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1 Dichotomy of mangrove management: A review of research and policy in the  
2 Mesoamerican reef region.

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8 **Abstract**

9 Mangroves are declining globally at faster rates than tropical forests and coral reefs,  
10 with primary threats including, aquaculture, agriculture and climate change. Mangroves  
11 provide ecosystem services to coastal communities of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and  
12 Honduras, which comprise the Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) ecoregion. Over the past two  
13 decades mangroves within the MAR have declined. Current estimates of mangrove  
14 cover in the region suggest that mangroves cover 239,176 ha of the MAR, equivalent to  
15 1.7% of the world's mangroves. Concerted efforts to manage, conserve and protect  
16 mangrove forest are apparent in all four countries. Comprehensive laws that prohibit the  
17 cutting and clearing of mangroves have been implemented in Mexico, Guatemala and  
18 Honduras. Belize has a permitting system to regulate mangrove alterations. In addition,  
19 a total of seven international and regional agreements have been ratified. Across the  
20 ecoregion, forty-three protected areas have been designated that contain mangroves,  
21 providing protection to 111,396 ha of mangroves (47% of the total). However, our  
22 findings suggest a lack of transparency in the governance framework, a disconnect  
23 between management and research, and geopolitical differences have all played a role

24 in reducing management efficacy. A key finding of our study reveals a distinct division in  
25 the perceived major threats to mangroves between Ramsar site managers and  
26 researchers. Ramsar site managers identify anthropogenic disturbances as key threats,  
27 while in contrast, the bulk of research focuses on natural disturbances. To promote the  
28 inclusion of evidence-based research within mangrove management plans, greater  
29 efforts to connect these important stakeholders are required.

30 **Keywords:** Mangroves, Management, Conservation, Research foci, Mesoamerica,  
31 Threats.

## 32 **Introduction**

33 Mangroves are a diverse group of halophytic plant species, which form highly  
34 productive forests in the area between mean sea level and the highest spring tide mark  
35 along tropical and sub-tropical coastlines and estuaries (Tomlinson, 1994). Once  
36 perceived as mosquito infested wastelands, mangroves have now been recognized as  
37 highly productive and ecologically important ecosystems. Providing ecosystem services  
38 to marine and terrestrial environments, and human societies (Gilman *et al.*, 2008;  
39 Nagelkerken *et al.*, 2008), which are valued at US\$9,900–35,900 ha<sup>-1</sup>yr<sup>-1</sup> (Costanza *et*  
40 *al.*, 1997; Sathirithai and Barbier, 2001; Barbier, Hacker, Kennedy, Kock, Stier, 2011).  
41 Some of the most important mangrove ecosystem services include: coastline protection  
42 (in particular storm, hurricane and tsunami protection); waste water treatment;  
43 production of extractable materials; and provision of cultural sites (Rönnbäck, Crona  
44 and Ingwall, 2007; Warren-Rhodes *et al.*, 2011). Despite the known value of these  
45 forests, mangroves are highly threatened. Deforestation estimates suggest mangrove  
46 cover has declined by 30-86% since the mid 1990's (Duke *et al.*, 2007), and mangroves

47 continue to decline globally at unprecedented rates (FAO, 2007). Globally the main  
48 threats to mangrove forests include: coastal development; logging for timber and fuel;  
49 aquaculture; salt extraction; and agriculture (Valiela, Bowen and York, 2001; Alongi,  
50 2002; Rönnbäck, Crona and Ingwall, 2007). The additional threats of climate change,  
51 e.g. sea-level rise, are also of concern (Schaeffer-Novelli *et al.*, 2016; Short *et al.*,  
52 2016). Understanding if or how mangroves can adapt to such changes is of particular  
53 relevance to already threatened ecosystems, e.g. in the Caribbean (Godoy and De  
54 Lacerda, 2015; Sasmito *et al.*, 2016).

55 The majority (over 70%) of mangroves are located within developing countries (Giri *et*  
56 *al.*, 2011), where limited resources and capacity can inhibit effective management. At  
57 the international level, a number of treaties and conventions afford some protection to  
58 mangroves (Macintosh and Ashton, 2002), for example: the Ramsar Convention (1974);  
59 the Cartagena Convention (1983); and the International Tropical Timber Agreement  
60 (2011). However, few of these treaties provide any effective legal protection and none of  
61 them address the conservation, preservation, or management of a particular mangrove  
62 species (Polidoro *et al.*, 2010). National legislation pertaining to mangrove management  
63 in the 1960's was primarily focused on mangrove exploitation (Carter, Schmidt and  
64 Hirons, 2015). However, over the past five decades management has progressed and  
65 has led to the integration of mangroves into coastal zone management plans (Carter,  
66 Schmidt and Hirons, 2015).

67 Common tools for the preservation and management of mangrove and other marine  
68 ecosystems include: marine protected areas (MPA's); nature reserves; wilderness  
69 areas; national monuments and national parks. Since 1974, increasing protection has

70 been provided through Ramsar site designation. To date, 281 Ramsar sites (12.5% of  
71 all Ramsar sites) are intertidal forested wetlands, which includes mangrove forests  
72 ([www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org)). Although increased recognition of mangroves in management plans  
73 is encouraging, the majority of plans associated with MPA's and Ramsar sites are  
74 based on generalized characteristics and threats, with limited reference to prior  
75 scientific research. In fact, there appears to be no effective mechanism for creating links  
76 between management activities for, and scientific research on, mangroves, thus  
77 research is rarely incorporated into management plans. Similar observations have been  
78 made in the management of coral reef ecosystems, where a mere 14% of information  
79 cited in management plans for the reefs of Australia, Kenya and Belize was primary  
80 research (Cvitanovic *et al.*, 2014). In this case, research was deemed to be inaccessible  
81 to managers due to, long publication times, subscription only access to research and  
82 poor articulation of management implications of the research (Cvitanovic *et al.*, 2014).  
83 Yet, for effective management to take place, evidence based decision-making is critical  
84 (Christensen *et al.*, 1996; Ruckelshaus *et al.*, 2008).

85 In this article we use the Mesoamerican reef (MAR) ecoregion as a case study, to  
86 examine the current status of mangroves, the legislation implemented to protect,  
87 manage and conserve mangroves, and review peer-reviewed scientific outputs from the  
88 region. The aim of this paper is to understand the current management paradigms  
89 within the MAR and identify threats to mangroves within the region. We compare the  
90 foci of management strategies and research programs in order to determine where  
91 overlap occurs and where there are gaps in the knowledge base.

## 92 **Methods**

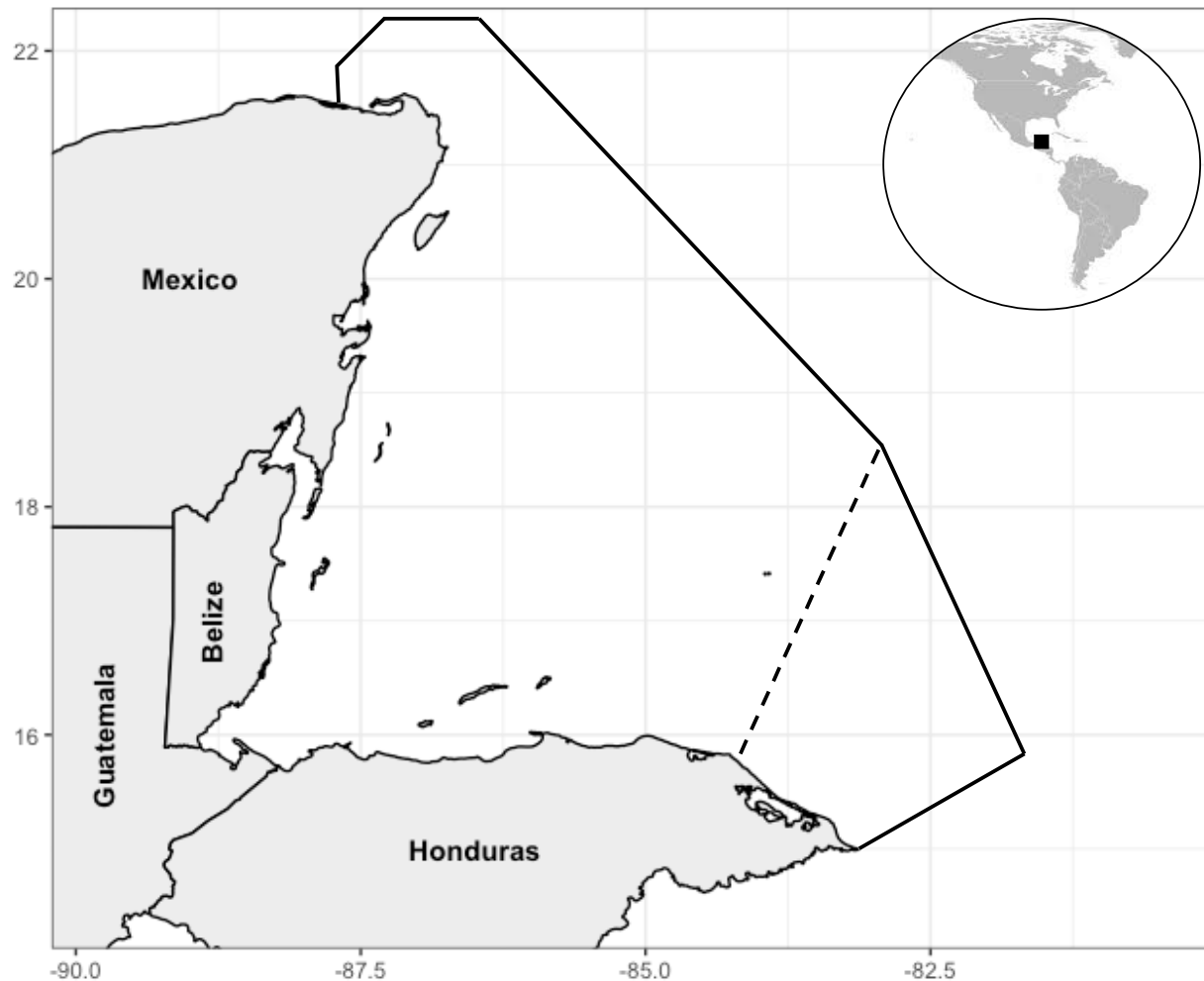
93 *Study area*

94 We have chosen to focus on the Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) ecoregion because the  
95 majority of mangrove research is concentrated in South-East Asia, where larger and  
96 more diverse stands of mangroves are located (Saenger, 2002). Much less is known  
97 about these ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean (but see, Ellison and  
98 Farnsworth, 1997; Núñez-Farfán *et al.*, 2002; Ellison, 2004). The MAR ecoregion  
99 extends over 1000 km from the Yucatan peninsula, Mexico (21.56°N; 087.09°W) to the  
100 east coast of Honduras (14.97°N; 083.16°W), encompassing the Caribbean coastlines,  
101 open-ocean, networks of cays, and offshore banks of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and  
102 Honduras (Kramer and Kramer, 2002) (Figure 1). It is home to the largest barrier reef in  
103 the western hemisphere and supports the livelihoods of approximately two million  
104 people (Kramer and Kramer, 2002), of particular importance are the fishing (Box and  
105 Canty, 2010) and tourism industries (Doiron and Weissenberger, 2014). Considerable  
106 attention has been given to coral reefs in the region, however seagrass and mangrove  
107 ecosystems have often been overlooked. In this review we consider the entire  
108 Honduran north shore as part of the MAR ecoregion, due to potentially high levels of  
109 connectivity between the Honduran east coast and the MAR (Butler *et al.*, 2011;  
110 Truelove *et al.*, 2015; Chollett *et al.*, 2017). The boundaries of the ecoregion were  
111 originally defined by the presence of several physiogeographic boundaries, these  
112 include the Gulf of Mexico, strong oceanic currents between the Yucatan penninsular,  
113 Mexico and south west Cuba, the shallow waters of the Nicaraguan rise, Honduras, in  
114 addition to a number of terrestrial environmental variables, e.g. rainfall. The ecoregion  
115 was officially declared in 1997 as part of the Tulum agreement, where all four countries

116 came together recognizing the importance of the region and the need to jointly manage  
117 a shared marine resource (Kramer and Kramer, 2002).

### 118 *Mangrove cover estimations*

119 First, we estimated mangrove forest cover for each country across the region. The three  
120 true mangrove species: *Rhizophora mangle*; *Avicennia germinans* and *Laguncularia*  
121 *racemosa* are considered as part of the mangrove forest system in all four countries.  
122 However, the mangrove associate *Conocarpus erectus* (Buttonwood mangrove) is only  
123 defined as part of the mangrove forest in Guatemala and Honduras. Regardless of a  
124 country's definition of the mangrove complex, mangrove cover estimates herein include  
125 all four species. Country specific estimates of mangrove cover were taken from the  
126 most recent estimates available (Mexico (Rodríguez-Zúñiga *et al.*, 2013), imagery from  
127 2010; Belize (Cherrington *et al.*, 2010), imagery from 2010; Guatemala (MARN, 2013),  
128 imagery from 2010; and Honduras (Carrasco and Caviedes, 2014), imagery from 2008-  
129 2010).



130

131 **Figure 1.** Map of the Mesoamerican Reef Eco-region. Solid line highlights the area  
 132 included within the study, the official boundary of the MAR (dotted line) does not include  
 133 the eastern north shore of Honduras.

134 *Mangrove management plans*

135 To ascertain the level of management and protection directly focused on mangroves in  
 136 each country, we first reviewed national environmental legislation, using Google  
 137 searches and accessing management plans. We subsequently identified which  
 138 international and regional conventions and agreements relating to mangroves each  
 139 country has signed or ratified. Within the Caribbean, protected areas that contain  
 140 mangroves include Ramsar sites and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Ramsar sites



141 that contain mangroves were identified through the American Ramsar Secretariat (Pers.  
142 Comms.) and the Ramsar website ([www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org)). The Healthy Reefs for Healthy  
143 People Initiative (HRI; [www.healthyreefs.org](http://www.healthyreefs.org)) provides the names of all of the MPAs  
144 within the MAR, which have marine territory, and provides the associated management  
145 plan. If a management plan was not available on the HRI website a wider web search was  
146 conducted, if after the search we did not identify a management plan we assumed that  
147 one did not exist or is not publicly available. Web searches (in English and Spanish),  
148 were used to identify management plans for each of the named protected areas.  
149 Management plans for protected areas, where available, were downloaded and  
150 searched using the keywords mangroves (mangr\*) in English, and manglar (mangl\*) in  
151 Spanish to find explicit references to the management of mangroves. It must be noted  
152 that the most recent management plans were used in this review and that management  
153 plans within the region are generally designed for a five-year period. In many cases the  
154 management period had expired, but we assume that current management strategies  
155 are based on the most recent plans.

#### 156 *Scientific literature review*

157 To determine the focus of scientific research on mangroves in the MAR, peer-reviewed  
158 scientific publications were searched for using the Boolean search methodology.  
159 Multiple combinations of the following keywords (and their equivalents in Spanish) were  
160 used in the search: 'Mangrove'; '*Rhizophora*'; '*Avicennia*'; '*Laguncularia*'; '*Conocarpus*';  
161 'Mesoamerica'; 'MBRS'; 'MAR'; 'Caribbean'; 'Mexico'; 'Belize'; 'Guatemala'; and  
162 'Honduras'. Only articles published from 1997 to date were used, as this date coincides  
163 with the declaration of the MAR as an ecoregion by all four countries, and therefore to

164 the direct management of the ecoregion. Books or book sections were not used, as we  
165 could not be sure of the peer-review process, and reviews were not included.  
166 Methodologies of articles were examined to ensure that research occurred in at least  
167 one of the four MAR countries and within the boundaries of the MAR ecoregion, as we  
168 delimited it. A total of 81 peer-reviewed publications (see supplementary materials for a  
169 full list of publications) were identified and the research undertaken in each country was  
170 tallied. Where research occurred in multiple countries in a single paper, each country  
171 received a tally.

#### 172 *Identification of threats*

173 A fine scale analysis of articles that were identified to focus on threats to mangroves  
174 was conducted to categorize the type of threat. Eight different threats were identified, a  
175 total of 29 times, and each threat was categorized as either natural or anthropogenic  
176 disturbances. *Natural disturbances* were: hurricanes; sea-level change; light gaps;  
177 seismic activity; tsunamis; and subsidence. *Anthropogenic disturbances* were:  
178 commercial development and deforestation. Threats identified were tallied and a  
179 proportion of each threat category was calculated based on the total number of threats  
180 identified.

181 A list of threats to Ramsar sites was obtained from the American Ramsar Secretariat.  
182 The threats were identified by future managers of Ramsar sites from a list of 51 options  
183 supplied by Ramsar (see supplementary materials for the full list of threats and their  
184 definitions) during the Ramsar site application process. The list of threats provided was  
185 pre-defined, and as a result not all threats reported may be relevant to the protected  
186 area, e.g. in Guatemala 'agriculture and aquaculture' was a reported threat. However,

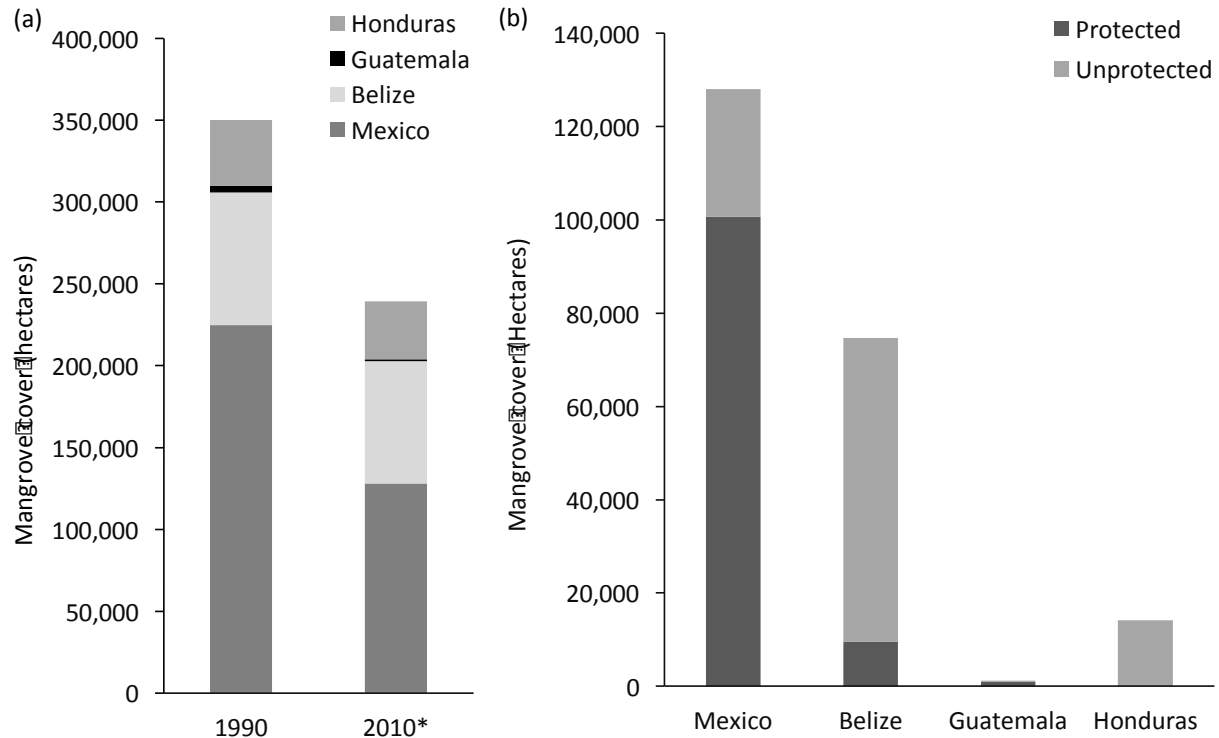
187 aquaculture is currently not present in the Guatemalan Caribbean, in contrast  
188 agriculture is present and is considered a threat to mangroves.

189 Thirty-seven different threats were identified by Ramsar managers, across the four  
190 countries, a total of 236 times, with a maximum of twenty-two at a single site. We  
191 categorized threats as either natural disturbances or anthropogenic disturbances.  
192 *Natural disturbances* were: storms and flooding; fire and fire suppression; problematic  
193 native species; invasive and other problematic species and genes; climate change and  
194 severe weather; and invasive non-native/alien species. *Anthropogenic disturbances*  
195 were: biological resource use; human settlements (non-agricultural); tourism and  
196 recreation areas; housing and urban areas; fishing and harvesting aquatic resources;  
197 natural system modifications; agriculture and aquaculture; pollution; logging and wood  
198 harvesting; human intrusions and disturbances; hunting and collecting terrestrial  
199 animals; vegetation clearance/land conversion; recreational and tourism activities;  
200 gathering terrestrial plants; transportation and service corridors; water regulation;  
201 household sewage; livestock farming and ranching; urban waste water; agriculture and  
202 forestry effluents; drainage; dams and water management/use; energy production and  
203 mining; unspecified development; wood and pulp plantations; mining and quarrying;  
204 industrial and military effluents; water abstraction; garbage and solid waste; shipping  
205 lanes; and air-borne pollutants. Individual threats that were reported were tallied as  
206 either natural or anthropogenic disturbances, a proportion of each threat category was  
207 calculated from the combined number of threats identified.

## 208 **Results**

### 209 *Mangrove cover*

210 Mangrove cover in the MAR is estimated at 239,176 ha, cover has declined across the  
211 region since the 1990's, where mangroves covered approximately 350,000 ha (Figure  
212 2), a loss of over 110,000 ha in a twenty-year period. Proportional cover of mangroves  
213 in the MAR region varies considerably between and within the four countries. The  
214 majority of mangrove cover within the MAR is located along the Yucatan Peninsula,  
215 Campeche and Quintana Roo regions of Mexico (53.5%; 128,049 ha; Figure 2),  
216 however Mexico has significantly greater mangrove cover in the Gulf of Mexico and on  
217 the Pacific coastlines. Belize is the only country to have its entire coastline in the MAR,  
218 and approximately one third of mangrove cover of the MAR is found in Belize (31.2%;  
219 74,684 ha; Figure 2). Only a small fraction of the total mangrove cover of the region is  
220 located in Guatemala (0.5%; 1,170 ha; Figure 2), the majority of Guatemalan  
221 mangroves are located on the Pacific coast. Despite the size of its coastline, mangrove  
222 cover in Honduras is a small proportion of the MAR total (14.7%; 35,273 ha; Figure 2).  
223 Mangrove cover in Honduras is almost equally divided between the Caribbean and  
224 Pacific coasts.



225  
 226 **Figure 2** Mangrove cover within the MAR region. (a) Historical (Kramer and Kramer, 2002) and recent  
 227 estimations of mangrove cover. (b) Total mangrove cover in each of the four MAR countries, with  
 228 hectares of protected and unprotected mangrove highlighted. (Mexico (Rodríguez-Zúñiga *et al.*, 2013);  
 229 Belize (Cherrington *et al.*, 2010); Guatemala (MARN, 2013); Honduras (Carrasco and Caviedes, 2014).  
 230 \*Some data from Honduras is from 2008.

231 **Legislation and management**

232 Comprehensive legislation exists within the region to protect mangroves. In Mexico,  
 233 Guatemala and Honduras, mangroves are property of the state and stringent laws exist  
 234 which prohibit the removal and cutting of mangroves and prevent changes in land use  
 235 (Table 1). In contrast, the majority of Belizean mangroves are privately owned and only  
 236 30% are state owned. However, national legislation in Belize is applicable to all  
 237 mangroves regardless of ownership. Within Belize, the cutting and clearance of  
 238 mangroves is controlled by a permitting system, however the dredging and landfill of  
 239 mangroves is only permitted under exceptional circumstances.

240 At the international level, the four countries of the MAR have ratified a total of seven  
241 international conventions and agreements to promote the management and sustainable  
242 use of marine and wetland resources (Table 1). The most important of these for  
243 mangroves is the Ramsar (wetlands) convention. Geopolitical differences influence  
244 regional cooperation, e.g. Mexico, a North American country, is excluded from Central  
245 American agreements, and Belize with a British rather than Spanish colonial heritage  
246 exhibits preferences with Caribbean Community agreements. All four countries are  
247 parties of the two main international conventions that are relevant to environmental  
248 protection: the Cartagena convention and Ramsar convention (Table 1). Honduras is  
249 the only country not to have ratified the Cartagena convention, but is a signatory to the  
250 convention. Additionally, all four countries ratified the Tulum declaration and the  
251 subsequent Mesoamerican barrier reef system project ([www.mbrs.doe.gov.bz](http://www.mbrs.doe.gov.bz)).

252 We identified a total of 43 protected areas in the MAR which have mangroves within  
253 their borders (Table 2), and estimate that just under half (46.6%; 111,396 ha) of the  
254 mangroves in the MAR are within the boundaries of a protected area. Over two thirds  
255 (31) of the protected areas have management plans (Table 2), although implementation  
256 of these plans may vary. The majority of management plans had no specific  
257 management strategies for mangroves, other than a reference to the national  
258 legislation, in the few instances where strategies were stated they were related to  
259 mangrove restoration, e.g. Shipstern Conservation and Management Area, Belize.

260 In Mexico, mangroves are the responsibility of the Department of Ecology and  
261 Environment, and the Institute for Flora, Fauna and Culture within the Secretariat of the  
262 Environment and Natural Resources. In addition, the National Commission for Natural

263 Protected Areas (CONANP) assumes responsibility for mangroves when they are  
264 located within a protected area. CONANP may co-manage protected areas with a local  
265 non-governmental organization (NGO). We identified 13 protected areas that contain  
266 mangroves in Mexico, these areas provide protection to approximately 80% (100,764  
267 ha) of Mexican mangroves forests in the MAR (Table 2; Figure 2).

268 In Belize, the Forestry Department within the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is  
269 responsible for managing Belizean mangroves. The Coastal Zone Management  
270 Authority and Institute and Fisheries Department may also assume a management role.  
271 NGO's co-manage a number of protected areas in Belize and therefore assume a direct  
272 role in the management of mangroves. Private protected areas are increasingly popular,  
273 and these areas are coordinated by the Belize Association of Private Protected Areas.  
274 We were not able to identify any private protected areas that provided protection to  
275 mangroves. Only a small proportion (12.9%) of the total mangrove cover of Belize is  
276 located within the 15 protected areas (Table 2; Figure 2).

**Table 1.** Legislation, Agreements and Protection of Mangroves in the Mesoamerican Reef Region.

<b>Mangrove Legislation</b>		<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Belize</b>	<b>Guatemala</b>	<b>Honduras</b>
<i>Legislation</i>		General Wildlife Act 2000, Article 60.	Forestry Act 1989, Article 52. Forests Act Chapter 213, revised in 2003	Forestry Act 1996, Article 35.	Fisheries Act 1959, Article 52.
		It is prohibited to remove, transplant, prune or conduct any work or activity that may affect the integrality of the hydrological flow of mangroves.	Dredging and landfill is strictly prohibited unless there is significant benefit to the general population.  Three types of permits can be issued for the alteration of mangroves, depending on the area of mangrove to be altered. Permits can be denied.	Change of land use of mangrove ecosystems is prohibited.  By-law Resolution No. 01.25.98, Article 15 allows family consumption to a maximum of 5m <sup>3</sup> .yr <sup>-1</sup>	The removal and cutting of mangroves is prohibited.
<i>State ownership of mangroves</i>		100%	30%	100%	100%
<b>Government Agencies</b>					
<i>Government hierarchy for the management of mangroves</i>	<i>Ministry</i>	Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources	Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries	Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources	Secretariat of Energy, Natural Resources, Natural Environment and Mines
	<i>Department</i>	Department of Ecology and Environment; Institute for Flora, Fauna and Culture	Department of Forestry	National Forest Institute	Fisheries department
	<i>External departments</i>		Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute; Department of Fisheries	National Council for Protected Areas	Institute for Conservation and Forest Development, Protected Areas and Wildlife
	<i>Other Agencies</i>	National Commission for Protected Natural Areas		National Council for Protected Areas	Local Municipal Environment Units
	<i>Non-government organizations</i>	e.g. Comunidad y Biodiversidad Asociacion Civil; Amigos de Sian Ka'an	e.g. Belize Association of Private Protected Areas; Toledo Institute for Development Environment	e.g. Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación	e.g. Bay Island Conservation Association; Roatan Marine Park
<b>International and Regional Agreements</b>					
<i>Cartagena Convention (*Signatory only)</i>		1985	1999	1989	1983*
<i>Wetlands Convention (Ramsar<sup>2</sup>)</i>		1986	1998	1990	1993
<i>Tulum Agreement</i>		1995	1995	1995	1995
<i>Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System Project</i>		1997	1997	1997	1997
<i>Central American Policy for the Conservation and Rational Use of Wetlands</i>		N/A	2002	2002	2002
<i>Ramsar Regional Initiative for the Integral Management and Wise use of Mangroves and Coral Reefs</i>		2009	-	2009	2009
<i>Ramsar Caribbean Wetlands Initiative</i>		-	2009	-	-



**Table 2.** Protected areas of the Mesoamerican Reef ecoregion with mangroves within their borders.

	MPA /NP	Ramsar site	Management plan	Reference
<b>Mexico (n=13)</b>				
Área de Protección de Fauna y Flora Yum Balam	X	X	Y	(CONANP, 2013)
Parque Nacional Isla Contoy	X	X	Y	(SEMARNAT & CONANP, 2015b)
Manglares de Nichupte		X	Y	(SEMARNAT & CONANP, 2014)
Parque Nacional Arrecifes de Puerto Morelos	X	X	Y	(SEMARNAP, 2000a)
Manglares y humedales del norte de la isla Cozumel		X	Y	(SEMARNAT, 2014)
Parque Marino Nacional Arrecifes de Cozumel	X	X	Y	(SEMARNAP, 1998a)
Playa Tortuguera X'Cacel-X'Cacelito		X	-	
Reserva de la Biósfera de Sian Ka'an	X	X	Y	(SEMARNAT & CONANP, 2015a)
Reserva de la Biósfera Banco Chinchorro	X	X	Y	(SEMARNAP, 2000b)
Parque Nacional Arrecifes de Xcalak	X	X	Y	(CONANP, 2004)
Parque Marino Nacional Punta Occidental Isla Mujeres, Punta Cancun y Punta Nizuc	X		Y	(SEMARNAP, 1998b)
Área Marina y Costera Protegida Actam Chuleb	X		-	
Zona Sujeta de Conservación Ecologica Santuario Manati	X		-	
Bahia Chetumal				
<i>Total:</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	
<b>Belize (n=14)</b>				
Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2004)
Laughing Bird Caye National Park	X		Y	(BFoD, 2010)
Payne's Creek National Park	X		-	
Sarstoon-Temash National Park	X	X	Y	
Shipstern Conservation & Management Area	X		Y	(PACT, 2016)
Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary	X		-	
Swallow Caye Wildlife Sanctuary	X		-	
Half Moon Caye Natural Monument	X		Y	(BAS, 2007)
Caye Caulker Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BCZMIA & BFD, 2004)
Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2010a)
Glover's Reef Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2007)
Hol Chan Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2002)
Port Honduras Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2012a)
Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2010b)
South Water Caye Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2009)
Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve	X		Y	(BFD, 2012b)
<i>Total:</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>12</i>	
<b>Guatemala (n=2)</b>				
Reserva de usos multiples rio Sartsun	X	X	Y	(CONAP, 2009)
Punta de Manabique	X	X	Y	(CONAP, 2011)
<i>Total:</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	
<b>Honduras (n=13)</b>				
Parque Nacional Sistema de Humedales de Cuyamel – Omoa	X	X	-	
Parque Nacional Jeannette Kawas	X	X	Y	(ICF, 2012a)
Refugia de Vida Silvestre Punto Izopo	X	X	Y	(ICF, 2012b)
Sistema Humedales Laguna de Zambuco		X	-	
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Cuero y Salado (Barras de Cuero y Salado)	X	X	Y	(ICF, 2011)
Parque Nacional de las islas de la Bahía	X		Y	(IHT y ICF, 2015)
Zona de Protección Especial Marina Turtle Harbour – Rock Harbour el Sistema de Humedales de la Isla de Utila	X	X	Y	(IHT y ICF, 2012)
Zona de Protección Especial Marina Sandy Bay West End	X		-	
Parque Nacional Port Royal	X		-	
Monumento Natural Marino Archipiélago Cayos Cochinos	X		Y	(CMCC, 2009)
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Laguna de Guaimoreto	X		-	
Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Platano	X		Y	(ICF, 2013)
Laguna de Bacalar		X	-	
<i>Total:</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	
<b>Grand totals</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>31</b>	

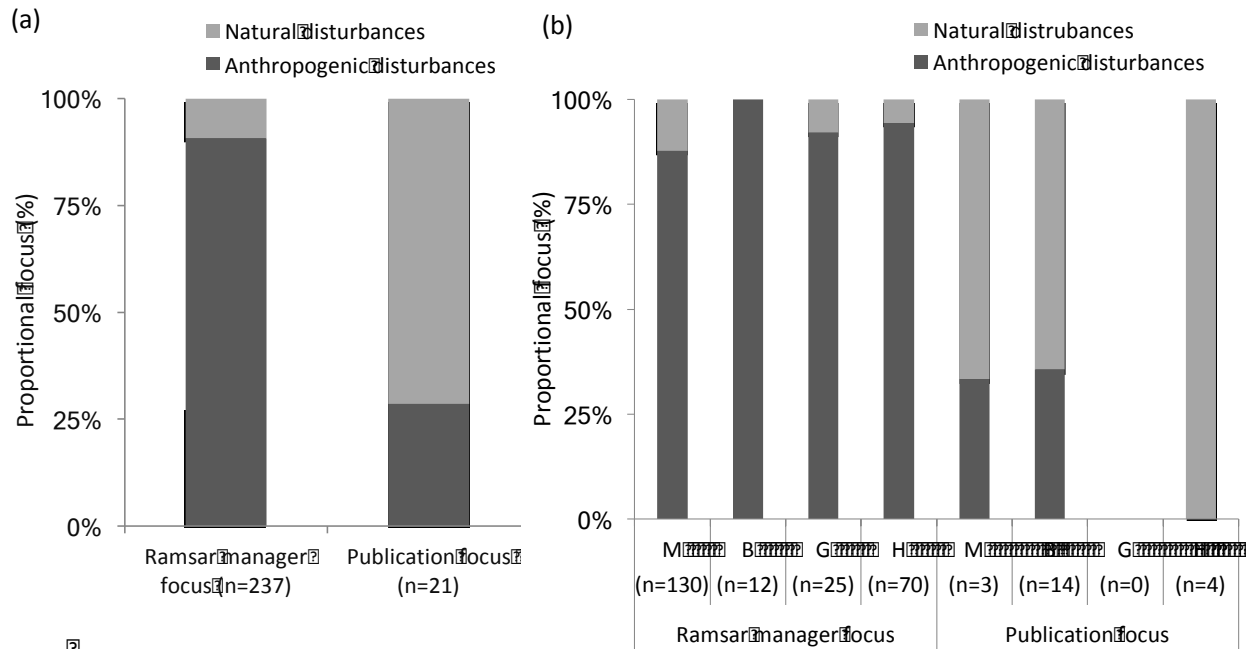
277 Mangroves in Guatemala are the responsibility of the National Forest Institute within the  
278 Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources. The National Council for Protected  
279 Areas (CONAP) has a role in mangrove management when mangroves are located in  
280 protected areas (Table 1). Protected areas are co-managed by CONAP and local  
281 NGO's and these organizations assume the day to day responsibilities of the protected  
282 areas. The majority of mangroves within Guatemala (88.2%) are located within the two  
283 protected areas (Table 2; Figure 2).

284 The responsibility of mangroves in Honduras resides with the Department of Fisheries  
285 under the Secretariat of Energy, Natural Resources, Natural Environment and Mines,  
286 and local municipal environmental units have a role in mangrove management within  
287 their jurisdiction. Within protected areas, mangroves receive additional management  
288 from the Conservation and Forest Development, Protection and Wildlife Institute and  
289 local NGO's. The NGO's assume the day-to-day responsibilities of the protected areas.  
290 A total of 13 protected areas have been declared that have mangroves within their  
291 boundaries, however limited mangrove cover data is available, which precludes an  
292 accurate estimation of mangrove coverage within Honduran protected areas (Table 2).

### 293 *Threats to mangroves*

294 A total of 81 peer-reviewed articles focusing on mangroves were identified within the  
295 MAR region. The majority of the research was conducted in Belize (68.2%), the  
296 remaining studies were conducted in Mexico (22.0%) and Honduras (9.8%). No peer-  
297 reviewed primary mangrove research identified from Guatemala. Of the 81 peer-  
298 reviewed articles identified, 15 of these address threats to mangroves (Ellison and  
299 Farnsworth, 1997; Feller *et al.*, 1999; Cahoon *et al.*, 2003; Piou *et al.*, 2006; Mckee,

300 Cahoon and Feller, 2007; McKee, Rooth and Feller, 2007; Taylor *et al.*, 2007;  
301 Vaneslow, Kolb and Fickert, 2007; Granek and Ruttenberg, 2007; Carrillo-Bastos,  
302 Elizalde-Rendón, Erika Marcela Torrescano Valle and Flores Ortiz, 2008; Islebe *et al.*,  
303 2009; Macintyre *et al.*, 2009; Mckee and Vervaeke, 2009; Hiraes-Cota *et al.*, 2010;  
304 McCloskey and Liu, 2013),, a total of 8 different threats were classified. A total of 37  
305 different threats, were identified from the 20 Ramsar sites, the majority of which were  
306 anthropogenic (90.7%), e.g. 'logging', 'aquaculture and coastal development' (Figure 3).  
307 The majority of peer-reviewed mangrove research from the MAR region has focused on  
308 natural disturbances (71.4%) of mangrove systems (Figure 3). These trends are not just  
309 a regional trend, but hold for each of the individual countries, where researchers and  
310 managers foci are on natural and anthropogenic disturbances, respectively (Figure 3).  
311 Primary research interests include hurricanes and sea-level change, and Ramsar  
312 managers across the region are concerned with deforestation, agriculture, and  
313 development.



314

315 **Figure 3.** Threats to mangroves of the MAR as identified by Ramsar managers and within  
 316 peer-reviewed publications (a) throughout the MAR; and (b) individual countries: M –  
 317 Mexico; B – Belize; G – Guatemala; and H - Honduras.

318 **Discussion**

319 Despite the stringent national legislation and international agreements which provide  
 320 protection to mangrove forests, and the additional protection provided by the 43  
 321 protected areas (which contain mangroves), mangrove cover in the MAR declined by  
 322 over 110,000 ha from 1990-2010, with an estimated current cover of 239,176 ha,  
 323 equivalent to 1.7% of the world’s mangroves (Giri *et al.*, 2011). The greatest losses  
 324 were observed in Mexico and Honduras. The decline in mangrove cover suggests a  
 325 problem with enforcement. We suggest a lack of resources for enforcement,  
 326 transparency within the governance framework, and lack of political will as potential  
 327 reasons for the failure in the enforcement of mangrove legislation. The number of  
 328 organizations responsible for the management and protection of mangroves in each  
 329 country varies and causes confusion, with the exact role of each party unclear. Each

330 country has a specific government department responsible for mangrove protection,  
331 with additional oversight from external agencies and non-government organizations  
332 (NGO's) when mangroves are located in protected areas. It must be noted that such  
333 discrepancies are not unique to mangrove systems or to this region (Rife *et al.*, 2013).  
334 Limited national budgets of the four countries reduce governmental institutional  
335 capacity, which has resulted in civil society in the form of NGO's filling the void in the  
336 management of protected areas. NGO's assume an important role as co-managers of  
337 protected areas, fulfilling the day-to-day management duties. However, a lack of  
338 authoritative power and a lack of human capacity to physically patrol often large and  
339 remote areas, inhibits the ability of NGO's to enforce environmental legislation (Cudney-  
340 Bueno *et al.*, 2009; Rife *et al.*, 2013). In essence many of the protected areas in each of  
341 the four countries could be considered "paper parks", as they provide no greater  
342 protection or management to mangroves than national legislation (Rife *et al.*, 2013). It is  
343 important not to be too critical of these institutions, however, all of which are operating  
344 on limited resources. The focus should be on how to support and build capacity of these  
345 organizations to allow them to improve mangroves and natural resource management  
346 efficacy.

347 Geopolitical interests of the different countries have reduced collaborative efforts of  
348 mangrove protection. Despite the four countries sharing an ecoregion, significant  
349 geopolitical divisions exist. This is exemplified by Belize ratifying a separate Ramsar  
350 initiative to the other three countries. The paradox is that despite having the same or  
351 very similar objectives, the four countries are not working together to achieve these  
352 goals. A lack of collaboration and harmonization in how management strategies are

353 developed and implemented can reduce mangrove protection, especially in forests that  
354 straddle international borders (McCallum, Vasilijević and Cuthill, 2015). Belize is the  
355 only country where all of mangroves are within the boundaries of the MAR. In contrast  
356 Mexico and Guatemala have significantly greater mangrove cover on other coastlines,  
357 and a little more than half of the mangrove cover of Honduras is concentrated within the  
358 Gulf of Fonseca, on the Pacific coast. Threats to mangroves may vary significantly on  
359 the different coasts, and therefore influence how national mangrove legislation is  
360 developed, and how governments prioritize limited management resources. Regardless,  
361 greater collaborative efforts, such as the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System Project,  
362 need to be established to promote the protection of marine resources, and facilitate  
363 transboundary initiatives that recognize that ecological populations do not align with  
364 geopolitical boundaries. There is a high probability that mangrove forests within the  
365 region are connected as recent studies have shown high levels of ecological  
366 connectivity in the MAR region for lobster, fish and corals (Butler *et al.*, 2011; Truelove  
367 *et al.*, 2015; Chollett *et al.*, 2017).

368 Evidence based decision-making has been well documented as an important  
369 component of resource management (Christensen *et al.*, 1996; Ruckelshaus *et al.*,  
370 2008). However, in the papers we reviewed there appears to be no discernible link  
371 between researcher recommendations and resource manager decision-making or  
372 actions. Concluding statements within articles may make some reference to  
373 conservation or management, but usually included no advice on how to apply research  
374 findings directly to management. Additionally, our study identified a disconnection  
375 between Ramsar site managers and the scientific community. Managers were primarily

376 focused on localized anthropogenic threats (e.g. Macintyre *et al.*, (2009)), while  
377 researchers focused on natural disturbances, such as hurricane events (Vaneslow, Kolb  
378 and Fickert, 2007) and the impact of sea-level change (Mckee, Cahoon and Feller,  
379 2007). Both anthropogenic and natural threats have either had, or have, the potential to  
380 negatively affect mangrove cover, but the different foci of researchers and managers is  
381 likely to hinder progress in mitigating threats from either source.

382 It is crucial that researchers and managers increase their communication and work  
383 together to understand the full complexity of the threats to mangrove forests. Combining  
384 these different priorities could bring important benefits. For example, the identification of  
385 areas of mangrove forests resilient to climate change can focus management efforts  
386 and create local priority conservation zones where anthropogenic disturbances should  
387 be minimized. Both groups are focusing on important issues, however the assumed lack  
388 of dialogue between stakeholders precludes the integration of science into mangrove  
389 management plans. Cvitanovic *et al.* (2014) have reported similar disconnects in the  
390 management of coral dominant marine protected areas. They proposed knowledge  
391 brokers, boundary organizations, knowledge co-production and management-orientated  
392 summaries in research articles as potential solutions to provide managers access to  
393 scientific outputs. The HRI program has put some of these in place within the MAR  
394 primarily focused on coral reefs, but these could be adapted to facilitate greater  
395 communications between managers to promote science lead mangrove management.  
396 In addition, discussion forums exist, such as the mangrove list  
397 ([majordomo@essun1.murdoch.edu.au](mailto:majordomo@essun1.murdoch.edu.au)). Listserves provide a forum where individuals

398 can pose questions to experts in an array of different fields and can provide useful  
399 dialogue between practitioners and researchers.

400 These potential solutions provide important links between peer-reviewed conservation  
401 science and conservation managers, but the dichotomy of researcher and manager foci  
402 must also be addressed. Combining current research interests of natural disturbances  
403 with local management concerns of anthropogenic stresses, in particular the  
404 understanding of local drivers of deforestation, is critical. However, if institutional  
405 capacity is lacking, then the implementation of management strategies will always be  
406 problematic. Building capacity within and among government departments and NGO's  
407 to ensure the effective enforcement of legislation and promote links with the scientific  
408 community to facilitate science-based decision-making is vital for the management of  
409 mangroves in the MAR, and elsewhere. It is important that managers have access to  
410 and make use of current research, especially when developing management plans  
411 (Adeel and Pomeroy, 2002; Iftekhhar and Islam, 2004; Schmitt and Duke, 2015). There is  
412 also an onus on researchers to increase the availability of their research to  
413 management authorities, not just government agencies, potentially through regional  
414 online archives or data repositories. Additionally, researchers should engage managers  
415 prior to conducting their research to foster a dialogue that can promote mangrove  
416 management and conservation efforts. Promoting public awareness to garner political  
417 will is also important, and a greater understanding of the ecosystem services provided  
418 by mangroves to local communities and their inclusion in management has the potential  
419 to increase the protection and conservation of mangroves (Shunula, 2002; Sudtongkong  
420 and Webb, 2008; Datta, Chattopadhyay and Guha, 2012).



421 We propose the following recommendations to promote management of mangroves  
422 within the region:

423 (1) Coordinated and detailed mapping projects in Belize and Honduras to provide more  
424 recent estimates of mangrove cover that can be used to set baselines from which  
425 management actions can be monitored and assessed;

426 (2) The implementation of a systematic, harmonized, mangrove monitoring protocol  
427 throughout the region that will facilitate comparisons of mangrove forest status;

428 (3) A program of work to increase understanding of the connectivity of mangrove  
429 populations throughout and beyond the MAR ecoregion, which can then be used to  
430 identify areas where greater collaborations are needed;

431 (4) The creation of a repository of scientific literature of the region to which researchers  
432 can submit their research, making it available for practitioners in the region and  
433 providing another step towards an increased dialogue between managers and the  
434 scientific community.

435 Our proposals require coordination and management of resources and information  
436 across the MAR. The HRI program already brings together stakeholders from across  
437 the region, but at present is heavily coral reef focused. Mangrove coverage was an key  
438 indicator within the original HRI guide (McField and Kramer, 2007), and therefore could  
439 become part of the biennially produced report card, which provides stakeholders an  
440 update on the status of marine resources. Our suggestion is that the network of  
441 contacts and collaborations within this program could be used to facilitate more

442 coordinated monitoring and assessment of mangroves and seagrass ecosystems in the  
443 region.

#### 444 **Conclusion**

445 The stringent national legislation and international agreements which should provide  
446 protection to mangrove forests within the MAR are ineffective. A number of local  
447 anthropogenic stressors threaten mangrove forests, and despite comprehensive  
448 legislation, mangrove cover has declined in all four countries. Capacity building of  
449 government and non-government institutions is required, as a lack of capacity has  
450 reduced environmental regulation enforcement. Local anthropogenic stressors are of  
451 greatest concern to managers of protected areas, whilst scientific research is focused  
452 on natural disturbances, primarily climate change. These different focuses can be  
453 advantageous if they can be linked effectively. For example, the identification of climate  
454 change resilient mangrove forests can channel mangrove management efforts to  
455 maximize effectiveness of limited resources. Greater understanding of drivers of local  
456 anthropogenic threats to mangroves is required to provide managers with the necessary  
457 tools to reduce these threats and promote mangrove forests and the ecosystem  
458 services they provide. To promote successful management, we suggest the  
459 reinforcement of institutional capacity, enhance links between government departments  
460 and civil society and increase science-based decision-making within protected areas  
461 management plans.

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