

Scientists Blast Plans for Nicaraguan Grand Canal

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Axel Meyer

Imperiled? A shipping canal through Lake Nicaragua would devastate the lake, scientists warn.

A group of scientists are fighting plans by the Nicaraguan government for a canal that would open a direct route for ships to pass between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Such a canal, which would likely pierce the largest freshwater lake in Central America, would imperil wetlands and other fragile ecosystems, [the scientists warn in a commentary today in *Nature*](#).

“This is the most imminent threat to the environment in Central America. It’s more urgent than climate change,” co-author Jorge Huete-Pérez, a molecular biologist at Universidad Centroamericana in Managua tells *ScienceInsider*.

Last June, the Nicaraguan government granted a concession to HKND Group in Hong Kong to develop the \$40 billion project, which would compete with the Panama Canal for a share of the booming shipping industry. Last month, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and HKND Group CEO Wang Jing announced they hoped to break ground in December.

The Nicaraguan government has predicted that the canal and associated infrastructure would supercharge the economy of the second poorest nation in the Americas, boosting annual growth rates

from 4.5% in 2013 to 14.6% in 2016, the authors write. “The government claims this will get the nation out of poverty,” says Huete-Pérez, president of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences. The government and HKND Group have stated that the canal’s route is still under investigation. But Huete-Pérez says that the probable path, as determined in previous surveys, is a 278-kilometer-long route passing through the Cerro Silva Nature Reserve on the east coast, into Lake Nicaragua, and then across a narrow isthmus and out to the Pacific.

“We’re all focused on saving the lake,” Huete-Pérez says. The shallow lake, an important source of drinking water for the region, would require “extensive dredging” and “would probably suffer from salt infiltration in the lock zones,” write Huete-Pérez and co-author Axel Meyer, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Konstanz in Germany. Along the canal route, the authors say, changes in water chemistry “could harm numerous populations of freshwater and marine fish found nowhere else in the world.” And clearing hundreds of thousands of hectares of forests and wetlands, they warn, would destroy habitat and food sources for endangered species such as the Baird’s tapir, the spider monkey, the harpy eagle, and the jaguar.

The authors also speculate that the need to relocate indigenous people in villages along a canal route would sow social discord. “Forcing ethnic communities in their ancestral homes could ignite conflict,” Huete-Pérez warns.

He and others criticize the government for allowing HKND Group to manage an assessment of the project’s environmental impact. HKND Group has hired the consulting firm Environmental Resources Management to carry out the study. “This is all backwards,” Huete-Pérez says. The science academy is working with the InterAmerican Network of Academies of Sciences to carry out an independent assessment.