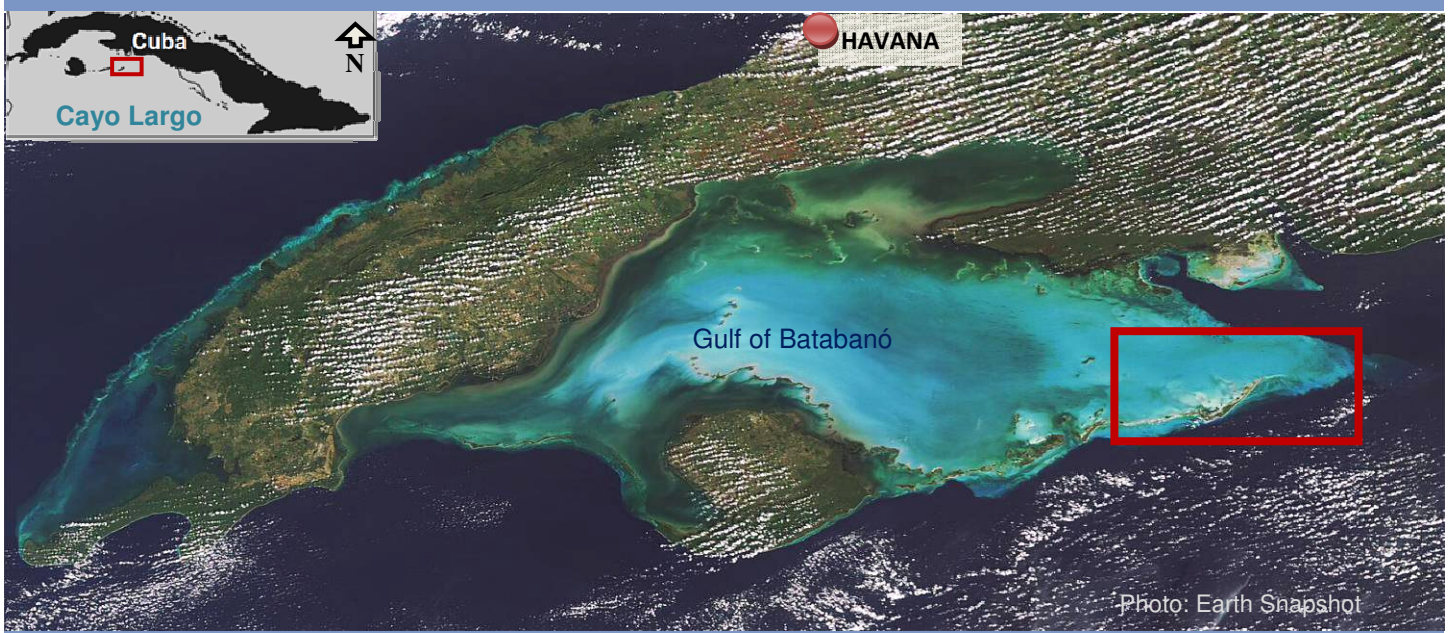


Cayo Largo del Sur: sand, sun and healthy ecosystems



Productive and biodiverse waters

Cayo Largo del Sur (or simply Cayo Largo) is a key in the bright turquoise and shallow waters of the Gulf of Batabanó, just 110 miles southeast of Havana.

Along with the Isle of Youth and about 350 islets, Cayo Largo forms the *Canarreos Archipelago* — a chain-like cluster of islets almost as long as the Florida Keys, that defines the southern border of the Gulf of Batabanó with the Caribbean Sea. The relatively well-preserved coral reefs here are among the most important spawning aggregation sites for several species of snappers and groupers in the Cuban insular shelf.

Cayo Largo is located not only in a marine area of high conservation interest but also within the largest and most economically important fishing zone in Cuba. Two thirds of the total national catch of spiny lobster and more than 60 percent of the total landings of lane snapper are harvested from the seagrass beds, mangroves, and coral reefs in the Gulf of Batabanó. These diverse coastal and marine ecosystems also provide habitat for bonefish, tarpon, snook and other popular recreational fish species.

Cayo Largo's early visitors included members of the native group Siboney (14th and 15th century), Christopher Columbus during his second voyage to Cuba in 1494, and pirates during the early 19th century. Today, Cayo Largo has no permanent human residents. Cubans stay on the key only to work in the hotels. Most of the key remains uninhabited.

Joining tourists are a large number of species from the Zapata Swamp (e.g. birds, manatees and the endemic Cuban crocodile) as well as from the Caribbean Sea (e.g. sea turtles and migratory fishes) that visit Cayo Largo.

An opportunity for sustainable development



Cayo Largo is the largest sand key in the Caribbean. Its 16 miles of serene, sandy beaches make it one of the main tourist destinations in Cuba. Tourists are also attracted by the fascinating coral formations, extremely clear waters and diverse marine life that dominate Cayo Largo's seabed.

Dubbed "the All-Inclusive Island," Cayo Largo has more than 1,000 rooms in hotels and villas. This "Sun and Sand" tourism model is becoming the main industry in Cuba, threatening mangroves, beaches and other natural resources in the coastal zone. Other threats are overfishing, illegal poaching, invasive species, climate change and sea level rise. The challenge comes in finding a balance between the conservation of Cuba's unique environments and the economic development of the country.

Conservation through collaboration

A strong environmental legal infrastructure is the first step toward ensuring that Cuba stays on the path of sustainable coastal development. Environmental Defense Fund has worked in the country nearly a decade. EDF collaborated with Cuban scientists and environmental managers to create a handbook on coastal conservation for policymakers and planners. Cuba's network of marine protected areas was part of a similar collaborative effort.

In 1996, Cayo Largo was designated by the Cuban Ministry of Fisheries as a "Zone under Special Regime of Use and Protection," which is equivalent to a fishery reserve. Today, the key is managed as an *Ecological Reserve* by the Cuban National System of Protected Areas.

The entire Canarreos archipelago (including Cayo Largo), the Zapata Swamp National Park and the archipelago Jardines de la Reina are being proposed as a **World Natural Heritage Site**. This 500-mile-long system in the southern coast of Cuba includes nine protected areas comprising the largest wetland and the main marine areas in Cuba and the most important ones in the insular Caribbean due to their extension, natural values and conservation status.

Despite these efforts not all of these extensive areas of high economic and conservation interest are yet comprehensively managed. With funding from the Global Environmental Facility, Cuban environmental officials have recently launched a five-year project to expand protection of natural areas along Cuba's southern coast and to strengthen land use plans to ensure that future coastal development is sustainable. This project also aims to integrate fisheries management with coastal conservation and protected area management.

Integrating fisheries management regulations with marine protected areas and sustainable coastal development is the strategy of EDF's Cuba Program to ensure that Cuba's marine environments, like Cayo Largo and the Gulf of Batabanó, are resilient in the face of natural, economic and political changes.

Cuban National System of Marine Protected Areas (SW)

