

ECAB Village, Port and Province

The place name **Ecab** actually refers to three different entities: a village, a port and a province. Etymologically the name **Ecab** is composed of two parts: **e** = knife edge, sharp point,¹ and **cab** = land,² thus making the meaning of **ecab** being a "sharp point of land".³ In the vocabularies the word **ni cab**⁴ is given as a synonym. However, etymologically the term **ni cab** is composed of **ni** = nose, point⁵ and **cab**, thus making the meaning of **ni cab** being a "point of land".⁶ In cases where the actual place is mentioned the word **cab** is usually omitted and the place name is positioned in its place: Ni Chupte, Ni Chilib, Ni Luth, Ni Mun, Ni Tun, Ni Tun Chauay, Ni Tun Jala, Ni Zuuc.

While both **ecab** and **ni cab** are glossed in the vocabularies as "cabo" or cape in English, considering the etymology of the two terms it would seem that there is a significant difference between the two. The term **ni cab** would appear to mean a protrusion of land into the sea in general and indeed the above mentioned capes show no particular configuration, from gradual to more abrupt protrusions into the sea. However, the term **ecab** would seem to indicate a certain sharpness to the point of land. That fact, combined with the fact that in the colonial Mayan literature there appears to be only one **Ecab** would suggest that there is something suggestive of this place name.

The location of the Village of Ecab⁷

As for the location of the village of Ecab itself: one can not appreciate the origin of its name from such things as aerial maps. However, taking a launch from Isla Mujeres or Cancun to Cabo Catoche the reason for the name quickly becomes apparent as one crosses over from the waters of the Caribbean Sea to those of the Gulf of Mexico at the northern end of Isla Blanca. First noticeable thing is that one goes from the rough waves of the Caribbean to the relatively flat water of the Gulf almost as if by magic despite the trade wind which bring

¹ CMM: E: punta como de alfiler, aguja de espinos y cosas assi. ¶ ye puo, ye alfiler, &: punta de aguja, de alfiler, ettz. / E: filo o corte de cuchillo, espada, hacha, &.

² CMM: Cab: el mundo. / Cab: pueblo o region.

³ CMM: E cab: cabo de tierra en la mar. ¶ Item: vn puerto de mar en esta tierra.

⁴ DMM/DESF: Cabo de tierra en la mar: ni cab; ecab.

⁵ While the word **ni** generally means "nose", by extension it also means point, extremity. It is often used in conjunction with the name of objects: **ni kab** - finger; **ni oc** - toe; **ni ak** - tip of the tongue; **ni uitz** - crest of the hill; **ni che** - branch. See CMM: Nij: narizes de hombre y de qualquier animal. ¶ Item: oçico de caualllo, perro, puerco, o de otro animal assi. ¶ Item: la punta de qualquier cosa.

⁶ CMM; Ni cab: altillo, cerrillo, o montecillo; tierra asi altilla, buen para fundar colmenares. ¶ Item: cabo de tierra en la mar como promontorio.

⁷ Over the years researchers have been misplacing the location of Ecab, locating it not too far east of C'otoch. However, Landa writes: "Que la isla de las mugeres esta XIII leguas abaxo de la punta de Cotoch y a II leguas de tierra enfrente de Ekab." Tozzer translates this as follows: "The Isla de Las Mujeres lies thirteen leagues below Cape Cotoch, and eleven leagues from the main land, opposite Ekab." However, because of the bar over the number II it is clearly the roman numeral II and not the arabic number 11. For confirmation of this see the legend on Map 2 which reads: "La isla de mugeres esta XIII o XIII baxo de punta de cotoch, apartada de tierra como dos leguas".

waves in from the east. It must have been a great relief to those traveling in the Mayan trading canoes when they reached the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Aside from this, there is a visual difference in the water, with the Caribbean water being a clearer blue.

As stated above, the name Ecab means “sharp point of land”, and indeed there was a spit of beach jutting out northward from Isla Blanca towards the island of Contoy which had a very sharp point to it. This was caused by a strong Caribbean current called the Yucatan Current running northwards past the beach on Isla Blanca carrying with it sand and shell.⁸ The Gulf of Mexico at this point has very little current and so acts as a buffer zone in which the sand and shell carried by the Yucatan Current can settle out. The result is quite striking and can really only be appreciated on the water.

As a historical note: It is here that the famed prophet Chilam Balam from the city-state of Mani built a house to await the return of the Spanish. This apparently happened in or before a year 8 Muluc, one of which began on July 8, 1510.⁹ It should be noted that Landa locates Ecab on the mainland 2 leagues, or approximately 11 km from Isla de Mujeres.¹⁰ That would place it on Isla Blanca.

The port of Ecab

Behind the spit of land which most probably the actual location of Ecab there is a fairly sizable bay which is called today Puerto Abrigo (Port of Refuge) by the local fishermen. At the present the bay measures approximately 500 meters wide by 2 km. long, running north-south and separated from the Caribbean Sea by about 500 meters of land.¹¹ While this port is of little significance today in the age of powered water craft, one can imagine in the days of Mayan trading canoes this would have been an important way-stop especially for those who were going from west to east. If one was coming from the west and the Caribbean Sea was particularly rough then of course one would put in on the lee shore of the spit of land

⁸ In current measurements taken back in the 1980's it was found that the Yucatan Current running past Isla Blanca was about 1.8 knots and that the current was somewhat stronger off the point of land known as Ni Zuuc where it was running about 2 knots.

⁹ In the colonial Mayan texts there is the mention of a gathering of 6 Mayan priest at the house of Chilam Balam, but no date given. In a separate text three of the same priest talk about returning to Uxmal from a trip to Bacalar (Bak Halal in Mayan) in a year 8 Muluc. One could imagine that their journey was done in a canoe and thus they had to pass by the home of Chilam Balam at Ecab both coming and going.

¹⁰ Landa, p. 2r: Que la isla de las mugeres esta XIII leguas abaxo de la punta de Cotoch y a II leguas de tierra enfrente de Ekab.

¹¹ It should be mentioned that according the local fishermen, the northern end of this spit of land is now extending itself northward at the rate of about 50 to 100 meters a year, depending on the storms which blow through. It is thought that this recent rapid growth of Ecab is due to the rebuilding of beaches in the hotel zone on the island of Cancun which were destroyed by hurricane Wilma in 2005 and subsequent storms. As a result there is an increase in volume of material being carried northward by the Yucatan Current. And indeed, the visual structure of the Ecab has change substantially over the years. When I first saw Ecab in 2013 it had a very definite knife edge look to it. In 2018 I revisited the area and the spit of land had more of a dull or blunted knife edge. The fishermen's reports coincide with my observations for it appeared to me that the tip of Ecab has extended itself some 200 or 400 meters between 2013 and 2018. For aerial photographs, probably dating from 2014, see Figures 3, 4 and 6 in which one can see an intermediate stage of beach building. Figure 5 gives an outline of how I remember the Ecab being in 2013. For on-the-ground photos taken in 2018 see Figure 7 and 8 which show that the aerial photographs are now out-of-date.

to await better weather conditions. Judging from the way things are done on the roadways of Mexico today, there would have been a little cottage industry set up near the spit of land to cater to the needs of the trading canoes, principal amongst them being food services.

There are definite references to the Port of Ecab, called Hol Ha Ecab¹² in Mayan, in the colonial literature. The Calepino Maya de Motul mentions that the name Ecab also refers to "a seaport of this land."¹³ The other mentions are to be found on pages 16-17 of the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel.¹⁴

The Province of Ecab

From Landa we also know that the place name of Ecab also referred to a province.¹⁵ In Roys' "Political Geography of Yucatan Maya" there is a map showing a very extensive area belonging to the province of Ecab beginning just south of Tulum and continuing up the eastern coast and around onto the northern coast with its western most limit being about where the demarcation between the states of Yucatan and Quintana Roo exits on the coast is today.¹⁶ There is also a map showing all of the provinces of the Peninsula of Yucatan including that of Ecab.^{17 18}

¹² **Hol Ha**: literally "water hole", from **hol** = hole and **ha** = water. Other words for "port" are hol tun, hol kaknab, hol pay, chi pay.

¹³ CMM: E cab: cabo de tierra en la mar. ¶ Item: vn puerto de mar en esta tierra.

¹⁴ Chumayel, p. 16: U kahlay katunoob yetel haaboob yax chuci u petenil Yucatan tumenel ɔuloob, zac uinicoob. Ichil bin Buluc Ahau Katun uchci u chuciob u Hol Ha Ecab. Ti lakin u taleloob ca ulob. (The history of the katuns and years when the Spanish, the white men, first captured the region of Yucatan. It was they say in 11 Ahau Katun (1512-1536) that they captured Port Ecab. They came from the east when they arrived.)

Chumayel, p. 17: tu yaabil uchci u kuchuloob tu Hol Ha Ecab tu cahal Nacom Balam tu yax chun u kinil u haabil u katunil Buluc Ahau Katun. (The year in which it happened that they arrived at Port Ecab, the village of Nacom Balam, was during the first days of the first year of 11 Ahau Katun. (11Ahau Katun began on July 7, 1512. This is two years after the meeting of the six priest mentioned above.))

¹⁵ Landa, p. 4v: de la provincia de Ekab de Cochuah, y la de Kupul estan sujeta a Valladolid

¹⁶ Figure 1: "Map 14, Provinces of Ecab and Cozumel"

¹⁷ Figure 2: "Map 1, Peninsula de Yucatan"

¹⁸ Note the placement of the province Chikin Chel on Map 1. From a couple of colonial sources this placement appears to be in error. **Chel** is the surname of a family of some importance, ranking, according to Landa, with the Cocom and Xiu families as the most important families in Yucatan. Their name is incorporated into the name of three provinces: Chikin Chel, Ah Kin Chel and Lakin Chel. Perhaps because of this there appears to be some confusion about the location of these provinces, especially Chikin Chel. According to Lizana* and Cogolludo,** Chikin Chel, which means "Western Chel", was located in the territory now known as Campeche. The province Ah Kin Chel is located around the towns of ɔilam (today Dzilam Gonzáles) and Holtun ɔilam (today Dzilam Puerto or Dzilam de Bravo). Lakin Chel, meaning "Eastern Chel" is located where many maps of the provinces of Yucatan locate Chikin Chel, i.e. along the inland waterway stretching from Hol Koben (today Rio Lagartos) to Hol Box. From this one could infer that the Chel family was involved in trade using the coastal waterways for their trade routes. The word **chel** is also the name of the local jay bird, Cyanocitta yucatanica.

* Lizana, 1633-78v: "...la gente que tocava a la Prouincia de Campeche, que se llamauan los ChiKincheles, y assi se llaman oy los del Territorio de Campeche entre los naturales,..."

** Cogolludo, 1842-346: ... a provincia de Campeche, llamadas de los naturales los Chikin Cheles, ..."

There is some question about the size of the population in the province of Ecab at the time of contact. Landa states before the coming of the Spanish that after twenty years of abundance and good health the population multiplied so that the whole land appeared to be but one town.¹⁹ While this statement does not apply specifically to the province of Ecab, judging by the number of structures both pre-contact and post-contact which are to be found in the areas which are on higher ground, there must have been a significant population before the Spanish introduced the various diseases which decimated the Mayan population.²⁰ Roys writes: "We know little about the province of Ecab, because the population decreased very rapidly during the first two decades of the Colonial period. Indeed, the 1582 catalog of churches names only five towns in this area. . . . None of them was large at this time and some were very small."²¹

On page 55 of "Maya History and Religion" J.E.S. Thompson has the following commentary:

"The northeastern tip of Yucatan has enjoyed a reputation for being unhealthy from colonial into modern times. In fact, it was very largely depopulated from the seventeenth century onward. Scholes and Roys (1948:324) cite the histories of two towns in that region. Chauaca was estimated to have had 3,000 men in 1528; in 1543 there were 600 to 700 citizens; the tax roll of 1549 lists 200 tributaries; by 1579 only twenty families remained, The figures for nearby Sinsimato were: approximately 600 men at the Conquest, 90 tributaries in 1549, and 8 in 1579 (a tributary was an adult man of working age). Both places have long since ceased to exist. This is an area containing much swamp and coastal lagoons. The population of these two towns fell by over 90 per cent in fifty years.

"Conil, a port on the coast, was host, doubtless unwillingly, to the conqueror Montejo for two months in 1528. It was said to have held five thousand houses. This may be an exaggeration, but the Spaniards were certainly there long enough to have a good idea of its extent. Possibly, too, these were multiple-family houses. Three thousand adult men should be an ultraconservative figure. The 1549 tax roll gives the number of tributaries as eighty. A drop of over 90 per cent in the population in twenty-one years is indicated. Conil lay in the province of Ecab. ... The province of Ecab was certainly mosquito-infested, as the writings of Stephens make clear, and Shattuck (1933:165, 168) reported malaria prevalent."

With the construction of the hotel zone originally on the island of Cancun but now all the way down to Tulum all this has changed and once again the words of Landa would ring true, except that today the buildings which abound are built for the gods of commerce.

¹⁹ Landa 7v: Que estas gentes tuieron mas de XX años de abundancia y de salud y se multiplicaron tanto que toda la tierra parecia vn pueblo, y que entonces se labrarõ los templos en tanta muchedumbre como se vea oy en dia por todas partes, y que atravesando los montes se vean entre las arboledas asientos de casas y edificios labrados a maravilla.

²⁰ Note that I mention "on higher ground". A large portion of northern Ecab province is swamp land to varying degrees and the mosquito population is something to behold in these areas.

²¹ Roys, "The Political Geography of the Yucatan Maya" (1957: p. 146).

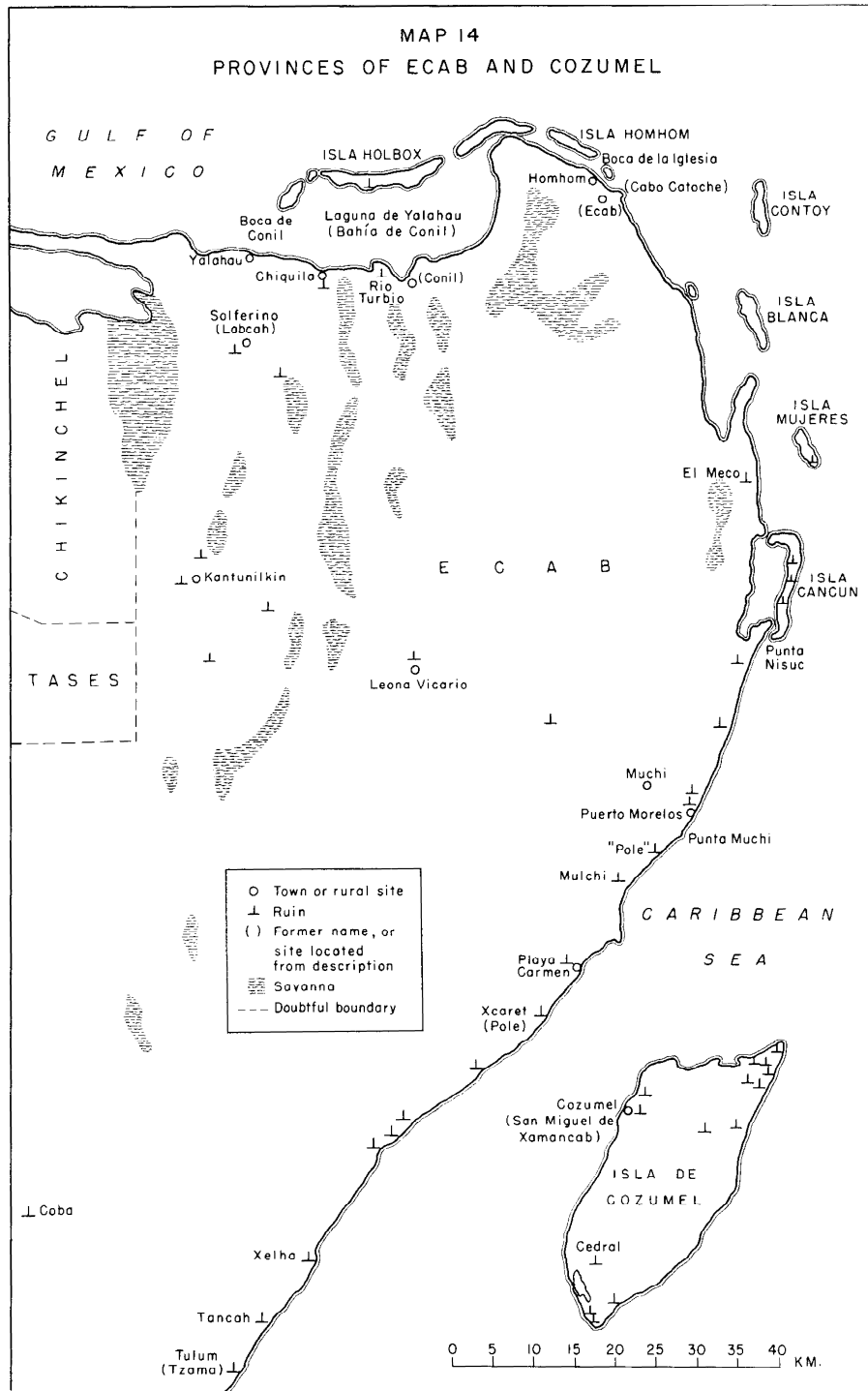


Figure 1: "Map 14, Provinces of Ecab and Cozumel"

In this map Roys shows that the village of Ecab is located a bit inland from Cabo Catoche. This is incorrect since Cabo Catoche is the northern most point of the barrier islands as shown in Map 1 given below. Also worthy of note is that Isla Blanca is shown here as an island. Today however it is attached the peninsula by a narrow strip of beach. From time to time that narrow beach is breached during hurricanes, making circumnavigation of the island possible, but eventually the breach is closed in again. The most recent breach was cause by hurricane Wilma in October, 2005 but the breach has since filled in.



Figure 2: "Map 1, Peninsula de Yucatan"

Note that on this map Roys has positioned the village of Ecab roughly in the area which is now known locally as Boca Iglesia. There is in fact an entrance (boca) on the Gulf of Mexico shore here which leads into a mangrove swamp. On the far side of the swamp, some 200 meters from the shore, there is a church built in the early colonial style, meaning that there is an stone arch covering the area where the priests held their rites, but that where the congregation sat there was a thatched roof covering which has long since disappeared. The design is very similar to that to be seen at Dzibilchaltun. There is also about 50 meters to the northeast a structure which might have served as the living quarters for the officiating priest. In Google Maps the coordinates are 21.518144, -86.984703.



Figure 3: Aerial photo of Isla Blanca
with Ecab forming a Puerto Abrigo along the eastern side.
This and the following three photos appear to have been taken in about 2014.



Figure 4: A closer aerial view of Ecab showing the various striations caused by the sand and shell brought up the coast by the Yucatan Current running northward along the eastern coast of Ecab.

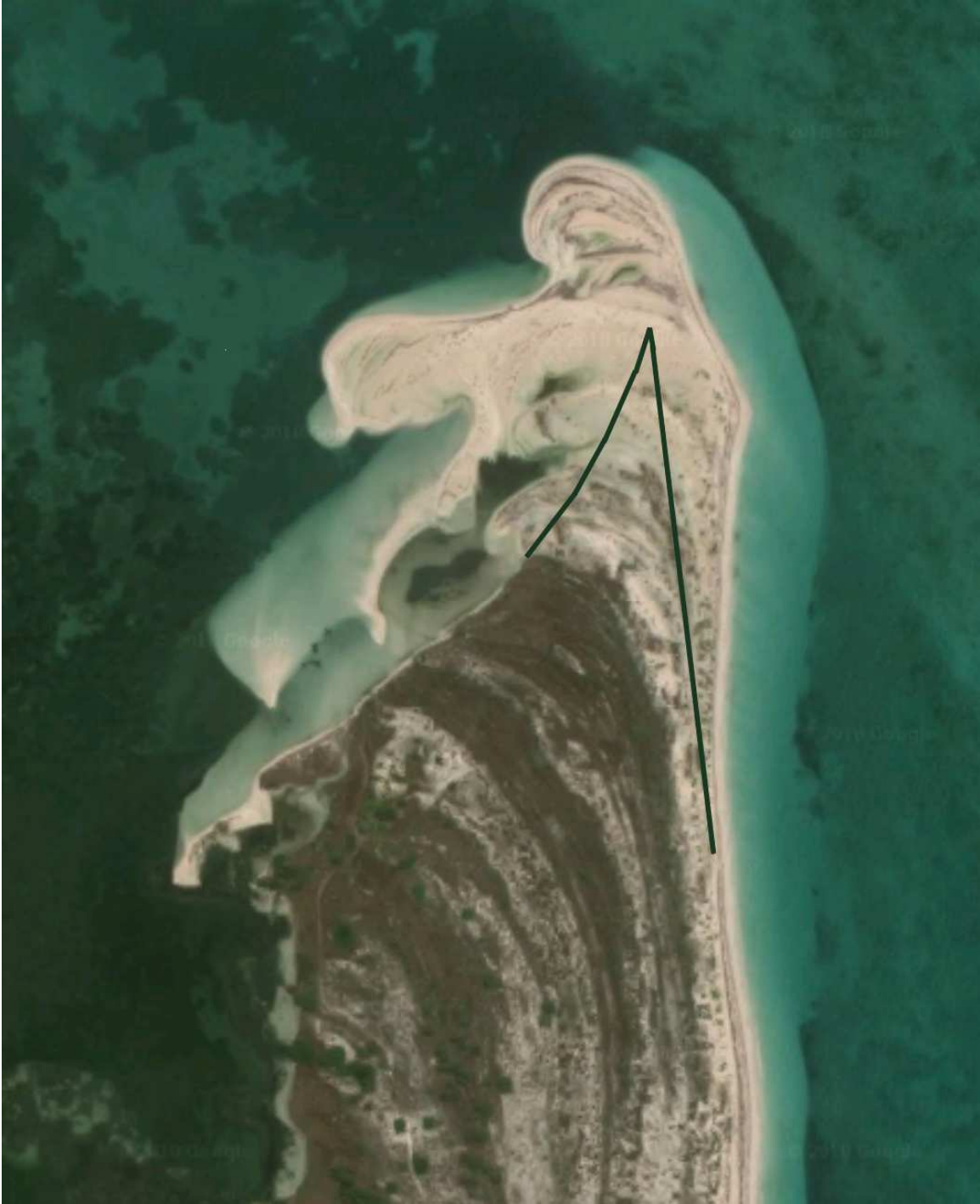


Figure 5: An outline of how I remember Ecab being in 2013.



Figure 6: A closer view of the accumulation of sand and shell.



Figure 7: This 2018 photo was taken while standing in the water at the very end of the above-water accumulation of sand and shell. Note that now the spit of land no longer has the sharp blade-like quality seen in 2013 as mentioned in the text.



Figure 8: This 2018 photo was taken a few meters south of the end of the above-water accumulation of sand and shell shown in Figure 7 to show the further extension of the sand bar. The below-water accumulation is not visible in the 2014 aerial photos.