

Chapter One: Introduction

OVERVIEW

Belize is a developing country possessing a rich tapestry of natural and cultural resources. Like many nations around the globe it confronts significant dilemmas posed at the interface of development and conservation. Local, national and international non-governmental organizations actively pursue conservation objectives through the modification of land use, land purchases, and the creation of public and private reserves. Meanwhile, deficits in financial and human resources force the Government of Belize to experiment with innovative partnerships with individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Under these arrangements, various co-management arrangements introduce different levels of management attention to otherwise neglected yet legally declared protected lands. At the same time, indigenous communities struggle to maintain and promote their traditional livelihoods and practices. While protecting their livelihoods and cultural resources, local people vigorously pursue title to their use of the areas in which they dwell. Land use decisions also involve private interests in sectors such as, tourism, timber, mineral extraction, agriculture, fishing, and shrimp farming. These industries contribute significantly to the economy of Belize. All groups contribute to the complexity of the social landscape in Belize and create challenges for a reconciliation of ecological sustainability and human development.

The challenge in Belize, as elsewhere throughout the world, is finding ways to balance the sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting objectives of diverse social processes and ecological systems. The outcomes of this balancing act are expressed in the day-to-day actions of individuals and the evolving contexts in which they make decisions. The struggles and accomplishments of many individuals and organizations in Belize provide tremendous insights into the answer to the question of how to balance environmental and social goals.

In the past, protected area decision-making in Belize has tended to take a top-down approach that does not incorporate the interests and needs of a diverse array of stakeholders¹ (PFB 1996). Furthermore, the absence of a national management authority or national policy for Belize's protected areas system results in the lack of effective and cohesive management plans. Even where management plans do exist, interaction among the organizations charged with implementing the plans is characterized by inadequate information sharing, communication, collective problem solving, and decision-making. This situation fragments and isolates mutual conservation concerns and initiatives. Given limited financial and human resources for protected area management and enforcement, meaningful public involvement and multi-stakeholder collaboration may be essential for successful implementation of policy and plans both at a macro and micro level. A substantial body of literature suggests that increasing collaboration among agencies and involvement of community members and additional constituents in protected area planning results in improved on-the-ground management (Childers 1994; Derman 1995; Gibson and Marks 1995; Pinkerton 1989; McNeely and Pitt 1985; Western et al. 1994; White et al. 1994). Collaboration for natural resource management indicates diverse arrangements in which multiple stakeholders voluntarily pool resources, information, and responsibility for collectively achieving shared goals (Gray 1989; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Additionally, collaboration can facilitate landscape-scale strategies rather than approaches that prioritize individual species regardless of their communities and larger-scale ecosystem processes that occur across institutional and political boundaries (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000).

The current lack of mutual understanding and agreement on protected area goals, the paucity of information exchange, and the significant overlap in responsibilities strains limited human and financial resources available for protected areas management in Belize. The success of a national protected area system – including its relationship to coexisting human populations and the resulting conservation of species and habitat – stands or falls on the adaptive management of the sites of which the protected area system is comprised. While the dangers of over-centralized management regimes are well known (Orlove 2002; Peluso 1992; Scott 1998; Wilshusen et al. 2002), a growing body of evidence substantiates that successful conservation management can be best enacted if the relevant stakeholders coordinate their

efforts as part of a collaborative arrangement (Dukes and Firehock 2001; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND APPROACH

This project seeks to identify constraints, facilitating factors, and opportunities to increase interaction among policymakers, resource-dependent communities, conservation groups, developers, and other stakeholders in protected area management in Belize. It is the researchers' assumption that conservation is integral to human development. As such, conservation initiatives must address the cultural, social, economic, organizational, political, and ecological context in which these initiatives occur without exacerbating inequalities among the various actors. Failing to accommodate such issues will result in the eventual degradation of both natural ecosystems and corresponding environments in which people live (Wilshusen et al. 2002).

Six graduate students of the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment focused their research in a distinctive area of Belize – the Toledo District – in an effort to identify key considerations for the possibility of developing collaborative arrangements within a multi-ecosystem and culturally diverse context. The Toledo District in Southern Belize, comprised of multiple watersheds draining into the Gulf of Honduras, contains a broad array of habitats and ecosystems unique to Central America. Long-term conservation of these areas requires cooperation among communities, organizations, and agencies that interact with local resources. By posing questions formed through initial research with stakeholders and constituencies in Toledo, the project aims to yield insights for improving multi-stakeholder collaboration applicable for resource management throughout the Toledo District and locations with similar situations.

This study examined several examples of multi-stakeholder efforts to manage natural resources in the Toledo District. The project team conducted an intensive analysis of conservation and development initiatives in the District. To highlight the issues involved in collaborative efforts in the study area, this report focuses on four case studies. These case studies were analyzed to answer the following general questions:

- What issues are involved at the conservation/development interface in Belize?
- What challenges are confronted in addressing these issues?
- What ways do different groups approach these issues?
- What barriers impinge on effective collaboration?
- What factors facilitate aspects of collaboration when it has occurred?
- What lessons from these experiences can be gleaned about future opportunities for improved collaboration and how they might be harnessed?

The four case studies were selected both for their visibility and because they provide invaluable insight on constraints, opportunities, and lessons that might apply to future collaborative efforts in the Toledo District. As a whole, the cases present a wealth of experience and insights about the potential for and challenges to collaboration from some of the most outstanding examples of collaborative initiatives in Southern Belize. They encompass a range of geographical and temporal scales. More importantly, they provide examples of the range of types of collaboration in the area: from the interchange of communication among a few stakeholders to the full sharing of responsibility and authority among many actors. Aspects from the lessons learned from each case study can be applied to the whole of Southern Belize and beyond.

The first case study focuses on the evolution of a “Ridges to Reef” concept – the Maya Mountain Marine Area Transect (MMMAT) – into a multi-watershed conservation strategy. This story explains how the MMMAT represents an effort to confront the challenges posed by national development projects in Southern Belize. It also describes the involvement of the MMMAT’s main proponent – the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) – with two protected areas within the area. Through this description, the case analyzes the potential of the MMMAT concept to serve as a forum for promoting multi-stakeholder discussions and coordination in light of the events that have taken place over the past decade.

The second case describes the continued development of a collaborative initiative – the Toledo Watershed Association (TWA) – which was born out of the MMMAT concept. This story highlights the tendency among organizations to work with other organizations like themselves rather than across sectoral boundaries and reveals the potential shortcomings of such an approach. The TWA story also highlights the desire among NGOs to define and defend organizational turf. Organizations in Toledo exhibit reluctance to share information, ideas, and especially credit for projects given the funding that reputation draws. Finally, the story demonstrates the power of models of success to motivate attempts at collaboration.

The third case study of the Golden Stream Corridor describes a smaller-scale collaborative initiative at the single-watershed scale. The case study focuses on how several organizations are attempting to coordinate conservation activities within a stretch of contiguous habitat between the Maya Mountains and Port Honduras in an effort to secure the area from development threats and fragmentation. An analysis of the interactions among diverse land managers, organizations and other stakeholders along Golden Stream is helpful for understanding the challenges to collaborative management in the Toledo District where similar dynamics play out on a larger scale.

Finally, the fourth case describes the evolution of the Bladen Management Consortium. As a case study in collaboration, it highlights the many difficulties associated with initiating and sustaining a multi-stakeholder management body, particularly with regard to the challenges of funding, staffing, representation, and legitimacy. It also illustrates how a few committed individuals can drive a collaborative process forward despite such challenges. Understanding the difficulties and successes that Consortium members have encountered provides insights for incipient watershed management efforts beyond a single watershed scale.

These four stories vividly capture recognition of the need among diverse groups to work together if common and complementary natural resource management objectives are to be realized in combination with the threats and opportunities of development. They also highlight the foundation and tremendous potential for enhanced collaboration in Belize. Importantly, the stories illustrate the reality that collaboration, even under the best of circumstances, is not easy. They reveal that collaboration, as demonstrated by the words and

actions of those involved, makes sense but nonetheless poses challenges that need to be recognized and overcome for progress to be made.

METHODOLOGY

This report is primarily based on the qualitative analysis of field data gathered in the southernmost district of Belize. The project emerged from interaction of team members with Belizean NGOs and the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment, Government of Belize. Originally planned as part of a holistic study for the development of an “Integrated National Protected Areas Policy,” the project team recognized the significance of collaborative initiatives in southern Belize and sought to analyze them. In order to discuss the initial concept and to learn the perspective of relevant stakeholders, two team members conducted preliminary research in Belize in February 2002. Reaction to the project concept during this visit was very positive. All the representatives of the visited groups expressed interest in improving communication and coordination for building more effective collaborative management strategies for protected areas. The Ministry of Natural Resources and various NGOs confirmed the importance of the research by offering varying degrees of logistical support. Consequently, the project team prepared a detailed work plan based on the observations made during the preliminary visit.

The six project team members gathered the bulk of field data in Belize during June and July of 2002. Additional field data was gathered in February and March 2003. Conducting interviews and residing in the Toledo District allowed the team to explore local issues in-depth, respond to emergent questions, verify data validity, and build better relationships. The research team based itself out of the town of Punta Gorda for convenient access to numerous research participants. In addition, many excursions were made throughout the country to cross-check information and to conduct interviews with people where they work and live. These trips proved critical for learning firsthand from resource-dependent communities as well as from bureaucrats in Belmopan and Belize City. The approach also facilitated the refinement of site-specific insights that directly relate to various people and places studied by the team.

Research involved extensive interaction with community members and representatives of organizations and agencies (see Appendix I). Key interviewees were determined by their relation to particular conservation and development projects and by their association with involved organizations and agencies. In addition to unobtrusive observation, the team employed methods of direct observation and semi-structured and guided interviewing (Bernard 1995). The team conducted over 70 interviews with representatives of government agencies, non-governmental and indigenous organizations, community-based organizations, local communities, and tourism and agricultural sectors. Dr. Julia Wondolleck and Dr. Steven Brechin, the team's faculty advisors, reviewed the interview questions and research strategy prior to commencement of fieldwork. Participants were asked for permission to electronically record the discussions (using an MD-recorder) in an effort to accurately document their knowledge and experiences in the region. When it was not feasible to record electronically, at least two team members took notes. The interview recordings and notes were transcribed for later reference. These interviews provided the most important data source for this project. They captured the perspectives of the participants themselves, allowing the team to better understand the social, cultural, and ecological landscapes of the Toledo District.

The team also relied on primary and secondary-source documents gathered in Belize and the United States. Pertinent documents in Belize were compiled and reviewed by the project team, including content analysis of protected area management plans and critical reviews of government policy documents. These documents were obtained from the resource centers of relevant governmental agencies and NGOs in Belize. In particular, the libraries of the Belize Audubon Society, the University of Michigan, the University of Florida, and the Indian Law Resource Center provided important information for this project.

As a result of researching the potential for collaboration and identifying constraints, opportunities, interests, resources, connections, and networks, the project team hopes to encourage a process that creates an open forum for discussion. This dialogue will increase as participants are brought together, exchange information, learn from each other, and share their interests, priorities, and objectives. It is imperative that the process continue beyond the life of this research project. This dynamic outcome is the most critical measure of project success.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The remainder of this report is divided into eight chapters. Chapter Two provides background information on Belize's geography, cultural setting, political system, and economic setting. It further describes Belize's ecological characteristics, and provides information on the national protected areas legal framework, as well as conservation initiatives and organizations involved in these initiatives. The chapter also sets the stage for the rest of the report by highlighting issues pertaining to economic development, social concerns, and environmental processes in the Toledo District.

Chapter Three provides a detailed analysis of the issues framing land tenure and resource management in Toledo. By addressing the convoluted interests and competing territorial claims of the Toledo Maya and the Government of Belize (GOB), the chapter discusses the potential for a resolution of the long-standing land tenure dispute and the implications for land and resource management in the district. The chapter then presents the case of the Sarstoon-Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM) as an example of a fledgling effort to achieve comprehensive indigenous management of a protected area, and the challenges and opportunities that may arise. The chapter ends by discussing the importance of SATIIM as an initiative to organize multi-stakeholder support for its efforts at Sarstoon-Temash National Park.

Chapter Four sets out the theoretical framework used to analyze the four case studies and to arrive at insights and conclusions. Forces that facilitate and constrain collaboration are discussed. The introduction to case studies consists of: 1) TIDE and the Maya Mountain Marine Area Transect, 2) the Toledo Watershed Association and the Southern Alliance for Grassroots Empowerment, 3) the Golden Stream Corridor, and 4) the Bladen Management Consortium.

Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight comprise the stories themselves. Each chapter includes a detailed, analytical discussion of the challenges to successful collaboration, and factors that may facilitate or expand collaboration for the respective case.

Finally, Chapter Nine draws on the lessons learned from each case study. This chapter analyzes the constraints and challenges to greater collaboration in Toledo and discusses these issues along political, socio-cultural, organizational, and economic contexts. Challenges include lack of enabling legislation, lack of implementation of policy and legislation, political will, divestment of protected area management responsibility, land tenure disputes, mistrust, cultural diversity, representation and participation issues, lack of ownership of plans, organizational norms and culture, capacity, inadequate communication and information sharing, and resource limitations. The chapter also presents a discussion of particular forces that facilitate collaboration in Toledo. These forces include a shared sense of place, common perception of threats, perceived need to act collectively, tight social and professional networks, specific shared interests, committed individuals, and governmental support. Drawing on lessons learned but also looking beyond the case studies, the chapter concludes with a discussion of future opportunities for improving collaboration at the interface of conservation and development. These opportunities include emerging support for eco-regional management efforts, designation of biological corridors, financing mechanisms, tourism and social entrepreneurship, existing governmental and quasi-governmental initiatives, increasing national and international recognition of the Toledo region, trans-boundary opportunities, partnership agreements, emerging educational opportunities, integrated conservation and development opportunities, and existing relationships.

