

South Water Caye Marine Reserve is the largest marine protected area in Belize, covering 117,875 acres (approximately 47,700 hectares), and was established by the Fisheries Department in 1996 in recognition of the exceptional integrity of its marine ecosystems, and its national, regional and international importance. The Marine Reserve is located on the shallow reef platform of the Atlantic coast of Mesoamerica, and is part of the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere, stretching approximately 1,000km from the Yucatan to the Bay Islands in Honduras.

The area is highlighted under ecoregional planning initiatives for its particularly rich biodiversity supporting an important oceanic mangrove system and extensive seagrass meadows, which provide valuable habitats for commercial and non-commercial species. These species include queen conch (*Strombus gigas*) and lobster (*Panulirus argus*), the foundations of the traditional fishing industry on which a number of coastal communities in Belize are dependent. The sheltered waters and mangrove systems of the Pelican cayes in the southern area of the Marine Reserve have been identified as one of the most biodiverse marine systems within the western hemisphere, supporting a number of endemic species, and species new to science.

Mangrove cayes provide nesting sites for several nationally important bird species and include Man O' War Caye, protected in its own right as a Crown Reserve. The numerous sand bores adjacent to Wee Wee Caye include an established nesting beach for the rare roseate tern (*Sterna dougallii*)

. The area is also utilized by marine turtles for nesting.

The designation fulfilled the requirements of UNESCO which, in the same year, included South Water Caye Marine Reserve as one of the seven protected areas that form the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System World Heritage Site.

The overall goal for the management of South Water Caye Marine Reserve is:

- To provide for the protection, wise use, understanding, and enjoyment of the natural resources of South Water Caye Marine Reserve in perpetuity.

This goal is supported by a number of objectives:

- Maintain and conserve the natural resources of South Water Caye Marine Reserve for the benefit of current and future generations
  - Engage fishermen in the management of sustainable fisheries
  - Provide opportunities for recreation, interpretation, education, and appreciation for all visitors
  - Strengthen education and understanding of users and potential users of the dynamics of coral reef systems within South Water Caye Marine Reserve and the human impacts affecting them
  - Identify, implement and strengthen priority research and monitoring through on-site activities, collaboration and partnerships