

James Kay takes us on an exploration of the national parks in the rugged and beautiful Baja Peninsula

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES KAY

Going Back To Baja

As the northernmost and westernmost state of Mexico, Baja California is a peninsula that stretches from the southern tip of California to Baja California Sur, the lower half of the isthmus, which extends farther south into the Pacific while running along the Sea of Cortez to the east. Also known as the Gulf of California, the Sea of Cortez separates Baja from mainland Mexico with one of the most ecologically diverse environments on the planet. Five Mexican national parks are situated along the eastern coast of the Baja Sur Peninsula alone. LEFT: The waters are so clear, a kayaker seems to hover over the water near Punta Baja Norte on the southern tip of Isla Carmen in the Loreto National Marine Park, Baja California Sur. BELOW: Wildflowers bloom at Bahia Los Triangulos, Isla Carmen, Loreto National Marine Park. BOTTOM: Sunset over Sierra La Giganta from Punta Baja Norte on Isla Carmen.



Often referred to as our “best idea,” America introduced the world to the concept of national parks with the formal designation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Perhaps inspired by our utilitarian quest to conquer and subdue every last square inch of the “howling wilderness” that greeted the first European settlers and the realization by the end of the 19th century that we were doing an exemplary job of it, a small group of visionaries began to realize that if future generations were going to have any chance to witness for themselves what Lewis and Clark saw, it would be through the formal protection of some of the most

magnificent landscapes in the American West.

Shortly after Yellowstone was established, the rest of the world climbed onboard, with Australia declaring the world’s second national park in 1879 and Canada announcing Banff National Park in 1885. Today, nearly 7,000 exist worldwide, with the largest in Greenland at 375,000 square miles.

I often tip my hat to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. for the financial muscle he provided to help expand the boundaries of Grand Teton National Park to include the valley of Jackson Hole. I shudder to think of the water parks, golf courses, convenience stores, billboards and flashing neon signs that would fill





James Kay says that kayaking is one of the best ways for photographers to access the remote terrain and skittish wildlife of the many environments found along the Baja Sur coastlines. ABOVE: Cardon cactus at Bahía Salinas in Loreto National Marine Park, Baja California Sur, Mexico. LEFT TO RIGHT: A salt lagoon at Punta San Ysidro off Isla San Jose on the Sea of Cortez; Shells, starfish and bone at Arroyo Blanco, also found on Isla Carmen in Loreto National Marine Park; On Isla San Jose, this is the view south from Punta Blanca, as first light illuminates sandstone waves on the Sea of Cortez in Baja California Sur, Mexico.



Jackson Hole today without his extraordinary efforts. As photographers, we've benefited greatly from visionaries like him, as confirmed by the fact that one of the most often used keywords we apply to our images is "national park."

Which brings me to Mexico, the Baja Peninsula and the ongoing efforts of visionary citizens there to protect its unique land and seascapes. With its southern tip barely dipping into the warm tropical waters south of the Tropic of Cancer, the dry, rugged jag of land that forms the 800-mile-long Baja Peninsula was torn away from mainland Mexico about seven million years ago by the same tectonic forces that created the San Andreas Fault in Southern California. The sea that now fills this gap is known as both the Sea of Cortez and the Gulf of California.

In recognition of the exceptional ecological and scenic values of the land adjacent to the Gulf and the rich marine life within its waters, Mexico has established five national parks along the eastern edge of the peninsula since 1995, including Archipiélago de Espíritu Santo, with its turquoise water, white-sand beaches and productive mangrove forests; Bahía

Save Baja

Some of the organizations working to protect Baja:

Eco-Alianza de Loreto, A.C.
www.ecoalianzaloreto.org

Niparajá • www.niparaja.org

Grupo Ecologista Antares
www.gea95.org/english

Kayaking Adventures Around Baja

Mar Y Aventuras • www.kayakbaja.com

Paddling South • www.tourbaja.com

de Loreto National Marine Park, with its diverse underwater life and large, uninhabited islands; Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park, with its tropical reef and legendary diving; and the rich avian and marine diversity of San Lorenzo Marine Archipelago National Park.

As the flagship in Baja's new national park system, Bahía de Loreto was established in 1996 and encompasses an 800-square-mile swath of Gulf waters and five of its most beautiful islands. Beginning just north of the small town of Loreto, a 30-mile stretch of coastline forms the park's western boundary. As

with other marine parks around the world, one of its primary goals is to help restore the species-rich marine environment by eliminating commercial trawling operations. In order to counter the ongoing threat of large-scale resort-development projects along the coast just south of the park, local groups have offered a proposal to double its size by extending its southern boundary by 40 miles to include the longest remaining stretch of undeveloped coastline on the peninsula.

Soon after Mexico established these parks, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) listed all 244 islands and islets in the Sea of Cortez as a World Heritage site in 2005 and considers it the highest-ranking marine site on its entire list. A nonbinding designation with no official legal status, World Heritage sites are listed by UNESCO as a way to encourage local governments to protect their natural and cultural heritage. Based, in part, on this recognition, the Mexican government recently canceled a major resort development project with 30,000 hotel rooms adjacent to Cabo Pulmo Marine Park.

calm waters of the Gulf and to land anywhere to photograph otherwise inaccessible locations. Layover camps on sandy beaches provide access to sweeping vantage points overlooking the sea, and our small kayaks allow us to easily approach and photograph wildlife.

What I find most visually alluring about Baja is the tremendous contrast between the sun-blasted, drought-plagued lands of the peninsula itself and the emerald-green, teeming-with-life waters of the Gulf. While these waters support more species of marine animals than any other similar-sized body of water on earth, this once prolific marine ecosystem has been heavily overfished by international fleets of commercial trawlers for decades. While vastly depleted in numbers, you'll still find blue whales, sperm whales, humpbacks, marlin, sailfish, sea lions, seals, manta rays, whale sharks, dolphins, sea turtles and myriad tropical reef fish. Entirely dependent on this marine ecosystem, the skies above are filled with pelicans, cormorants, frigate birds, kestrels, egrets, turkey vultures, blue-footed boobies, blue herons, gulls, oystercatch-

cactus, palm trees, elephant trees, agave and the bizarrely shaped boojum trees, all worthy subjects for photography.

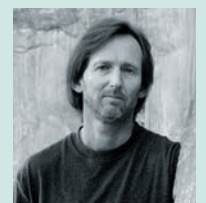
As the most ambitious project yet undertaken to protect the unique lands of the Baja Peninsula, a group of dedicated individuals is currently working on a grand proposal called the La Giganta and Guadalupe Biosphere Reserve. It would establish a series of measures protecting rich biological values across nearly 6,000 square miles in the Sierra de la Giganta and Guadalupe mountain ranges, which form the backbone of the southern half of the peninsula. It would share a common border with Loreto National Marine Park, with its mountains providing a rugged backdrop of 5,000-foot peaks rising directly from the water's edge.

Regardless of where national parks are located around the globe, the reasons for establishing them are perhaps best summed up by an eloquent collection of words I once saw engraved into a wooden sign on the rim of Bryce Canyon National Park: "If future generations are to remember us more with gratitude than with sorrow, not only must we achieve the miracles of technology,

ers, osprey and grebes, to name a few.

The diversity of animal life and the ruggedly beautiful coastline provide unlimited opportunities for both landscape and wildlife photography, including one of the planet's greatest wildlife spectacles, as whales congregate along the coast during the winter months. Late summer hurricanes occasionally transform the typically drab brown hills into a lush tropical backdrop rising from the green waters of the sea and sustain a wide variety of unique desert plants, including huge forests of towering cardon cactus and gardens of ocotillo, manzanita, cholla

we must leave them with a glimpse of the world as we found it, not just what it looked like when we were through with it." (Lyndon B. Johnson) OP



To see more of James Kay's photography or to sign up for one of his workshops, visit www.jameskay.com.