Chapter Five: TIDE and the Maya Mountain Marine Transect

What’s unique about the [transect] is the interchange between the reef, the estuaries and the rivers; it’s a water-based ecological system. So the ecology leads to social organization. – Peter Esselman (2002)

Marketing is everything. We are looking for something sexy. You need a sexy name that will sell quickly. I like the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor. It’s marine, it’s the Maya Mountains and it’s in a corridor. It sells the ridges to reef concept. – Wil Maheia (2002)

INTRODUCTION

The Maya Mountain Marine Area Transect (MMMAT)\(^\text{19}\) concept was first developed by a Belizean environmental research non-governmental organization (NGO), with funding and technical support from The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The MMMAT represents an effort to confront the challenges posed by expanding development in Southern Belize. This case study will look at the three coastal and marine protected areas within the MMMAT, and analyze the potential value of the MMMAT concept as a forum for promoting multi-stakeholder discussions and coordination in light of the events that have taken place over the past decade.

BACKGROUND

The MMMAT as an ecological system

The MMMAT was defined as a conceptual land management unit by the Belize Center for Environmental Studies (BCES)\(^\text{20}\) and TNC in the mid-1990s that would protect biodiversity and natural ecosystem functions in the Toledo District through a corridor of public and private protected areas (TIDE 1998:6) (see Map 5, p.39). The conceptual million-acre corridor area is comprised of six large watersheds that empty into Port Honduras: Monkey
River, Payne’s Creek, Deep River, Golden Stream, Middle River, and Rio Grande watersheds (TIDE 2000:6-7) (see Map 4, p.38). This corridor connects the Maya Mountains to the coastal waters and reefs associated with the Gulf of Honduras. Five ecosystem types are found in the MMMAT: upland forests, coastal plain, freshwater, estuarine and shallow near shore, and coral reef. These ecosystem types support large and increasingly uncommon predators like the jaguar, rare and threatened birds like the yellow-headed parrot, 29 of the 78 natural vegetation types in the country, as well as manatee and other species directly dependent on fresh or salt water (TIDE 2000:7). A Site Conservation Plan (SCP) prepared by TIDE for the MMMAT states that what integrates this entire site, and serves as an indicator for overall ecosystem health, are the freshwaters that flow through it. Should the quality of these waters degrade, not only would the fish and mammals living in the streams suffer, but so too would estuarine and near shore communities and coral reefs due to their sensitivity to water quality degradation (TIDE 2000).

The upland forests of the corridor area, which total 99,671 hectares, run from the Main Divide of the Maya Mountains down through karstic foothills to the coastal plains. These upland forests comprise the eastern half of Columbia River Forest Reserve, the entire Bladen Nature Reserve, and the western third of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (see Map 5, p.39).

Almost half of the corridor area is represented by wetland ecosystems, which include Pine Savanna, Riparian Forests, and Estuaries and a Shallow Near Shore Region (including expansive stands of mangrove forests). On the southern side of the corridor is the Main Divide of the Maya Mountains and the Deep River Forest Reserve, which stretches from the mountains to the coastal plains and includes significant wetlands. Adjoining is the Payne’s Creek National Park which contains a major wetlands network. The wetlands of both the Payne’s Creek National Park and Deep River and further along the coast are contiguous with the Port Honduras Marine Reserve, a coastal embayment which contains about 130 cayes (GOB n.d.[1997]). Further offshore is the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve. This reserve contains eight small cayes along the southernmost tip of the Belize Barrier Reef.
The coastal plain pine savannas – grasslands and pine forests with patches of oak and palmetto – account for about 42,500 hectares. Rich riparian forests stripe the abundant waterways. The rest of the coastal plain is comprised of about 127,500 acres of what was formerly Broadleaf Forest but has now been heavily exploited (TIDE 2000:14). More than 90 percent of the human population within the corridor lives in this area, and therefore the area has the highest concentration of human activity (residential, farming, hunting, etc.). Approximately 35 percent of the land within the corridor has been converted to settlements and farms with plenty of accompanying roads including the newly paved Southern Highway (TIDE 2000:14).

Lands belonging to three NGOs – Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE), TIDE, and Fauna & Flora International (FFI) – are also located within the corridor. A for-profit tourism venture, Belize Lodge & Excursions, owns and manages the 7,600 acre Boden Creek Ecological Reserve, which also lies within the corridor. About 3,000 hectares of the corridor area is Maya Indian Reservation (see Map 7, p.48), and the rest is evenly divided between private and national land (TIDE 2000:9).

**The MMMAT as a concept**

The MMMAT concept was the brainchild of Lou Nicolait and Evan Cayetano of the now defunct BCES. Through the efforts of Evan Cayetano, BCES established a branch in Punta Gorda. After three years of conducting ecological assessments, BCES and TNC staff determined that the most vulnerable forests that needed urgent protection were in the southern part of Belize within an area spanned by the Deep River Forest Reserve and the coastal embayment of Port Honduras. Although protected areas existed, there was growing concern that they were vulnerable due to the absence of management plans or on-the-ground management. BCES recognized that the six-watershed area which comprises the MMMAT could eventually be managed according to the concepts of a biosphere reserve for sustainable use and resource protection (BCES 1997:2). More specifically, BCES identified the area east of the Maya Mountain Divide, including the Bladen Nature Reserve, Deep River Forest Reserve, Payne’s Creek National Park, and Port Honduras Marine Reserve as “critical lands to maintain [in] protected status or be placed under some protected status in order to maintain
biological diversity” (TIDE 1998:6). For BCES, the final goal would be the improved management and use of the six connected watershed areas that empty into Port Honduras, through the preparation and implementation of management plans for the coastal and marine portions of the corridor, i.e., Payne’s Creek National Park, Port Honduras Marine Reserve, and Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve. It was deemed necessary to have the plans completed in order to ensure protection of the areas and also to finalize sustainable use plans for appropriate sites within the marine reserves (BCES 1997:3-4).

**TIDE and MMMAT**

TNC decided to support the efforts of BCES to conceptualize a corridor concept for the region, later dubbed the MMMAT, and to make the corridor a reality. TNC hired a marine scientist, Will Heyman, to assist BCES with the technical and institutional support to do conservation work in Southern Belize. In May 1994, Will Heyman was asked to open a BCES office in Punta Gorda, which would facilitate BCES’ corridor development work in Southern Belize. According to Heyman:

> By the summer of 1994, I met Wil Maheia, who was working on his M.S. in Idaho… In the course of about one year, a Peace Corp Volunteer came in [to work at BCES-PG], I worked with Wil Maheia, and Evan Cayetano came in and became the Director of the PG branch of BCES. The idea at the time was that BCES would begin to transfer more of its operations to Southern Belize. (2003)

BCES depended almost entirely on TNC for funding, and had to close its doors in 1996 when TNC withdrew funding. According to Heyman, Wil Maheia continued to work “wearing the BCES cap” for another year-and-a-half promoting the corridor concept at the communities although he was not getting a salary. Soon after, Heyman and the TNC-Belize Director met with Maheia and together decided that a new organization – the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) – should be formed out of the BCES remnants. According to its Executive Director, TIDE was conceived as a grassroots initiative in response to the negative environmental effects from activities such as manatee poaching, illegal fishing, illegal logging, destructive farming methods, and other types of unsustainable development. Its original staff was made up entirely of volunteers, and its early efforts involved protection of the West Indian Manatee. TIDE has branched out substantially from
its initial manatee focus. Aside from managing public and private lands, it also provides fly-fishing and kayaking tours via its for-profit arm, TIDE Tours (TIDE 2003c). TNC has been one of TIDE’s main partners since TIDE’s inception. TIDE has adopted the MMMAT as a critical focus area, including the BCES goal of ensuring protection of the three coastal and marine portions of the corridor – Payne’s Creek, Port Honduras, and Sapodilla Cayes.

From 1999 to 2002, TNC focused much of its efforts at promoting the MMMAT concept. The main purpose of the MMMAT concept, as originally envisioned, was to guide economic development in the transect so that long-term ecological and socioeconomic benefits would be maximized at the ridge to reef scale. TNC hired a consultant to take the lead in developing a first version Site Conservation Plan (SCP) for the MMMAT, following a planning methodology developed by TNC. The second version of the SCP, which was completed in December 2000, contained an overview of conservation targets and goals for the MMMAT, described the stresses and sources of stresses on the five ecosystem types, critical threats and strategies, as well as monitoring and capacity building action plans. As stated in the document, the SCP “yielded a series of specific action plans for threat abatement, monitoring, and increasing TIDE’s conservation capacity [within the MMMAT]” (TIDE 2000:76). TNC hired another consultant, Peter Esselman, to draft the third generation of the MMMAT SCP, this time with a refined and new analysis of aquatic biological communities (TIDE 2002a).

The main aim of the SCP is to “help tie together the multiple demands of terrestrial and marine conservation through the freshwater systems that unite them in a Ridge to Reef Corridor” (TIDE, 2000:77). TIDE organized a two-day meeting in January 2002 to present the SCP to the public of the Toledo District in an “attempt to draw together key stakeholders from the local NGO community and the government” (TIDE 2002b). The meeting had the following objectives: 1) to present the history and ideas behind the delineation of MMMAT, 2) explain the concepts and approach behind the SCP methodology, 3) seek feedback about the validity and accuracy of the SCP analysis and TIDE’s proposed solutions to conservation challenges, and 4) to form partnerships and collaborations between national and local stakeholders (TIDE 2002b).
Several interviewees for this study commented that the approach that TIDE followed to gain support for the MMMAT concept and the SCP fell short on a number of levels. It was not clear to participants if the meeting was to seek meaningful input to the SCP or if TIDE’s intention was simply to obtain consensus among the participants for the SCP. Nevertheless, TIDE was criticized at the meeting for failing to consult adequately with stakeholders within the MMMAT area during the formulation of the SCP and failing to involve other organizations in developing the plan. One participant encapsulated the feelings of many at the meeting:

The plan was all environmentally focused, with no significant socioeconomic component. People are viewed as threats in this plan…. (Caddy-Foster 2002)

Another participant reiterated concerns about the SCP planning approach:

Stakeholder involvement was brought in after [TIDE] had already proposed [the SCP]. TIDE’s objective was to receive comments on and inputs to the plan. However, support for the SCP was not generated for several reasons: 1) participation of stakeholders was not there, 2) there was too much of a major focus on biodiversity issues, and 3) TIDE did not pay attention to the communities straddling the area, which are in severe poverty…. The SCP will not succeed unless the framework is hinged on community participation. (Morrison 2002)

From the BCES and TNC studies, there seems to be compelling ecological evidence that supports the legitimacy of the MMMAT as an important corridor for conservation. The SCP consultant remarked that it is “rare that you find these protected areas that stretch from the ridges to the reefs, in systems that are so little degraded” (Esselman 2002). There have not been problems with the technical and ecological side of the SCP. But it is very clear that stakeholders’ concerns are directed at the legitimacy of the plan from the local social and political perspectives. According to Esselman:

…the suggestions [from the meeting] were to hold wide-scale community consultations [on the SCP] and even to go so far as to hold a complementary process, like a socio-SCP, as a counterpart to the ecological-SCP. To go out on a community by community basis and find out what the resource conservation issues are. (2002)

Most of the discussion on the second day of the meeting explored pathways by which collaboration could occur to salvage the MMMAT concept. As a result of this discussion a watershed taskforce was set up, which was charged with taking the steps necessary to lead to
a watershed association of some geographic scope (see Chapter Six). To date, only a few organizations (including TIDE) have shown interest in making this watershed approach a reality.\textsuperscript{24}

According to TIDE’s Executive Director, the SCP “will continue to evolve like a management plan. We will have a draft here and there but I don’t know if we’ll ever have a draft that says this is the final draft” (Maheia 2002). To date, TIDE has not followed through on the suggestion to hold wide-scale community consultations. TIDE has instead appeared to be content at gaining a foothold in the MMMAT area by becoming involved in the management of the coastal and marine protected areas of the MMMAT – Payne’s Creek National Park, Port Honduras Marine Reserve, and the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve. Even in these locations, TIDE has faced tremendous challenges.

**TIDE and Payne’s Creek**

TIDE has been struggling with gaining management responsibility of the 31,676-acre Payne’s Creek National Park (PCNP), which was officially declared in 1994. According to TIDE’s draft management plan (1998) for PCNP, the national park is very rich in biodiversity and contains outstanding areas that contribute to the comprehensive coverage of natural communities. The Ycacos Lagoon within PCNP drains directly into the coastal embayment of Port Honduras.

In a letter to the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment (TIDE 1999), TIDE stated that it “was counting on participating in the co-management of the PCNP” and strongly believed “that the park cannot be managed without a sound management plan, approved by Forestry and the communities.” In September 1998, TIDE prepared a draft management plan for PCNP at the “invitation … of the Forest Department (FD), Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR)” (TIDE 1998:6). In the plan, TIDE recommended that, since Payne’s Creek is contiguous with Port Honduras Marine Reserve, the two areas should ultimately be managed as one unit, “under one management authority…to be called the Port Honduras Management Authority” (TIDE 1998:7-8). TIDE further proposed that this management authority should also be made responsible for the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve since “it has essentially the same users” as Port Honduras (TIDE 1998:7-8). TIDE’s vision at the time was that the now-
defunct BCES would initially act as the “implementing arm” of the management authority, with TIDE taking the “responsibility for strengthening and capacitating the authority particularly [in] community and stakeholder aspects” (TIDE 1998:36). The draft management plan, which lacked significant community input, remains in its draft stage.

As a result of TIDE’s interest in the PCNP, and community requests for more involvement in the management of the national park, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRECI) made a landmark decision on February 22, 1999. The major elements of the decision were as follows:

- The PCNP will be managed by an interim committee composed of one representative from TIDE, four representatives from the Punta Negra and Monkey River communities, one representative from the Coastal Zone Management Authority and one representative from the Forest Department. (It was subsequently decided that two representatives from Punta Gorda would also sit on the committee.)

- The mission of the interim committee is to complete the draft of an appropriate management plan based upon the original plan submitted by TIDE for the approval of the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment.

- The interim committee will also establish an appropriate mechanism for the sustained co-management of the national park by the local communities, local NGOs which have community support, and the Forest Department.

- The interim committee has the authority to pursue such activities as it may consider of immediate necessity for the protection of the PCNP and to foster community involvement in the management of the park….

- The Managing Director of TIDE is to liaise with the Forest Department to facilitate the selection of community representatives on the interim committee (GOB 1999).

At the first meeting of the interim committee, the Executive Director of TIDE and a representative from Punta Gorda were elected co-chairpersons of the committee. The committee also expressed its support of “the management plan as drafted by TIDE” and
strongly urged the Forest Department to “draft a Memorandum of Understanding such that TIDE in partnership with the surrounding communities become the managers of the PCNP, on behalf of the Forest Department in accordance with the management plan” (TIDE 1999).

**TIDE and the Payne’s Creek Communities**

TIDE subsequently initiated management activities at Payne’s Creek. With funding support from TNC and other sources, TIDE hired people from the local communities as rangers and installed ranger stations in Payne’s Creek and Abalone Caye (within Port Honduras) in order to deter illegal harvesting of mahogany and to stem illegal poaching of manatees especially from across the border (Guatemala and Honduras) and as a way to enforce conservation values in this area. Up to that point, TIDE was the only NGO engaged in on-the-ground protected areas management in the Toledo District.

TIDE’s positive working relationship with the communities, however, did not last long. This relationship breakdown was probably due to TIDE’s unilateral engagement in PCNP management activities and little, if any, community input and involvement in the management of the national park. TIDE had even gone as far as to submit a proposal for the co-management of PCNP between themselves and the Forest Department, which has legal jurisdiction over national parks. According to the draft agreement, the staff of the national park would be responsible for the day-to-day management of PCNP with advice from TIDE, which would also be responsible for reporting to and consulting with the Forest Department in respect to PCNP management.

The management plan that was originally circulated in draft form in 1997 had been partly used by TIDE to conduct some management activities in the park. According to TIDE’s Executive Director, Wil Maheia:

> The Ministry of Natural Resources knows we manage [Payne’s Creek]. We have a working committee but no formal agreement. We know the Government won’t kick us out so we have not gone through the formalities of paper work. (2002)

Recently, the chairlady of the Monkey River Village Council, who also sits on the PCNP Interim Committee, proposed that the management of the PCNP be given to the communities...
of Monkey River and Punta Negra (Sandlin 2002a). The reasons offered for this request included the fact that the two communities were instrumental in the declaration of the Payne’s Creek area as a national park, and that they have “consistently supported the management” of the park (Sandlin 2002a). The following reason was also given:

Both communities [Monkey River and Punta Negra] originally supported the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) [sic] management of the park. After four years of management by TIDE, however, little has been done. In fact to date no management plan has been developed and if any benefit has accrued it has been to TIDE and not to the communities. It should be noted, however, that in seeking direct management of the park, it is not the intention of the communities to go against TIDE but merely the belief of both communities that they can derive more benefits from managing the park themselves. In fact most NGO’s [sic] have given the idea that they are merely interim managers while they train communities to manage their own resources. Monkey River and Punta Negra would like to be among the first to take these organizations at their word. (Sandlin 2002a)

In relation to the management plan, Sandlin was probably referring to the fact that the management plan postulated by TIDE had, after almost four years, not been updated to include community input. In response to this unprecedented move by the communities, TIDE applied to the Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT) for funding to revise and update the PCNP management plan (GOB 2003f). Before the grant funding was approved, TIDE was required by PACT to submit to the Forest Department a proposed “Methodology for Revision and Finalization of the Payne’s Creek National Park Management Plan” for review and approval. In this document, TIDE noted that the PCNP Interim Committee “ultimately makes decisions on behalf of Payne’s Creek National Park” and that the committee “proposes to give TIDE the responsibility of the day-to-day operation and administration of the Park” (TIDE 2003). The Forest Department subsequently approved the methodology but reminded TIDE that “the custodial responsibility of the management plan remains with the PCNP Interim Management Committee” (Belize Forest Department 2003). A few days later, PACT received a letter from the chairlady of the Monkey River Village Council requesting that PACT suspend the grant funding to TIDE for the revision of the management plan. PACT responded that for the suspension of the project to be considered, the request would have to come from the Interim Management Committee, at which both Monkey River and TIDE are represented (Woods 2003).
According to Maheia, the breakdown in relations between TIDE and the communities was exacerbated by party politics, particularly as a result of the electioneering that took place in preparation for the 2003 General Elections. Like much of Belize, Monkey River is very divided along party lines (People’s United Party and United Democratic Party). For example, PUP supporters do not shop at the grocery stores of UDP supporters, and vice versa. Monkey River representatives (Eleanor Sandlin and others) recently asked TIDE to agree that the communities should manage Payne's Creek. Maheia has reiterated that he has nothing against Monkey River and Punta Negra managing Payne's Creek. However, he believes that they cannot and should not do it on their own. According to Maheia, the GOB-appointed management committee has not played its role, as directed by the Ministry of Natural Resources. Even though it has the authority to do so, the committee has not completed the PCNP management plan, nor taken steps to establish an appropriate mechanism for the sustained co-management of the national park by the local communities, local NGOs, and the Forest Department. The people on the committee appear to be committed to the management of Payne’s Creek, but have not been able to work effectively as a group because of the communication breakdown between the community representatives and TIDE. TIDE has been chairing the committee, but at every meeting of the committee the respective representatives change. According to TIDE’s Executive Director, Wil Maheia, even though the Forest Department has jurisdiction over Payne's Creek, they seem content to observe how the situation plays out.

The Sapodilla Cayes

The 33,401-acre Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve (SCMR) was legally designated in 1996. That same year, it was further recognized as a component of the Belize Barrier Reef World Heritage Site (Barborak et al. 2002). A management plan for the SCMR was drafted in 1994 by the Fisheries Department.

According to several sources, TIDE was offered the management of the SCMR in the early 1990s but turned down the offer. The question of who would manage SCMR was again brought up at a meeting of the Tri-National Alliance of the Gulf of Honduras (TRIGOH) in Honduras in 1997. TIDE again did not express any intention to manage the SCMR, although
the Toledo branch of the Belize Tourism Industry Association\textsuperscript{27} (BTIA) did express interest at that same meeting (Anonymous 2002). Several interviewees suggested that TIDE’s decision not to be involved in the SCMR’s management was due to the fact that its leaders felt that they did not have any competition in the MMMAT’s marine area and could absorb the management of the SCMR indirectly. According to TIDE’s Executive Director, Wil Maheia:

\begin{quote}
   The Nature Conservancy wanted TIDE to manage the Sapodilla Cayes, but did not offer financial support. TIDE had human resources to manage SCMR, but did not have the funds. (2003)
\end{quote}

In the meantime, thousands of tourists were making use of the Sapodilla Cayes every year, with most of the tourists coming from Honduras and Guatemala. Honduran tourist guides began to complain about the lack of a management presence in the area and the deleterious effect that unchecked visitation to the cayes was having. In 1999, BTIA applied for the management rights of the Sapodilla Cayes. BTIA cited that it was important to empower local constituencies, which would be the association’s primary goal along with preserving the ecological integrity of the cayes and reef system.

Several interviewees commented that TIDE and TNC expressed great concern when it became known that BTIA was applying for the management of the Sapodilla Cayes. Both organizations felt that BTIA was not adequately equipped to manage the SCMR. These same sources claim that BTIA membership swelled after it became public knowledge that BTIA was poised to receive the mandate from the Fisheries Department to manage the SCMR. The new BTIA members called for a change in leadership of the BTIA. BTIA officials have alleged that the unprecedented increase in membership of the association was encouraged by TIDE in an effort to change the leadership structure of the BTIA and derail the signing of the co-management agreement with the Fisheries Department (Anonymous 2002).

In reaction to these events the members of BTIA formed a new organization, the Toledo Association for Sustainable Tourism and Empowerment (TASTE), so as to retain control of the management of the Sapodilla Cayes. TASTE and the Fisheries Department subsequently signed a co-management agreement for the SCMR in 2001. According to the CEO of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (the Fisheries Department’s parent Ministry) TASTE
was selected to manage the SCMR because it presented the only proposal and submitted a good plan. The Fisheries Department, however, has been carrying out the day-to-day management of the marine reserve. At a February 2003 meeting of protected area management agencies in Belmopan, a high-level Fisheries Department official announced that TASTE will get delegated management of the SCMR in 2004. In the meantime, TASTE has joined various NGO associations in an effort to familiarize itself with protected area management issues. These associations include the Toledo Watershed Association (see Chapter Six), the Association of Protected Area Management Organizations (see Chapter Nine), and the Tri-National Alliance for the Gulf of Honduras (see Chapters Two and Nine). TIDE is also a member of each of these associations.

**TIDE and Port Honduras**

TIDE has had more success with community relations in its efforts at Port Honduras. In 1993 and 1994, the Port Honduras coastal embayment was subject to two rapid ecological assessments (REAs), which were led by TNC’s Florida and Caribbean Marine and Conservation Science Center, and included the participation of the Government of Belize, NGOs, and community-based organizations. The results of both REAs confirmed the results of earlier studies which documented the importance of Port Honduras as a critical habitat area. The REA reports concluded that the area warranted special management under marine protected area regulations. Residents of Monkey River, Punta Negra, Punta Gorda and nearby communities, and the Port Honduras cayes use the Port Honduras area for small-scale commercial fisheries, largely for lobster and finfish. These residents – particularly fishers – agreed with the conclusion of the REAs and proposed that Port Honduras be declared a marine reserve, mostly due to their concerns about the unabated gillnetting and poaching of manatees in the bay of Port Honduras by Guatemalan and Honduran fishers. The over fishing and illegal fishing by foreign nationals may not be surprising given the relative richness of the fisheries resources in Southern Belize compared to those in coastal Guatemala and Honduras. Also, Southern Belize has only about 4,500 coastal inhabitants and 125 fishers whereas the Atlantic Coast of Guatemala alone has 130,000 inhabitants and 5,000 coastal fishers (TIDE 2000:18).
From early on, TIDE responded favorably and proactively to the marine reserve proposal to protect the areas from these trans-boundary pressures. As a result, one of TIDE’s original objectives was to protect the West Indian Manatee. According to TIDE’s Executive Director, Wil Maheia:

Fishing boats were coming in from Guatemala exploiting the resources… In one weekend they had killed about nine manatees. We only have around 150 in [the Port Honduras] area.... Without TIDE the manatee would have been extinct. (2002)

This experience at Port Honduras was crucial to TIDE’s development; as mentioned previously, the organization’s raison d’etre eventually evolved and moved into protected areas management and development. After three years of planning meetings and workshops sponsored and conducted by TIDE, the reserve was legally established in January 2000. The 100,378-acre reserve extends from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the mouth of the Monkey River and goes five miles out to sea. Due to community attendance at these series of meetings and workshops, the reserve has, from its inception, been characterized by a high degree of community participation (Barborak et. al. 2002:16), mostly of fishers from the coastal communities of the Toledo District.

The planning sessions also resulted in the creation of a management plan for Port Honduras in 2000. According to Barborak, et. al. (2002:16), the management plan was designed as “a collaborative effort that included participation by representatives from the local communities, TIDE, and The Nature Conservancy.” The plan proposed that the Belize Fisheries Department and TIDE “will be responsible for the overall management of the Port Honduras Marine Reserve” and also recognized that “community and stakeholders will be imperative to the success of the reserve” (TIDE 2000:62). The Fisheries Department, which has jurisdiction over all marine reserves, and TIDE signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the co-management of PHMR in May 2001 (GOB 2001). The main features of this MOU are as follows:
A management committee shall be instituted and maintained by the Fisheries Department to advise on matters pertinent to the proper development and management of PHMR. It is important to note that the only agencies specified to be on the committee are the Fisheries Department, Forest Department and the Coastal Zone Management Institute.

TIDE is responsible for the day-to-day management of the PHMR (including all aspects of recreation, visitor use, equipment maintenance and public awareness and education campaigns) with direct advice from the Fisheries Department.

The Fisheries Department is responsible to assist with additional security and enforcement, as well as to assist with providing infrastructure.

The reserve is therefore managed by TIDE, with advisory input from the management committee; presently comprised of representatives from the agencies specified in the MOU, as well as from TIDE and local communities. TIDE’s Executive Director claims that the “Port Honduras advisory committee is a good model for community involvement…. Communities are officially involved in hiring and firing decisions at TIDE.” The committee meets every three months to address policy and management issues in the reserve. According to a WCS report to the World Bank:

Management of [PHMR] is truly a community-based process, as the reserve’s manager was born within the area that presently comprises the reserve, and community members chose the reserve’s six rangers. (Barborak et. al. 2002:16)

**ANALYSIS**

While the MMMAT concept has merit from an ecological standpoint, its potential as a forum for multi-stakeholder discussions and coordination will be more difficult to promote. The following discussion will attempt to disaggregate the lessons vis-à-vis interests, challenges, and characteristics of multi-stakeholder collaboration, and will suggest opportunities that may still exist for promoting multi-stakeholder discussions and collaboration in the MMMAT.
Challenges for collaboration

Lack of trust

TNC’s involvement in Southern Belize from the early stages of the MMMAT discussions has been viewed suspiciously; this suspicion reflects on TIDE as well. The TIDE/TNC connection is strong and goes back to the pre-TIDE days when BCES was still in existence. As stated previously, the MMMAT concept was first developed by BCES in the mid-1990s, with funding and technical support from TNC, as an effort to prepare for expanding development in Southern Belize (mainly as a result of the rehabilitation of the Southern Highway). An NGO representative based in Punta Gorda observed that TNC promotes the MMMAT on their website “as if they are the manager of the whole thing” (Anonymous 2002). Others have suggested that TIDE and TNC are more interested in raising money on the name of the MMMAT than they are about working hard to make sure that the MMMAT becomes an actual multi-stakeholder management reality. But the harshest accusation leveled is that “TIDE is a TNC organization” (Anonymous 2002). In response, TIDE’s Executive Director stated:

We are not a TNC organization. We have partnerships with them like we do with Rainforest Alliance, WWF [and others]… A lot of people still don’t give us credit for what we have done. Some of our own people don’t give us a lot of respect…. [We] are locally based. All our board [members] were born and raised here. Out of 27 employees we have only two people that were not born here…. [We] have to have our own identity. We are not TNC; we are TIDE. (Maheia 2002)

An INGO official based in Punta Gorda put it another way:

[Local] NGOs are… everywhere and they are [usually] affiliated with a group outside – owned may be too strong a word, but… controlled by NGOs from outside. Where would Programme for Belize be without TNC, or YCT without FFI, SATIIM without EcoLogic, TIDE without TNC…? (McGill 2002)

In general, according to Chief Forest Officer Oswaldo Sabido, there is a certain amount of skepticism in Government circles when you talk about NGOs. Sabido asks: “Where’s the hidden agenda? What do these people really want?” Questions such as these create a barrier to Government-NGO cooperation. This barrier could be removed by greater transparency, that is, by “developing closer relationships so that people are aware of what is happening and
they can see what is being done,” as Sabido suggests. The growing perception is that NGOs have many more resources than Government agencies, especially in relation to the NGOs’ agenda and the areas under their jurisdiction.

Without question, TIDE has been the dominant player in protected areas advocacy and management in Southern Belize. Besides promoting the MMMAT concept, TIDE has also attempted to gain management responsibility over Payne’s Creek, Port Honduras, and the Sapodilla Cayes. This attempt by TIDE to become involved in the management of coastal and marine protected areas has led some officials of key stakeholder agencies to suggest that TIDE would like to have and maintain a “monopoly in conservation” in the region (Anonymous 2002). TIDE’s Executive Director disputes this suggestion:

[We] don’t get credit for [our protected areas management efforts], but when it comes to community involvement… name me any other park – here or in the United States – where the manager was born and raised in the park and the rangers too. [Our park] managers are overseen by an advisory group. We have an advisory board that oversees the management. For example the advisory committee could sanction a ranger, if he were out of line. (2002)

The monopoly view is probably strengthened by what many see as the similar conservation strategies that TIDE and TNC have adopted for the identification of critical habitats, the lobbying for the legal protection of these “hotspots”, preparation of protected area management plans, and actual management of protected areas. The fact that TIDE has, with TNC’s financial support, been acquiring lands in the Toledo District through their Private Lands Initiative has not helped matters either. TIDE’s Executive Director has a different point of view of what he calls [TIDE’s] “buying back Toledo”:

Belizeans don’t have access to the lands any more…. Over the past year, tenure of seafront properties has changed from local to foreign owned [sic]. When I was growing up there wasn’t anyone in this town interested in seafront property. The seafront was for everybody. There were no fences. [These lands] should be in local hands. It is our intention to repatriate some of these lands. When we own it, it’s not TIDE owning it but the people of Belize.

Conflict and competition among groups

Competition and rivalry. Competition and rivalry characterize interactions between NGOs, and between NGOs and communities, and is related to territoriality, funding, and visibility.
TIDE’s original goal was to create a niche for itself at the MMMAT level (so that all other organizations would play a secondary or support role). At the same time, TIDE worked feverishly to gain management control of the three coastal and marine reserves within the MMMAT. In particular, it successfully lobbied to create the Port Honduras Marine Reserve. According to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Sergio Garcia, there was “all sorts of infighting” between TASTE and TIDE over the rights to manage Sapodilla Cayes (2002). The Belize Fisheries Department signed a co-management agreement with TASTE for the Sapodilla Cayes. According to Garcia, TASTE had presented an acceptable proposal and plan. Although the working relationship between the two NGOs has vastly improved recently, this squabble created a serious rift at the time between TIDE and TASTE.

The communities of Monkey River and Punta Negra are presently at odds with TIDE over the rights to control the management of Payne’s Creek National Park. TIDE and the communities are represented on the Payne’s Creek Interim Management Committee, which was supposed to be a forum for overseeing the management of the national park. However, a leading community representative has proposed that the communities be given full management responsibility of the PCNP, and TIDE has been trying to salvage its lead role by proposing to update the management plan for the park.

**Funding relationships.** The relationship between local NGOs and donor agencies has impacted how local NGOs interact with each other in the MMMAT region. In regard to funding, ESTAP (GOB 2000c:183) notes:

> Funding is a constraint for most NGOs and CBOs in the region, and the high cost of operation in the region contributes to the unsustainable nature of their work. The absence of proper guidelines and legislation to regulate (and regularize) their activity has meant that many NGOs and CBOs still operate in a climate of suspicion.

One NGO official agreed with this view, saying that “[NGOs] are not honest with one another. Ideas are sources for funding, so people aren’t always willing to share” (Caddy-Foster 2002). The director of a Punta Gorda-based US NGO agreed that this is especially the case with TIDE:
I get the impression that TIDE might be more ambivalent [to pursue collaboration] than the others. Because they are seeing all these other NGOs coming into the area and thinking they might be taking away from their area. (McGill 2002)

Various stakeholders see TIDE as being more interested in raising money than working hard to make sure that the MMMAT becomes an actual multi-stakeholder management reality. Indeed, the strong partnership between TIDE and TNC has not only translated to a secure funding source for TIDE, but has also increased TIDE’s international visibility. This has made TIDE the most marketable NGO in Southern Belize, evidenced by the number of awards, donations and grants that the NGO has received over the last five years. Meanwhile, other organizations have had to struggle to gain visibility and secure funds for their work. Maheia recognizes that TIDE’s “bold and aggressive” fundraising strategy has affected its relationship with other organizations, but points out that “at the end of the day we are proud to know we are one of the biggest employers in this town and contribute to the economy of the [Toledo] District while conserving our natural resources” (2002).

**Fragmentation and division.** Civil society organizations have been proliferating in Southern Belize. Although some of these organizations have formed various alliances, others seem content to operate on their own or do not have the will to collaborate with others. The Maya Leaders’ Alliance (MLA) and the Southern Alliance for Grassroots Empowerment (SAGE) are probably the only good examples in Southern Belize of multi-organizational coordination, albeit for cultural and economic interests.28 The protected area management organizations and landowners of the Toledo District, however, have not been successful at setting up networks.

At a meeting of protected area management organizations held on January 23, 2003, in Belmopan City, it was noted that protected area management organizations operate in isolation from each other and therefore have little impact on the development of Belize and protected areas at a national level.29 Often these organizations are faced with similar problems but do not network with other agencies and end up dealing with their problems alone, including searching for funding support. This exacerbates the fragmentation among NGOs that already exists. As explained by an INGO official based in Punta Gorda, “There are more NGOs arising; more people looking for the same amount of money” (McGill 2002).
Organizational challenges

TIDE’s capacity to manage its ambitious protected areas portfolio has been called into question. Some see TIDE’s portfolio as too large for one organization to handle. The Executive Director of Friends of Nature, Lindsay Garbutt, who previously worked at TIDE, commented:

[TIDE’s] popularity grew faster than their institutional capacity; therefore as an organization they never… developed proper strategic planning to know what… to do versus what… the opportunities [are] out there. [As] an organization they tried to grab all the opportunities that were out there, whether or not it was in their strategic plan. This means [that TIDE has] stretched itself very thin. (2002)

Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries CEO Garcia echoes this view; he feels that TIDE created this predicament for itself by jumping into projects “knowing that the money is there,” even though their human resources are limited. Other interviewees commented that TIDE’s staff has been rendered ineffective by poor management for real conservation on-the-ground. Monkey River community leaders claim that after four years of management by TIDE, little has been done at Payne’s Creek National Park (Sandlin 2002a).

TASTE’s capacity to manage the Sapodilla Cayes has also been questioned. Although the Fisheries Department signed a co-management agreement with TASTE, the agreement was mostly symbolic because the Fisheries Department retains day-to-day management responsibility for the reserve. Several sources indicated to the project team that this reluctance to transfer management responsibility to TASTE stems from the fact that the Fisheries Department does not yet have full confidence in TASTE’s ability to manage the reserve on its own. Although TASTE is comprised of prominent and successful persons experienced in business management, few of its members are experienced or trained in natural resource management.

Other challenges – sovereignty issues

The Sapodilla Cayes have long been a contentious issue for the Governments of Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. Long-standing territorial claims to the Sapodilla Cayes and other border regions have set the grounds for this dispute. In addition to Belize, both Guatemala...
and Honduras claim the Sapodilla Cayes as part of their territorial boundaries. Each of the three countries also has substantial economic interest in the Sapodilla Cayes and the surrounding marine area. The economic concerns over the fishery and the area’s importance for tourism are fundamental to all three countries. The surrounding waters of the Sapodilla Cayes are a rich and productive fishery in which all three parties have a vested interest and on which part of the coastal economies of the three countries are dependent. As succinctly stated in a televised Belizean newscast on October 14, 2002:

The cayes that make up the Sapodilla Range are among the most beautiful along the entire barrier reef. Every year, thousands of tourists make use of these islands, but most of them come from Guatemala…. As for who actually has sovereignty there is no debate. The cayes are all Belizean. (News 5 Online)

All of the cayes within the Sapodilla Cayes archipelago are national land; some are leased to several Belizeans. Nevertheless, negotiations have been ongoing between the three countries for several years. These negotiations may have a dramatic effect on the management practices of the Sapodilla Cayes. In August 2002 a facilitation team developed a settlement agreement that called for the development of the Belize-Guatemala-Honduras Ecological Park. The park would include the Sapodilla Cayes and other parts of the barrier reef system. This puts into question the future management by TASTE of the area. Under the specified terms all three countries would be involved in the management of the Sapodilla Cayes and surrounding marine area.

In addition, the facilitators also put forth a proposal for a joint development fund to increase cross border trade and exchange between the three countries. It is difficult to know what impact further development in the area will have on the management decisions of the Sapodilla Cayes.

In the context of the ongoing dispute, the Fisheries Department has had to make decisions about whether to consult with Honduran and Guatemalan stakeholders (i.e., tour operators, tourists and fishers) in the Sapodilla Cayes. Pressure exists not to consider these non-Belizean stakeholders, because it is perceived as potentially fostering territorial claims of those countries. However, TASTE’s Coordinator, Jack Nightingale, does recognize the potential benefit of involving non-Belizean stakeholders:
I think it has to be a great idea. For a start, let's face it, the tour operators that have been coming here for the last thirty to forty years from Guatemala, whereas they say this is Belizean, they also recognize the joy they have in being able to use it. If we continue with that kind of relationship which is good, because they are bringing business, perhaps we would like to bring Belizeans in to enjoy more of it, rather than it all be Guatemalan. So that there could be a greater balance of things that would make it excellent. (News 5 Online 2002)

Opportunities and facilitating factors

Existing relationships

While the MMMAT concept has not yet translated into a forum for multi-stakeholder discussions, and less so into a multi-stakeholder management reality, there are existing relationships and emerging collaborative efforts that have good potential for success.

Emerging coalitions. At the invitation of BAS and UNDP-Belize, eleven protected area management organizations from across Belize (including TIDE, TASTE, and YCT) met on January 23, 2003, with the intention of formally creating an Association of Protected Areas Management Organizations (APAMO). Meeting participants recognized that, although other umbrella organizations exist in Belize, a national network for protected area management agencies is needed. Other networks do not deal specifically with protected area issues, have broader objectives and goals, and consequently may not address areas of concern to protected area managers. Meeting participants supported the creation of APAMO and agreed to work together to form the association, which would have the following objectives: 1) Provide GOB and funding agencies with advice and recommendations to improve and promote management of protected areas; 2) Highlight and promote the contribution which protected areas make on the economy and environmental image of Belize, and social well-being of Belizeans; 3) Foster communications between protected areas managers so as to enhance coordination; 4) Facilitate technical support to member agencies; 5) Provide a forum for discussion and prioritization of issues, and concerted action; and 6) Create a networked voice for protected areas managers. A committee, comprised of representatives of agencies present at the meeting, has been set up to coordinate the formalization process of APAMO (Salas 2003:9).
Working relationships. Whereas there has not been much success at formalizing multi-agency coordination in Toledo, informal interactions between and among agencies do exist. For example, due to a lack of financial resources, Forest Department personnel in Toledo are unable to effectively perform their duties, namely, monitoring of logging operations, and enforcement of forest and wildlife regulations. Consequently, the Forest Department depends on the goodwill of community members and NGO personnel to report illegal activities in protected areas. A forest officer, Wayne Bardalez, posted in the Toledo District observed:

The Forest Department [is] handicapped due to lack of resources. …GOB has not provided financial support. NGOs, which have good experience, have been helping the Forest Department to do its monitoring. (2002)

TIDE has loaned its vehicles and boats to Police Department, Fisheries Department and Forest Department staff on a number of occasions to conduct patrols in protected areas and to monitor reports of illegal poaching or logging activities. According to Bardalez, the Forest Department raided an illegal logging operation in Sarstoon-Temash National Park in mid-2002 with transportation assistance from the Community-initiated Agriculture and Resource Development Project (CARD)\textsuperscript{30} and with the support of the Police Department. Although some NGO officials believe that “[GOB] sees NGOs as interfering,” these same officials see it as an opportunity to counteract GOB’s ambivalence about NGOs by capitalizing on these Government agencies’ reliance on NGOs.

Conservation easements are another example of working relationships. Although conservation easements are not permissible under Belize’s laws, landowners can impose restrictive covenants on their properties. In effect, two landowners may execute contracts that bind each other, which may be recorded as an encumbrance on the title. In other words, conservation easements work on private land once the owners are in agreement. The easements are legally binding between the landowners under their own arrangements. TIDE and the Ya’axche’ Conservation Trust (YCT) have signed such an “easement” for one of TIDE’s properties. In September 2001, representatives of TIDE, YCT, and the Forest Department attended a Land Trust Rally in Baltimore, Maryland, to learn more about how such easements work.
Shared concerns and interests

The five ecosystem types located within MMMAT are interconnected. Therefore, the MMMAT is an integrated corridor from an ecological perspective. In the words of Esselman: “Even if socio-politically the corridor idea is not embraced, it’s still functioning as an ecological entity” (2002). Occurrences at one property would likely have impacts at another property. Whether the various stakeholders are currently interested or not, this ecological contiguity across various protected areas provides an opportunity for CBOs, NGOs, INGOs and policy makers to join forces to improve management of this unique corridor and address shared concerns.

Since the folding of BCES and the establishment of TIDE, other environmental NGOs are now involved in protected areas management in the MMMAT region. These include NGOs that have co-management agreements with the Government of Belize, notably, TASTE, which is involved in the management of the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve; Belize Audubon Society, which manages the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary; and the Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE), which is concerned with the protection and management of the Bladen Nature Reserve. Friends of Nature, which manages Laughing Bird Caye National Park and the Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve, also operates in Southern Belize, but not within the MMMAT region. Some of the Maya organizations are also interested in the protection of natural resources: The Toledo Maya Cultural Council, for instance, trains young Mayas in conservation management and is represented on the Board of the Ya’axche’ Conservation Trust. The Kekchi Council of Belize (KCB) promotes “sustainable economic development to foster productivity and self reliance” and community co-management of protected areas. The KCB is the lead agency involved in SATIIM, which (as of April 16, 2003) is negotiating a co-management agreement with the GOB for the Sarstoon-Temash National Park.

International NGOs and foundations have also demonstrated concern for the protection of resources in the MMMAT region. TNC has long been a key player in promoting the MMMAT concept. This INGO also has a marine research program based in Toledo. As part of its global restructuring, TNC is in the process of setting up a permanent country office in Belize, of which its marine program would be one component.
The Oak Foundation, a private US-based foundation, has set up a Belize country office (based in Placencia, Stann Creek). This foundation invests in marine conservation initiatives and has already approved grants to TIDE and other NGOs. A UK-based NGO, Fauna & Flora International (FFI), purchased a 9,554-acre parcel of land, known as the Golden Stream Corridor Preserve, which is managed by YCT. Even the US Government has added to this diverse organizational landscape: Peace Corps-Belize has assigned several volunteers to work with local counterparts on community-based conservation initiatives at villages in Toledo and other parts of the country.

Conservation initiatives in the Gulf of Honduras provide opportunities for larger-scale collaboration. This prospect is possible due to renewed efforts to reconcile international territorial disagreements. The governments of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras have been involved in diplomatic negotiations mediated by the Organization of American States (OAS) and facilitated by official representatives of Guatemala and Belize to arrive at a mutual resolution of the territorial dispute. The facilitators have developed a series of proposals and presented these proposals to their respective governments. One of these proposals includes the development of a Belize-Guatemala-Honduras Ecological Park established “in the form of an Agreement binding under international law between Belize, Guatemala and Honduras” (GOB 2002a). The facilitators have noted that the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System project and the Mesoamerican Biological Corridors Project provide “a natural platform and an enabling environment for the establishment of the Ecological Park” and may also be able to provide technical and financial support (GOB 2002a). The Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve falls within the proposed Ecological Park, and would therefore benefit from this tri-national initiative. It must be noted that Belize's sovereignty over the Sapodillas would not be affected by this tri-national initiative. The proposals may only be implemented after they have been put to a public referendum in Guatemala and Belize, and endorsed by the majority of electors in both countries.

**Political support**

The GOB appears to be very keen on promoting the involvement of NGOs and CBOs in the management of public protected areas. Of the three new terrestrial protected areas that were
declared in 2002, all are based upon some kind of a co-management structure. The entire Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (to which the Forest Department belongs) receives a mere 1.6 percent of the national budget. Given these extreme resource constraints, it is highly unrealistic to assume that the Forest Department can adequately manage the nation’s protected areas (Ravndal 2002). “Co-management” arrangements are therefore expected to continue indefinitely.32

The GOB has signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with various NGOs and CBOs for the co-management of protected areas. For example, as previously mentioned, TIDE is managing the Port Honduras Marine Reserve on behalf of the Fisheries Department. TASTE has signed a co-management agreement for the Sapodilla Cayes Marine Reserve. The Rio Blanco Mayan Association (representing Santa Cruz and Santa Elena villages) has been charged with the management of the Rio Blanco National Park. SATIIM is poised to enter into an agreement with the Forest Department for the management of the Sarstoon-Temash National Park. These MOUs call for the NGOs/CBOs and the GOB to share management responsibilities. While resource constraints make it difficult for GOB to provide financial assistance, the GOB has helped by writing up support legislation, providing technical assistance and training, and providing “moral support” (Garcia 2002). According to Chief Forest Officer Sabido:

[Forest Department personnel are] trying to develop more coherence between the different stakeholders especially those people who are managing protected areas or who are directly involved with the whole issue of sustainable use of the forest resources. We are trying to facilitate the participation of the different NGOs or CBOs as much as possible in the initiatives that have started. And also through the Mesoamerican Biological Corridors Project, we also have helped to basically fund and facilitate community and NGO initiatives that tend to bring different stakeholders together. (2002)

**Insights on TIDE’s future role in MMMAT**

TIDE has been and will continue to be a major player in Southern Belize, given the funds and contacts that it has at its reach. The majority of interviewees, including directors of other leading NGOs and officials of Government agencies, recognize TIDE’s importance and influence. A high-level Government official commented:
TIDE seems to have a lot more expertise, more prominence, perhaps more voice in what happens with the coastal and marine areas.... On the political front, TIDE seems to be very articulate and is able to get the ears of the decision-making people.... TIDE following its mentor, TNC, takes a much more corporate approach to conservation than say, YCT, which is trying to develop a more community-based management that involves several communities and a particular ethnic group in Toledo. (Sabido 2002)

The director of a newly established NGO in Southern Belize stated:

I think TIDE is the leading organization [in Southern Belize]. For a long time it was the only one. It has a huge local, regional, national and maybe even international recognition. It can play a leading and extremely important role in the development of that whole area. (Garbutt 2002)

A former TIDE Board member put it another way:

TIDE's leadership as an NGO in the area comes through its access to substantial international funding and support resources. This organization gets the most funding of all the NGOs in the Toledo District. By virtue of that, TIDE is poised as a leader but it doesn't necessarily have the strongest consultative leadership and shared strategic vision to independently take the organization ahead.... (Enriquez 2002)

TIDE’s leaders have been willing and ready to take on new leadership roles for the NGO in various conservation projects. When a leadership gap presented itself at Payne’s Creek, TIDE immediately jumped in. As the trans-boundary pressures on the fishery resources of Port Honduras increased, TIDE took that as a chance to lobby for the protection of the coastal embayment.

TIDE has had several chances to take the lead with championing the MMMAT concept and, for a number of reasons, is still well-positioned to do so. TIDE is the one organization best suited to playing this leadership role because of its political connections, the substantial (albeit stretched) human and financial resources at its command (compared to the other NGOs in the region), its historical involvement with the MMMAT and its technical grasp of the importance of ecological corridors, and its programmatic presence across a wide swath of the Toledo District (via the management of private and public protected areas).

However, given the scale and complexity of the MMMAT, TIDE will not be able to “go it alone.” It is already difficult for TIDE to effectively manage the many different initiatives on
its plate. A former TIDE Board member and a former TIDE staff member both believe that TIDE does not have the institutional capacity at this time to take on more than it currently has, even if it would like to realize the huge financial gain and prestige that would come to the organization by increasing its portfolio.

For TIDE to expand its reach and be more effective, it may need to join forces with other organizations. As echoed by a former TIDE employee:

Certainly some sort of an alliance is necessary. How that would be structured I don’t know. NGOs are territorial. I don’t know how much the different NGOs will be willing to share power or benefits that come. (Garbutt 2002)

It is clear that the process of improving coordination and collaboration among organizations is not without its challenges. However, there is an opportunity for enhanced collaboration if leadership to do so materializes. TIDE may indeed find it challenging to effectively handle its current responsibilities and expand its outreach at the same time. Nonetheless, TIDE could use this as an opportunity to strengthen its organizational capacity by, among other things, developing an updated organizational strategic plan with measurable objectives and clear evaluation procedures. As noted by an NGO official, “the MMMAT is bigger than just TIDE.” TIDE therefore has the opportunity to demonstrate through its actions that is truly committed to the notion of sharing responsibilities and pooling resources with other agencies to improve protected areas management across the MMMAT.

Conclusions

The above discussion leads to the following insights regarding the future of the MMMAT as a multi-stakeholder forum:

- With the development of the Site Conservation Plan, the MMMAT went from a concept to an actual conservation strategy. Although having a strong ecological foundation, the SCP lacks a significant community component. Additionally, insufficient stakeholder consultations held during the SCP development process have resulted in a lack of support of TIDE’s MMMAT SCP, even though land managers in the MMMAT region recognize the ecological significance of the corridor.
It appears that TIDE may hold the cards for the creation of a meaningful multi-stakeholder forum in Southern Belize. An effective collaborative process is not possible in the Toledo District without TIDE. However, other organizations also need to play a role in creating a meaningful multi-stakeholder forum in Toledo. Although such a forum is not possible without TIDE’s involvement, the same holds true if the other key organizations are not involved.

The MMMAT concept and strategy still remains as the most comprehensive effort to date to promote multi-stakeholder coordination and effect multi-ecosystem management in Toledo. Compared to the other NGOs in the region, TIDE is best positioned to play a lead role in the promotion and formation of this effort, whether as prime instigator or technical advisor. If not TIDE, another organization in the region could try to mobilize this effort. Regardless, it seems clear that without a concerted effort to do so, with someone taking the lead, a meaningful multi-stakeholder forum will not be implemented in Toledo.

Whether the various stakeholders are presently supportive or not of the MMMAT SCP, the contiguity of the five ecosystem types provides an opportunity for land managers and policy makers to join forces to improve management of this corridor both at the individual land management unit level and at the landscape level.

Because of the lack of organization among the protected areas agencies in Toledo and the inability to coordinate their efforts and to lobby with one networked voice, the management agencies are weak and have little impact on the development of Belize and protected areas at a national level.