Chapter Six

Mexico’s Islands: Mirage or Reality?

1. Introduction: Discovery of Mexico and Its Islands by Spain in the 16th Century

Mexico is a country of islands. Endowed by nature with four ocean basins that surround its vast and varied coastlines, Mexico possesses over two hundred islands in the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of California and the Pacific Ocean.

The importance of Mexico’s islands has attracted attention from historical, diplomatic and scientific angles. Unfortunately, the significance that these islands are called upon to play in the economic and commercial development of that country, and in the future of that nation, has been seriously neglected.

From a historical viewpoint, the modern history of this country may be traced back to two islands in the Caribbean – Cozumel and Isla Mujeres – and a few more in the Gulf of Mexico – Isla del Carmen, Sacrificios, Isla Verde and San Juan de Ulúa. It was in the latter group of islands that Spanish explorers

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1 The length of Mexico’s littorals has been estimated to total 10,741 km. (5,799 n.m.); corresponding 7,919 km. to the Pacific; 2,821.23 km. (including 180.40 km. of islands to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean) for a total in the Atlantic coast of 2,821.23 km., taken from Eduardo Solís Guillén. DERECHO OCEÁNICO (Ocean Law). Porrúa, Mexico (1987) at 255.

2 As of today (2011), Mexico has not produced a definite number of its islands, their land area, the length of their coastlines or even their precise geographical location. In the past, federal agencies of the Mexican government involved with islands conducted surveys and reported a wide range of contradictory and incomplete results. For example, Gobernación in its Inventory (1981) reports 239 islands, 23 cays and 20 reefs; Marina in its Catalogue (1979) omits giving the total number of islands simply mentioning that its catalogue is based on the “Catalogue of Islands” published by Relaciones Exteriores in 1900; Programación y Presupuesto in its Provisional Catalogue (1981) only mentions that there are “3,067 components (sic) of Mexico’s insular territory;” and in the joint and latest catalogue published by Gobernación and Marina (1987), prepared “to respond to the needs on information, consultation and dissemination of the vast and unexplored Mexican insular territory,” the possible number of islands may range between 415 and 586 depending on how the language is interpreted. For the complete cites of these catalogues see supra note 133 in Chapter One of this book.
Francisco Hernández de Córdova, Juan de Grijalva and Hernán Cortés launched three major expeditions, initiating the explorations and the evangelization of the indigenous peoples and the resulting *Mestizaje*, who forged a new race in the Mesoamerica of 1517–1519. As an Spanish colony for three hundred years, Mexico became an independent nation in 1821. The modern history of Mexico, as asserted by Moreno Collado and Reyes Vassade, started in the islands.

From a geographical perspective, Mexico’s establishment of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) created a new “marine space” covering 2,644,147.50 km² (771,083.94 n.m.²), an area much larger than its own territorial land base. Because of the use of islands as basepoints for the EEZ, Cayo Arenas and Arrecife Alacrán in the Gulf of Mexico, and Clarión and Guadalupe in the Pacific Ocean, as sanctioned by international law, Mexico was able to increase the size of its EEZ by one third.

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3 Hernández de Córdova is credited with the “discovery” of Mexico, both islands and Cabo Catoche in the Yucatán peninsula, and the Bay of Campeche in 1517, as a part of continental Mexico. See Jorge A. Vargas. *U.S. Marine Scientific Research Activities Offshore Mexico*. 24 Denver J. of Int’l Law & Policy (Fall 1995) at 8–9.

4 In 1518, Grijalva landed in Cozumel and Isla Mujeres in the Mexican Caribbean and went on to Laguna de Términos in Campeche and San Juan de Ulúa in the tropical jungles of Veracruz, in the Gulf of Mexico. *Ibid.*

5 Following the instructions of King Charles V of Spain, Diego Velásquez, governor of Cuba, authorized and financed these three major expeditions with the purpose of advancing Spain’s political, territorial and religious interests in the world. See Patricia de Fuentes. *The Conquistadors* (1985), *The Spanish Conquerors* at 69.


7 *Ibid.* These authors add: “[Mexico] has forgotten them… The Mexican people have not yet developed what may be called their insular conscience.”

8 The EEZ area does not include the marine belt of Mexico’s 12 n.m. territorial sea. Combining both marine spaces, Mexico established a marine area covering 2,882,754 km² (840,698 n.m.²), according to the figures provided by Solis Guillén, *Ocean Law, supra* note 1 at 256. Mexico’s land base area covers 1,964,375 km² (758,449 miles²), *Atlas of the World. National Geographic* (8th ed., 2010) at 129.

9 For a discussion of Mexico’s delimitation process of its EEZ, see *supra* notes 118–134 in Chapter Four of this book, and the accompanying text.

10 At that time, the most advanced and latest work of the Third U.N. Conference on the Law of the Sea regarding maritime delimitations, including the use of islands as base points for delimitation purposes, was reflected in the *Informal Single Negotiating Text* (ISNT), U.N. Doc. A/CONF.62/WP.8/Part II (1975). Both the U.S. and Mexico agreed to use the pertinent articles in the ISNT as guidelines for establishing the 200 n.m. maritime boundary between both countries. The ICNT was recognized by these countries as the “implicit agreement” reached until then by the international community on the use of islands for delimitation purposes, as updated by the Revised Single Negotiating Text (RSNT), produced on May 7, 1976. See