

Oceana and Blancpain lead an expedition to protect the reefs of the Gulf of Mexico

In October 2020, Blancpain announced its association, as exclusive watch partner, with Oceana, the largest international organization dedicated solely to ocean conservation. As part of the partnership, on August 9th, the two entities are launching the Project Alacranes expedition to explore the depths of two areas, which contain some of the greatest marine wealth in the Gulf of Mexico. For 15 days, the expedition will travel through Arrecife Alacranes National Park (Scorpion Reef in English), including an area called Bajos del Norte to document the health of their biodiversity and investigate the secrets of the reefs that, due to their distance from the coast, remain almost intact from the effects of human activities.

For nearly 70 years, since the 1953 launch of the world's first modern diving watch, the Fifty Fathoms, Blancpain has enjoyed historical links to the ocean. Through its Blancpain Ocean Commitment, the fine watchmaking Brand has co-financed 20 major scientific expeditions, celebrated its role in extending the surface of Marine Protected Areas (MPA) around the world with an addition of more than four million km², and presented several award-winning documentary films, underwater photography exhibitions and publications.

As part of its multi-year partnership with Oceana, Blancpain supports the organization's first expedition in Mexico, where it will work with cutting edge technology that has been little used in Mexican seas. Between August 9th and 23rd, 10 scientists with different specialties will explore the area and do environmental DNA analysis and photomosaic modeling, which will be used to create 3D maps of the reefs and enable a census of the species that inhabit them or use this area as part of their migratory routes. The use of a sonar called "Fish Hunter PRO" will provide information on the schools of fish, making it possible to establish parameters for monitoring fish stocks of commercial interest, and to create guidelines for the sustainable management of fishery resources.

"Our objective is to collect scientific information that allows us to determine the current status of this Marine Protected Area, and to use this information to promote the changes needed to protect and guarantee the future of this important ecosystem," said Renata Terrazas, Executive Director of Oceana in Mexico at a press conference on July 27th.

She explained that Mexico is one of the 17 nations with the greatest biodiversity, and the Scorpion Reef, located 140 km north of the Yucatan Peninsula, is the largest reef in the southern Gulf of Mexico. Its study and conservation are necessary, because numerous endangered species live there, and different commercial species that reproduce there later migrate to areas where fishing is an important economic factor.

At least 136 species of fish, 34 species of coral, various dolphin species, and commercially valuable marine animals, such as queen conch and grouper, live in the area the Project Alacranes expedition will explore.

"Despite being a Protected Area, the Scorpion Reef is not exempt from pollution, illegal fishing, and potentially destructive tourism, threats that must be fought," said Terrazas. "In the case of Bajos del Norte, the risk is greater because it has no legal protection."

"The recovery and conservation of marine habitats in Mexico translates into greater economic and social benefits, especially for local fishermen. Adequate protection of these reefs ensures that future generations can enjoy their beauty and resources," stated Miguel Rivas, director of Habitat Campaigns at Oceana.

Aboard the *Caribbean Kraken*, the Project Alacranes expedition will first travel to the reefs of Bajos del Norte, a little known area far from the impact of human activities where little scientific research has been conducted on the biological wealth it holds. From there it will return to Puerto Progreso to restock and, 34 hours later, it will embark for the Alacranes Reef.

Marc A. Hayek, Blancpain President & CEO, said: "Blancpain has had an incredibly close relationship with the ocean since the early 1950s, when we released the Fifty Fathoms, the first modern diving watch. With the Blancpain Ocean Commitment, our aim is to raise awareness of the importance of the oceans for human life, and to contribute to their protection. To do so, we center our initiatives on three axes: beauty, to show people what the underwater world has to offer and arouse their interest; knowledge, to learn about the areas that need attention; and protection, to ensure efficient ocean conservation. We are proud to be part of Project Alacranes, which meets all three of these criteria, and have faith in Oceana's strength in exploration, scientific research and advocacy to make a difference towards Mexico's biodiversity, the local populations, and ultimately the world."

Video material of some of the preliminary findings will be shared on Oceana's social media, so that those interested can closely follow this scientific expedition at @OceanaMexico on Twitter and Facebook, and @oceanamexico on Instagram.