

## **Cedros: Origin and permanence of the placenames in a Mexican Pacific island**

*Jesús Israel Baxin Martínez*

*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*

[isbaxmar@yahoo.com.mx](mailto:isbaxmar@yahoo.com.mx)

and

*Carmen Sámano Pineda*

*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*

[car\\_sa\\_pi@yahoo.com.mx](mailto:car_sa_pi@yahoo.com.mx)

**ABSTRACT:** Toponymy is a field of knowledge that provides valuable support to pertaining to geography: it contributes to the naming of geographical space and its parts, and is a sign of the appropriation of territories by human groups. Mexican toponymy has diverse linguistic origins: most stem from indigenous languages and Spanish, and their combinations, on continental and island soils. The geographical names used to designate natural elements and places of itinerant or permanent occupation on island territories have been arbitrarily assigned in different historical eras. This paper analyzes the toponyms of the island of Cedros (Baja California, Mexico), their historical roots and the names assigned by its contemporary inhabitants. The toponyms discussed here are compared to some geographical names from the western shore of the Baja California peninsula and other Mexican islands.

*Keywords:* Baja California, Isla of Cedros, Mexican islands, Mexico, placenames, toponymy

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### **Introduction: toponyms in Mexico**

Mexican toponymy has developed from various sources over the centuries, and reflects the evolution of the natural landscape through time and human occupation. The names reflect historical and mythical events as well as nationalistic, religious and geopolitical interests (León-Portilla, 2002, p. 5).

Studies in human geography and other social disciplines have focused on continental Mexican toponyms and neglected those of Mexican islands. Academic studies of specific Mexican insular territories are sparse, and the same is true regarding their toponymy, which has only been studied in unpublished papers. With regard to the island of Cedros, there are various texts and articles dealing with its habitation in pre-Columbian times, the Spanish expeditions recounted in chronicles, and the exploitation of their maritime resources. Few documents mention the island's toponyms, let alone classify them or research their origins.

This paper is divided into three sections, with the aim of offering the reader an overview of Mexican toponymy, addressing basic facts about Mexican islands and their names, and finally, dealing specifically with the official and local toponymy of Cedros, as a fundamental element of analysis that allows us to make out that insular territory's history.

As in the rest of Mesoamerica, Mexican toponymy has its roots in several different historical eras. It comprises names assigned by indigenous groups to elements of their natural space and the settlements they founded, as well as toponyms incorporated by the Spanish

during the conquest and the New Spain viceroyship (1535-1821), and various combinations resulting from the mixing of these elements.

Indigenous toponymy is inherited from the native peoples who inhabit or have inhabited what is now the territory of Mexico. Among the latter are peoples who have become extinct along with their languages. These peoples' imprints, however, remain in the toponyms assigned to elements of the areas they inhabited.<sup>1</sup>

"Mexico" is a toponym of Nahuatl origin. It comes from *metztli* (moon) and *xictli* (navel). In 1325 the Mexica people, after a long pilgrimage, arrived at the Mexican Basin and settled on a lacustrine islet in the western part of the basin. The settlement, which soon became a city, was known as Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and was the capital of the Aztec empire.

The composite toponym Mexico-Tenochtitlan disappeared along with the city in 1521. The city of Mexico, the capital of the viceroyship of New Spain, was built atop the rubble a few years later. In 1821, when New Spain gained independence from its mother country, Mexico remained the capital city of the new nation, and continues as such today. The toponym "Mexico" also designates the whole country, both within its borders and abroad. Its meaning has been variously interpreted in books, articles and other documents.<sup>2</sup> Since the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the Spanish began naming or renaming the great regions into which New Spain was divided, their natural elements and human settlements; with these new names, they asserted their power over the vast area occupied by the newly created viceroyship.

Spanish toponymy honored Spanish places, Catholic saints and important persons from that era. Examples of this are Nueva Galicia (a province which comprised the present-day states of Nayarit and Jalisco), which was named after the Spanish province of Galicia, and cities such as Monterrey (Nuevo León), named after viceroy Don Gaspar de Zúñiga y Acevedo (1560-1606), fifth count of Monterrey (INEGI, 1992).

Composite toponyms, which combine an indigenous and a Spanish name were used to rename indigenous settlements during the viceroyship era. For example: San Andrés Ahuayucan ("Place of Oaks") in Mexico City, and Santa María Jaltianguis ("Sand Market") in Oaxaca. These examples, and many others throughout Mexico, reflect the political and economic power held by the victor over the vanquished, as the Spanish toponym always precedes the indigenous one. Some toponyms (very few) come from foreign languages, especially from English. These names designate coastal features on both continental and insular territory. Thus we have Colnet Cape (Baja California), Sam Point (Quintana Roo), and Henslow Cape on Isla Socorro (Colima).

In 1981, INEGI (the National Geography and Statistics Institute) undertook the task of regulating geographical names according to the rules laid out by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The first task was to research the origin, meaning and evolution of the names of the country's natural and cultural spaces. Unfortunately, although

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<sup>1</sup> In 2015, speakers of indigenous languages in Mexico numbered 7,381,660, some 6% of the national population (INEGI, 2015). As for Mexico's indigenous toponymy, refer to *La multilingüe toponimia de México: sus estratos milenarios* (1983) by Miguel León-Portilla, and *De toponimia y topónimos: contribuciones al estudio de nombres de lugar provenientes de lenguas indígenas de México* (1987) and *Itinerario toponímico de México* (2010), both concerning Ignacio Guzmán-Betancourt's work.

<sup>2</sup> Although linguistic studies based on the Nahuatl language posit that the name Mexico can be translated as "in the navel of the Moon" (Gutierre Tibón *Historia del nombre y la fundación de México*, México, 1980), the interpretation "place or region among agave" has also been proposed (Ángel García Conde, 'México, su origen geográfico e histórico', *Investigaciones lingüísticas*, vol. 1 (3-4), México, 1934).

the researchers worked energetically on this monumental task, the project was not concluded (Maya, 2007)<sup>3</sup>.

Toponyms are an invaluable tool for culturally-focused geography, as they help reconstruct the history of a given geographic space, whether continental or insular, and understand the reasons for the naming of natural elements (topography, plant and animal life) and human settlements, and who has the power to name them. Once the meanings of toponyms are known, their analysis requires a certain order, according to the space's characteristics. Among the existing classification systems, the one created by Faure (2004) in *Diccionario de nombres geográficos y étnicos del mundo*, was chosen for the systematization of Mexican insular toponymy. Faure takes three categories into account,

1. Anthroponyms, which are derived from people's names, including saints' names (hagyonyms).
2. Names derived from landscape descriptions:
  - a) Natural landscape: topography (mountains, valleys), rivers (colour, length, width, course), plant life (forests, absence of vegetation), animal life (species).
  - b) Cultural landscape: human activities (resource exploitation: agriculture, ranching, food industry), water-related buildings, inns, ancient buildings, military buildings, roads or bridges.
3. Other names: new foundations, eulogistics (names that praise), historic events, symbolic legends.

The categories proposed by Faure are relevant for the proposed analysis of the names of selected Mexican islands ([Table 2](#)) and the names from the island of Cedros that contrast with the toponyms from the western coast of Baja California ([Table 4](#)).

### **Toponyms of the Mexican islands**

Historical and geographical context provides a solid foundation for research on Mexican island toponymy. From the chronicles written by Jesuit missionaries who settled in the northwestern regions of New Spain, we know that some islands were named by their permanent inhabitants in pre-Columbian times ([Table 2](#)). For instance, the Comcaac or Seri people named their native island Tahéjoc (Open Circle), but the Spaniards named it Tiburón (Shark). The Seri also named certain islands in the Sea of Cortez or Gulf of California which they have temporarily or permanently inhabited since pre-Columbian times.<sup>4</sup>

As aboriginal insular peoples died out, their toponyms were lost, since the missionaries did not record them in their chronicles or journals. Such is the case of the Pericú islanders, who inhabited the islands currently named San José, Espíritu Santo and Cerralvo, in the southwestern region of the Gulf of California (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 151). As to the islands of Mexico's east coast, they were named by Maya groups, and they retain their original names.

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<sup>3</sup> Hard work is still needed in order to move forward with this project, given that Mexico had 192,245 named localities in the 2010 census (INEGI, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> This ethnic group still lives in Mexico. Moser and Marlett (2008) have compiled various Comcaac toponyms, among them at least sixteen that designate islands in the Sea of Cortez (Baxin: 2015, p. 123).

Such is the case of Holbox (Black Hole), Jaina (House in the Sea) and Janitzio (Corn Flower, in the P'urhépecha language), located in Lake Pátzcuaro, in the state of Michoacán (México Desconocido, 2016).

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, other islands in the tropical Pacific that have belonged to Mexico were named by European travelers of various origins. The Revillagigedo archipelago and the island of Cerralvo were named after two viceroys of New Spain. There was a controversy regarding Cerralvo in November 2009, when the government officially renamed it Jacques Cousteau.<sup>5</sup> The name change caused annoyance and growing opposition among the inhabitants of the nearby Baja California Sur shores, since the island belongs to that state. The local people were irritated because they were not consulted, and they insist on keeping the name Cerralvo. Their opposition is supported by people from other parts of Mexico and by congressmen, who have also protested to several Mexican authorities. There has been no reply from the government to date. León-Portilla (2009) wrote an article about this arbitrary decision, which, according to this historian and expert on toponymy, erases historical evocations; in this case, a reference to the marquis who authorized Francisco de Ortega's explorations<sup>6</sup> in the 18th century to broaden geographical knowledge of the Gulf of California.

In 2014, the INEGI counted 4,111 insular elements (islands, islets, keys and reefs) in Mexico. Their combined surface area is about 5,127 km<sup>2</sup> (Aguirre et al., 2010, p. 9; National Consulting Committee on Mexican Insular Territory, 2012, p. 18)<sup>7</sup>, which represents 0.26% of the surface of Mexico (1,964,375 km<sup>2</sup>). While the islands are not significant in terms of their surface area, analyzing their toponymy is revealing in terms of environmental and historical knowledge.

In Table 1, Cozumel stands out among the largest and most populated islands, with 169 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, while Carmen is connected to the mainland via bridges because of its commercial and industrial importance. Both islands are seats of municipal government, as is Isla Mujeres; the rest have a few hundred or thousand inhabitants and are politically dependent on a neighbouring municipality or the federal government.

In Table 2, we observe that a general study of island toponymy yields noteworthy results. For example, while there are, as is the case in continental territory, indigenous and Spanish names, there are no composite names.

Giraut's (2008, pp. 99, 104) asserts that toponyms "... have a lifespan according to their nature, their use and level of appropriation, and account for the stories, conflicts and values of society in relation to space...". We can thus argue that the names given to Mexican islands in various historical eras reflect a low degree of territorial appropriation by their temporary or permanent inhabitants.

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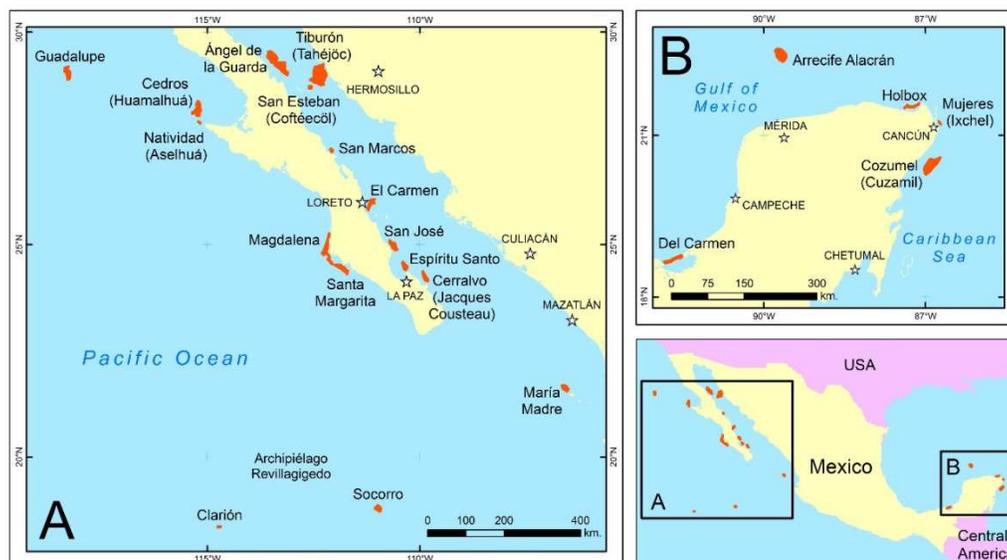
<sup>5</sup> Diario Oficial de la Federación, November 17, 2009

[http://dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=5120394&fecha=17/11/2009](http://dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5120394&fecha=17/11/2009)

<sup>6</sup> Between 1632 and 1636, Francisco de Ortega named or renamed most of the islands located along the western shore of the Gulf of California. Among those that retain his denomination are San José, Santa Cruz, Monserrat, Carmen, Danzante, and San Ildefonso (León-Portilla, 1970, pp. 12-38; Ortega, 1944, pp. 72-110).

<sup>7</sup> Different authorities indicate different values for the total area of Mexico's islands. CONABIO *et al.* (2007, p. 11) indicate 5,083 km<sup>2</sup>; Quiroz (2009, p. 12) gives 5,918 km<sup>2</sup>, while González (1997, p. 163) and Garmendia (2010, p. 24) claim that it is 5,800 km<sup>2</sup>. In 2014, the impending publication of the *Catalogue of Mexican Insular Territory* was announced. This is a joint effort by several Mexican governmental institutions, and a definitive measure should be given in it, but it has not yet been published.

**Figure 1: Location of the most significant Mexican islands based on strategic situation, surface area and population.**



Source: Map created by the authors.

**Table 1: Largest and most populated islands in Mexico.**

Largest islands	Surface Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Most populated islands	Inhabitants (2010)
Tiburón (Gulf of California)	1,198	Isla del Carmen (Gulf of Mexico)	169,725
Ángel de la Guarda (Gulf of California)	930	Cozumel (Caribbean Sea)	79,535
Cozumel (Caribbean Sea)	469	Mujeres (Caribbean Sea)	12,642
Cedros (Pacific Ocean)	346	María Madre** (Pacific Ocean)	2,788
Magdalena (Pacific Ocean)	284	Janitzio* (Lake Pátzcuaro)	2,458
Guadalupe (Pacific Ocean)	243	Cedros (Pacific Ocean)	2,042
Santa Margarita (Pacific Ocean)	215	Holbox (Caribbean Sea)	1,486
San José (Gulf of California)	181	Mexcaltitán* (Laguna Grande)	818
El Carmen (Gulf of California)	145	San Marcos (Gulf of California)	394
María Madre (Pacific Ocean)	144	Natividad (Pacific Ocean)	302
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,155</b>		<b>272,190</b>

\*Lacustrine islands. \*\*The population of María Madre is indicated according to information gathered in the 2010 census. However, between 2011 and 2012, approximately 6,000 convicts were brought in, so the island's population is now estimated to be between 8,000 and 9,000 people.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on CONABIO, 2007, and INEGI, 2010.

Of the 4,111 islands inventoried by the Mexican government, several governmental institutions, among them INEGI and CONABIO, recognized, in 2007, only 433 with established names, of which only 40 were inhabited. Almost all of these are named with toponyms of Hispanic origin, some of which are repeated. There are three islands called Las Ánimas (The Souls), five with the toponym Venado (Deer), six called Lobos (Wolves)<sup>8</sup>, and eight called Pájaros (Birds); 32 islands are named after saints (assigned by date of discovery), hailing from the Catholic tradition, as are the eulogistic names. The next most common names are those derived from the natural landscape: topography and plant and animal life.

**Table 2: Names of some Mexican islands.**

Category		Indigenous toponyms			Spanish toponyms
		Name of the island	Probable meaning	Language	
Anthroponyms	Names of persons	—	—	—	Cerralvo (Jacques Cousteau), Revillagigedo, Socorro, Isabela, María Madre, Juan Ramírez
	Names of deities, saints, virgins	Ixchel (Mujeres)	Goddess of the Moon and fertility	Maya	Guadalupe, San Martín, San Benito, Santa Margarita, San Esteban, San Marcos, El Carmen, Monserrat, San José
Derived from landscape	Natural	Cuzamil (Cozumel)	Land of Swallows	Maya	Cedros (Cedars), Rasa (Flat), Tiburón (Shark), Dátil (Date), Tortuga (Turtle), El Pardito (Little Brown One), Patos (Ducks), Clarión (White Chalk), Roca Partida (Split Rock), Lobos (Wolves), Alcatraz (Gannet), Arrecife Alacranes (Scorpion Reef), Coyote, Las Pitahayas (Dragonfruits), Roqueta (Small Rock)
		Huamalhuá (Cedros)	Island of Fogs	Cochimí	
		Aselhuá (Natividad)	Island of Birds	Cochimí	
	Coftéecöl (San Esteban) Hast Siml (Partida)	Big <i>Sanjuanicos</i> Ball Cactus Hill	Seri Seri		
	Cultural	Janitzio	Corn Silk	Purépecha	El Metate (The Grinding Stone), El Hospital (The Hospital)
Other names	With symbolic meaning	Jaina	House in the Sea	Maya	Coronado (Crowned), Danzante (Dancer)
		Tahéjoc (Tiburón)	Open Circle	Seri	
		Chalchihuitlapazco (Sacrificios)	Jade Sparkle	Nahuatl	
	Yunuén	Half Moon	Purépecha		
	Eulogistic	Jarácuaro	Place where the god Xaracua is worshipped	Purépecha	Natividad (Nativity), Ángel de la Guarda (Guardian Angel), Las Ánimas (The Souls), Espíritu Santo (Holy Spirit), Isla de la Pasión (Passion Island)
	Anecdotal	Holbox	Black Hole or Black Head	Maya	Salsipuedes (Get out if you can), Sacrificios (Sacrifices), El Desengaño (Disappointment), Mala Noche (Bad Night), El Infiernito (Little Hell), Rincón del Gato (Cat's Corner)

<sup>8</sup> The name refers to sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*), known in Spanish as “lobos marinos” or sea wolves.

As regards little-known uninhabited islands of small size (a few hectares), the origins of their names are unknown, though they might stem from local anecdotes. Some were named as reference for fishing and navigation, although they are uninhabited. These are some of their names: Cabeza de Caballo (Horse's Head), Garrapata (Tick), Gitana (Gypsy), El Hospital (The Hospital), El Huerfanito (The Little Orphan), El Infiernito (Little Hell), Mala Noche (Bad Night), El Mamut (The Mammoth), Mano de León (Lion's Hand), El Metate (The Grinding Stone), Morena (Dark Skinned Woman or Moray Eel), La Muela (The Molar), El Pastel (The Cake), Las Pelonas (The Bald Ones), El Piojo (The Headlouse), El Reloj (The Clock), Rincón del Gato (Cat's Corner) or El Submarino (The Submarine) (CONABIO, 2007: 109-122). All of these islands are located in front of Mexico's shores, most of them in the Pacific Ocean. Next in order are the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea and inland (lacustrine) islands.

### **Cedros: the evolution of an insular territory through its toponymy**

The island of Cedros is located in the Mexican Pacific between 28° 10' North and 115° 12' West, facing the central portion of the Baja California peninsula. The Cochimí people named it Huamalhuá, which has been variously interpreted as "Island of Fogs" (Venegas, 1757, p. 437), "The Nebulous One" (Clavijero, 1852, p. 82; León-Portilla, 2000, p. 136) or "House of Fog" (Alzate map, 1772, in Barrera, 1992, p. 240d). The name Huamalhuá was also recorded as Amalguá, according to Venegas (1757: vol. 2, pp. 442-452). However, the scarcity of original sources in which to compare the phonetics of the names prevents us from deciding which one was originally assigned by the Cochimí, since that indigenous people are virtually extinct, along with their language (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 262).

The island is still prone to foggy weather to this day. According to Osorio (1948, pp. 336, 342), it is due to the island's northwestern slopes being exposed to Pacific breezes and to the shade on the slopes that descend all the way to Sebastián Vizcaíno Bay. All of this causes humidity changes and wraps the summits in fog that reaches up to 600 or 700 meters during the night. Its condensation falls on the vegetation and in effect increases the underground water supply.

During his studies of Cedros, Des Lauriers (2006; 2009) found a Clovis spearhead and other archaeological remains which led him to conclude that the Americas might have been populated by sea, simultaneous with the Bering migrations. The author points out that the bathymetric curve closest to the islands of Cedros and Natividad might indicate that both were part of the peninsula during the late Pleistocene and early Holocene (Des Lauriers, 2006, p. 259). They are currently located 23 and 16 km away from Punta Eugenia, Baja California.

The Spaniards' first contact with Cedros occurred in 1540, the year in which Hernán Cortés sent an expedition led by Francisco de Ulloa with the aim of "discovering" new lands north of the Californias. The results of that expedition allowed them to define California as a peninsula and not an island, since they sailed along its coast from the mouth of the Colorado River to Cedros. However, the idea that California was an island persisted even among some cartographers well into the 18th century. León-Portilla (2000, p. 136) mentions that the island of Cedros was first described shortly after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, "while many other mainland places in New Spain remained unknown".

Francisco Preciado asserts that Ulloa named the island "Cedros" (Cedars) after its arboreal vegetation (in León-Portilla, 2000, pp. 138-139),

And when we were getting closer, we saw a large hill covered with beautiful trees as big as the trees and cypresses in Castilla. On this island we found large game footprints and rabbits, and we saw a piece of pine wood, from which we deduced that there must be many pines in that country ... On Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, which was the twentieth of that month of January, we sailed with weak and adverse winds, and finally we arrived almost at the very end of the island, named Island of Cedars because there is, on its mountains, a forest of very tall cedars, as is the nature of such trees.

The trees seen on the north point of the island are pines (*Pinus binnata* var. *cedrosensis*<sup>9</sup>), and not the kind of tree known by the Spaniards as cedar (*Juniperus oxycedrus*). Among the species identified and classified on the island, two belong to the cedar family: an endemic bush (*Quercus cedrosensis*) and a tree locally known as huata (*Juniperus californica*) (Osorio, 1948, p. 345; Cota, 1988, p. 36). According to Jordán (1987: 202-203), the portions of forest on Cedros do not have a counterpart on the central part of Baja California because they might be remnants from a time before the geological immersions, a time when there might have been different biogeographic conditions, and the island might have kept its endemic vegetation due to “its isolation and its sea walls”.

The toponym of Isla de Cedros underwent some fleeting changes which are recorded on maps and in chronicles. On some 16th century maps it is labeled “Isla del Riparo” (“Stopover Island”)<sup>10</sup>, because Ulloa stopped (“hizo un reparo”) on it and the expedition’s main pilot, Francisco Preciado, gave it that name (Barrera, 1992, pp. 228-229). However, it is not specified whether the Spanish word “reparo” refers to repairs made to a ship or simply to a stop during the journey.

The island was renamed by other explorers of the region, such as Sebastián Vizcaíno, who, during his 1602 journey along the Baja California shores, called it “Cerros” (Hills) due to its topography, which features a great number of hills and mountains of various hues and heights (Osorio, 1948, pp. 327, 385; Barrera, 1992, p. 238). The names “Cedros” and “Cerros” were used to refer to the island in various viceregal and foreign maps in the 18th century. From 19th century maps to the present, “Cedros” has been its most commonly used name.

In 1732, the Italian Jesuit Sigismundo Taraval, a missionary who settled near San Ignacio (present day Baja California Sur), described some of the customs practised by the ethnic group that inhabited the island of Amalguá, “Island of Fogs” (now known as Cedros) and the neighboring Aselguá, “Island of Birds” (present day Natividad). He renamed Cedros as Trinidad (Trinity) due to the fact that it had three capes, three mounts, three bays and three towns (Mathes, 1989, p. 408).<sup>11</sup> Taraval also referred to the insular cluster formed by Cedros, Natividad and San Benito as “Islas de los Dolores” (Islands of the Sorrows), although it is worth noting that two centuries prior, Ulloa had called this same archipelago<sup>12</sup> “Islas de San Esteban” (Islands of St. Stephen) (Osorio, 1948, p. 382; León-Portilla, 2000, p. 140).

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<sup>9</sup> “Explorer of Mexican species” <http://bios.conabio.gob.mx/especies/6067140>

<sup>10</sup> The sixteenth century maps in which it is designated as Isla del Riparo are: Domingo del Castillo, 1541; Battista Agnese, 1542; Sebastian Cabot, 1544; and Medici-Danti, 1564.

<sup>11</sup> Coincidentally, *Trinidad* was the name of the vessel Francisco de Ulloa captained when he discovered Cedros in January of 1540.

<sup>12</sup> The islands of San Benito, Cedros, and Natividad have not been designated as an archipelago in recent times, even though they have common geological substrata and biogeography. As pointed out by Arrault (2005, p. 319), the geographical concept of the archipelago implies a cluster with coherence in its discontinuity.

In 1884, the engineers Denton, Quintero and Niess mapped Cedros at the request of Luis Huller and Co., who had a license on the island. On this map, they pointed out and named the Cordillera de la Independencia and the Sierra de las Cabras in the west, and the Sierra de la Amistad and Sierra Lugarda at the centre of the island; less important hills were assigned the names of Monte Lerdo de Tejada, Monte Romero Rubio, Monte Morelos and Monte Zaragoza, while the two major mountains, now known as Pico Gill and Cerro Cedros or Cerro Cenizo, are marked as Monte Hidalgo and Monte Juárez, respectively (Reyes, 1992, p. 272d). This is the first known map in which inland and shore toponymy are indicated, although those names are no longer in use.

The island's contemporary inhabitants call it "El Piedrón" (The Big Rock). This name has become widespread among islanders and those who have migrated to other cities in the peninsula, such as Ensenada, the seat of municipal government to which the island is delegated, located 445 km to the northwest. [Table 3](#) shows a synthesis of the different names this Mexican island has had over the years.

**Table 3: Evolution of the toponymy of Cedros.**

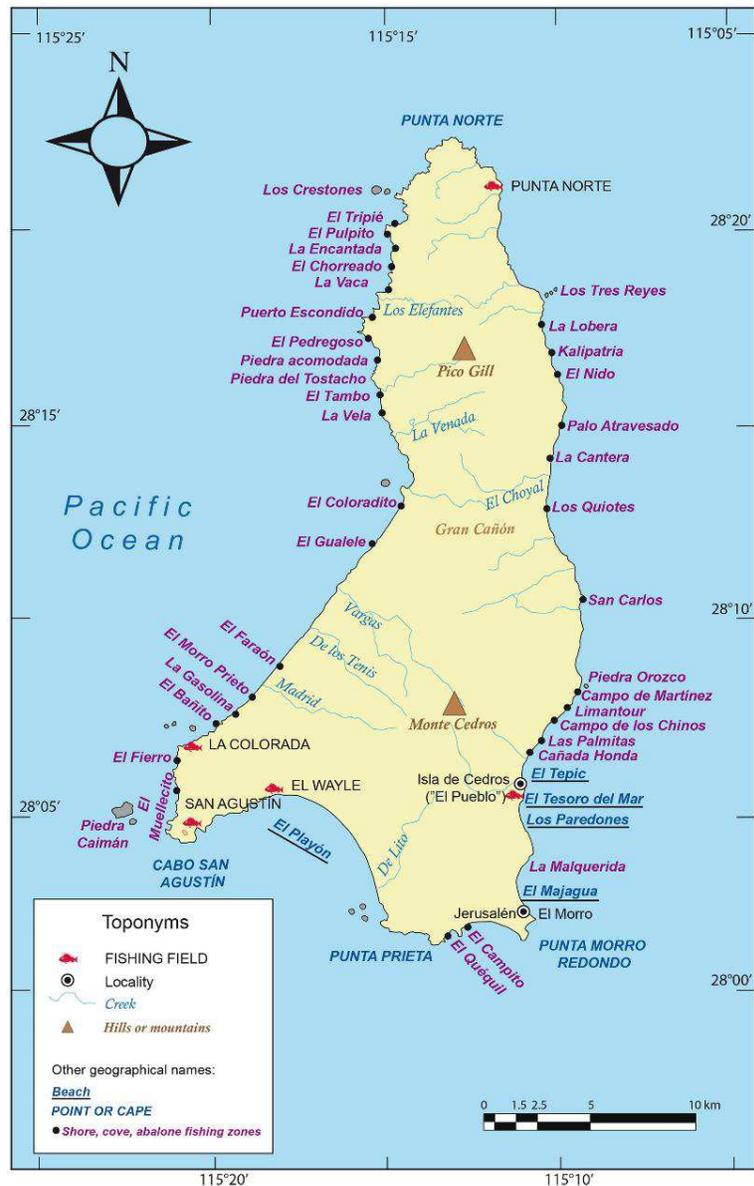
Date	Name of the island	Who assigned the toponym
Before 1540	Huamalhuá ("Island of Fogs")	Native population (Cochimí)
1540	Isla de Cedros ("Island of Cedars")	Francisco de Ulloa
16th century maps	Isla del Riparo ("Stopover Island")	Francisco Preciado
1602	Isla de Cerros ("Island of Hills")	Sebastián Vizcaíno
1732	Isla Trinidad ("Trinity Island")	Sigismundo Taraval
18th century to present	Isla de Cedros <i>or</i> Isla Cedros	Official cartography
20th and 21st centuries	El Piedrón ("The Big Rock")	Contemporary natives

In Cedros, various toponyms are used to designate fishing fields, beaches, lobster and abalone fishing zones, coastal features, creeks, hills and mountains. In 2009, as part of a dissertation (Baxin, 2010), a map of the island was generated through fieldwork, including most of the toponyms found using the techniques of social cartography, which is common in cultural geography. Around 70 toponyms were registered, contrasting with around ten toponyms recorded in official maps by the National Institute for Geography and Statistics (INEGI, 1998) ([Figure 2](#)).

Cedros has two towns. The first is on the east coast, and its inhabitants live off fishing. This town is called "Isla de Cedros", after the island itself. It is locally known as "el pueblo", "the town". The second town is El Morro ("The Mound"), on the southeast point, inhabited since 1965; there live the workers from the company Exportadora de Sal, S.A. (ESSA). The town's name was taken from Morro Redondo ("Round Mound"), which is "the highest of three round hillocks that stand out perfectly in the middle of a flat surface ... properly a three-meter high rocky cliff" (Osorio, 1948, p. 322). El Morro's western borough is called Jerusalén ("Jerusalem"). An islander commented in a 2009 interview: "when the housing for the ESSA workers was being built, people said we were being promised a New Jerusalem, and the name stuck, even though its official name is "21 de Octubre" in honour of the union's anniversary; that name is little known among the population" (testimony by Santos de la Toba, June 29 2009, in Baxin, 2010, p. 216).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Jerusalén and 21 de Octubre are instances of a geographical name with both symbolic and anecdotal meaning.

**Figure 2:** The island of Cedros and some of its toponyms.



Source: Map created by the authors.

In the fishing fields, the names of coastal features are repeated. Such is the case of San Agustín, named after a cape thus named by Vizcaíno during his 1602 expedition (Osorio, 1948, p. 383). The La Colorada (“The Red One”) fishing field, on the other hand, owes its name to the reddish hue of the rocks: a toponym derived from the landscape. As for the Wayle (or Guayle) fishing field, the origin of its name is unknown, although an informant from the island states that it comes from the name of a Greek man who used to work there (Baxin, 2010, p. 216). However, Osorio (1948, p. 325) had already pointed out a large rock called Piedra del Guayle (“Guayle Rock”), in the middle section of the San Agustín cove.

Other names of uncertain origin were gathered by the author during his 2009 field work; for instance, Majagua beach, which according to some islanders is of Cochimí origin. However, according to the Royal Spanish Academy<sup>14</sup>, it is the name of a tree that abounds in Cuba, but according to Maldonado (1997, p. 43) the word comes from the Nahuatl *maxahuatl*, a tree bark that strips are obtained for use as ropes, so we do not know when or why it was adopted in Cedros.

### Comparison between the toponymy of Cedros and the western shore of Baja California

Comparing the geographical names of the west coast of Baja California with those of the island of Cedros, we can observe similarities and differences in the toponymical classification (Table 4), which are shown below.

**Table 4: Representative toponyms from the island of Cedros and from the west coast of the Baja California peninsula**

Toponym classification		Cedros	Baja California
Anthroponym	From geographical features	San Carlos, Piedra Orozco, Campo de Martínez, Limantour, Arroyo de Lito, Arroyo Madrid, Arroyo Vargas	Punta San Miguel, Eréndira, Cabo Colonet (Colnet), Cabo San Quintín, Morro Santo Domingo, Desierto Vizcaíno, Bahía Sebastián Vizcaíno, Punta Eugenia, Bahía San Cristóbal, Bahía San Hipólito, Laguna de San Ignacio, Bahía Magdalena
	Townships and/or fishing fields	San Agustín, El Wayle	Tijuana, Primo Tapia, Vicente Guerrero, Venustiano Carranza, Santa Rosalita, Villa Jesús María, San José de Gracia, Adolfo López Mateos, San Carlos, Puerto Cortés, Plutarco Elías Calles, Cabo San Lucas
Derived from natural or cultural landscape	From geographical features	La Lobera (Wolf's Den), Palo Atravesado (Crossed Stick), La Cantera (The Quarry), Los Quiotes (Agave Flowers), Gran Cañón (Great Canyon), Las Palmitas (Little Palm Trees), Cañada Honda (Deep Ravine), Los Paredones (Walls), Morro Redondo (Round Mound), Punta Prieta (Dark Point), El Playón (Big Beach), Piedra Caimán (Caiman Rock), El Morro Prieto (Dark Mound), El Coloradito (Little Red One), Arroyo La Venada (Doe Creek), Piedra Acomodada (Well-Placed Rock), El Pedregoso (The Rocky One), Puerto Escondido (Hidden Port), El Pulpito (Little Octopus), Los Elefantes (Elephants)	Punta Baja (Low Point), Punta Cono (Cone Point), Bahía de Tortugas (Turtle Bay), Punta Prieta (Dark Point), Estero La Bocana (Estuary), Islas Pelícanos (Pelican Islands), Bahía Ballenas (Whale Bay), Punta Pequeña (Little Point)

<sup>14</sup> See relevant entry in online dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy: <http://dle.rae.es/?id=Nx6REoh>

	<b>Townships and/or fishing fields</b>	Punta Norte (North Point), El Morro (The Mound), La Colorada (The Red One)	Ensenada (Cove), Puerto Canoas (Canoe Port), Bahía de Tortugas (Turtle Bay), Los Lentiscos (Lentisco Bushes), La Ballena (The Whale), La Poza Grande (Big Pool), Cabo Redondo (Round Cape), El Conejo (The Rabbit)
<b>Other names (with symbolic, eulogistic, anecdotic or unknown meaning)</b>	<b>From geographical features</b>	Los Tres Reyes (Three Kings), El Tesoro del Mar (Sea Treasure), El Tepic (The <i>Tepic</i> ), La Malquerida (Unloved Woman), Kalipatria*, Campo de los Chinos (Chinese Field), El Majagua, El Quéquil (Pancake), El Muellecito (Little Dock), El Fierro (The Iron), El Bañito (Little Bath), La Gasolina (Gasoline), El Faraón (Pharaoh), Arroyo de Los Tenis (Tennis Shoe Creek), El Gualele*, La Vela (Candle), El Tambo (Barrel), Piedra del Tostacho (Tostacho Rock)*, La Vaca (Cow), El Chorreado (Dripping One), La Encantada (Haunted One), El Tripié (Tripod), Los Crestones (Big Crests)	Punta Salsipuedes (Point Get-Out-If-You-Can), Bahía Todos Santos (All Saints Bay), Bahía Rosario (Rosary Bay), Laguna Ojo de Liebre (Rabbit's Eye Lagoon), Punta Falsa (False Point), Bahía Asunción (Assumption Bay), Punta Abreojos (Eye-Opener Point), Punta el Descanso (Resting Point)
	<b>Townships and/or fishing fields</b>	Jerusalén	El Rosarito (Little Rosary), La Bufadora (Hissing One), Guerrero Negro (Black Warrior), Puerto Chale (Port <i>Chale</i> ), La Aguja (Needle), Candelaria (Candlemas)

\*Names of unknown origin

- In Cedros, the names derived from the landscape and those with a symbolic, eulogistic, and anecdotic sense prevail over anthroponyms. This situation reflects the appropriation of space practiced by the contemporary inhabitants of the island. While the names themselves do not indicate the presence of water, they are related to relief features (Gran Cañón, “Great Canyon”; or El Pedregoso, “The Rocky One”), vegetation (Los Quiotes, “The Agave Flowers”; or Las Palmitas “The Little Palm Trees”) and fauna (La Lobera, “Wolf’s Den”; Arroyo la Venada, “Doe Creek”; El Pulpito, “The Little Octopus”; and Los Elefantes “The Elephants”<sup>15</sup>). These names, as well as those colloquially assigned by fishermen and divers to coastal features, are a reflection of the resources found on insular territory. Although limited in number, they have been assigned by the island’s inhabitants to distinguish places.

- In the western part of the Baja California peninsula, names derived from the landscape usually refer to natural elements: water (Poza Grande, “Big Pool”), relief features (Cabo Redondo, “Round Cape”, and Punta Prieta, “Dark Point”), vegetation (Los Lentiscos<sup>16</sup>), and land and sea animals from the region (rabbits, pelicans, turtles, whales).

<sup>15</sup> As in the case of place names alluding to “wolves” (sea lions), this name refers to sea elephants (*Mirounga angustirostris*). Both are mammal species common in certain areas in the north of the island.

<sup>16</sup> An evergreen bush with a woody stem of reddish, hard and aromatic wood.

- In Cedros there are more anecdotal names than on the peninsula, although many of them are not official but assigned by fishermen and divers to areas of the shore where fishing resources abound, especially abalone and lobster. Most of these toponyms do not appear in official maps, but have been collected during field work (2009) and serve as references for diving and fishing activities.

- The toponym Punta Prieta is the only one used both on the peninsula and on the island. But, there is a case worth noting that refers to the presence of Asian fishermen. The word “chale” refers to the Chinese and Japanese immigrants who arrived in northwestern Mexico in the first third of the 20th century (Velázquez, 2006: 89-90). Their main occupation was diving for abalones. References to them can be found in the toponyms Puerto Chale (western Baja California) and Campo de los Chinos (“Chinese Camp”, western shore of Cedros).

- Some toponyms come from ship names. In Baja California Sur there is Guerrero Negro, a township that is home to the second largest salt mine in the world. The name comes from the ship “The Black Warrior”, which ran aground just off the Ojo de Liebre lagoon in 1858. On Cedros, the names of beaches such as El Tesoro del Mar (“Treasure of the Sea”) and El Tepic<sup>17</sup> come from ships wrecked in the island’s vicinity, though the precise dates of such shipwrecks are unknown.

## **Conclusion**

Mexico’s cultural wealth residing in its indigenous languages is undeniable. However, several of these languages have become extinct, and others might follow. Hence the importance of studying the toponyms given by the original inhabitants to elements of their space, be they placenames or geographical accidents. Thus, it is useful to know whether the toponyms have disappeared, remain, or have been modified through cultural fusion, as part of the human footprints that several cultural groups have left on the land, reflecting the history, organization and transformation of geographical space.

Much work remains to be done regarding the study of the origin and evolution of geographical names in continental Mexico, but even more awaits us regarding the toponymy of Mexican islands. Of 4,111 islands registered in Mexico, only 10% have an established name, and of these, only one in ten is inhabited. Unlike continental toponymy, Mexican island toponymy is rich in Spanish names, poor in indigenous names, and completely lacking in composite toponyms combining indigenous and Spanish words.

As we have argued in this article, the Mexican island of Cedros is suitable as a case study in toponymic analysis, because its habitation spans all of Mexico’s historic eras: pre-Columbian, viceregal, modern and contemporary. The toponymy of Cedros reveals a vast wealth in its temporal and geographical origins, and it illustrates the relations between the landscape and the different societies that have occupied it in the last six centuries. Huamalhuá (Island of Fogs) is one of the few Cochimí names which have been recovered from Jesuit chronicles. Although it is not the island’s official name and it was forgotten during the viceregal era, along with the original inhabitants, it is relevant insofar as it contains a description of the island landscape pertaining to a meteorological event: the presence of fog.

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<sup>17</sup> Tepic is the name of the capital of the state of Nayarit, located at 21°30'56" N and 104°53'41" W. This toponym is of Nahuatl origin; it comes from *Tetl*, stone, and *picqui*, solid object. This is: “Place of solid rocks”.

The toponym “Cedros”, which remains in official use to this day, served to alert the explorers to the presence of plant life, although the island is predominantly arid nowadays. Later names, assigned in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Riparo, Cerros and Trinidad, have only survived in a few chronicles and maps, and were never official. El Piedrón, in turn, an alonym<sup>18</sup> or local name established by contemporary inhabitants, refers to the considerable dimensions of a rocky island that stands out in the middle region of Baja California. It is a name derived from the inhabitants’ perception and the nostalgia of emigrants.

In Cedros, toponyms are significant because they are signs of the description of the landscape, its appropriation or occupation by explorers, chroniclers and intermittent or permanent inhabitants. Most placenames are anecdotal in nature or pertain to the natural features and resources of the island, particularly its shores, these names designate fishing fields, diving areas and various geographical accidents. Many of these names have not yet been recognized in official maps. Studies about such island and insular toponymies would enrich the linguistic, historical and geographical information at our disposal, and reinforce the knowledge of the natural and cultural diversity of insular spaces as significant, not marginal, points in maps.

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<sup>18</sup> Names of local origin, parallel to the official name (Giraut & Houssay, 2008: 98).

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