

Chapter Eight: The Bladen Management Consortium

INTRODUCTION

The Bladen Nature Reserve inspires passion among its many advocates and frustration among residents of the communities that it borders. Called “the jewel in the crown of Belize’s protected area system,” for its exceptional biodiversity, dramatic topography, and archeological treasures, the 97,000-acre reserve is afforded Belize’s highest level of protection (Pinelo 2002). Only education and research are allowed in Bladen: hunting, fishing, logging, harvesting of plant materials for food, fiber, or medicine, removal of artifacts, tourism, and trespass of any sort without a permit are all prohibited. While these restrictions exist “on the books,” until recently the under-resourced Government agencies and thinly stretched non-governmental organizations tasked with enforcing them have implemented little real on the ground management in the reserve. With growing population and mounting development pressure, illegal activities in the reserve have continued to increase in the last several years, threatening both the natural and archeological resources that have made the Bladen Nature Reserve famous.

The Bladen Management Consortium was born out of its founders’ conviction that the Bladen Nature Reserve was a unique resource in dire need of management and their recognition that the management challenges were beyond the capacity of any one organization. As a case study in collaboration, it highlights the many difficulties associated with initiating and sustaining an multi-stakeholder management body, particularly with regard to funding, staffing, representation, and legitimacy. It also illustrates how a few committed individuals can drive a collaborative process forward despite such challenges. Significantly, several of the key individuals and organizations involved in the Bladen Management Consortium also interact in the broader landscape of the Toledo District. Understanding the difficulties and successes these groups have encountered in the

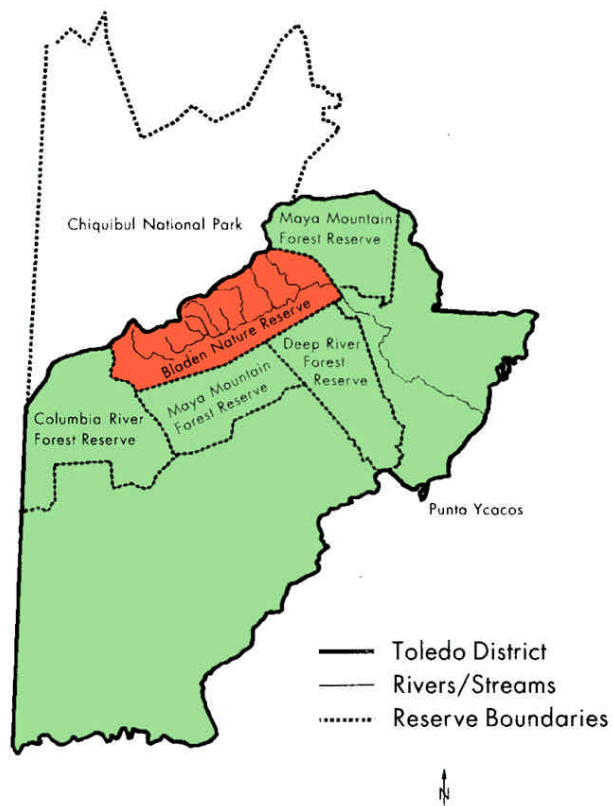
Consortium may therefore provide insights for incipient watershed management efforts in which they are involved at the district scale.

BACKGROUND

Context

The Bladen Nature Reserve sits at the “top” of the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor (MMMC), where several of the rivers that flow into Port Honduras, including Golden Stream, have their origin. The Reserve is bisected along its major axis by the Bladen Branch of the Monkey River, forming the Bladen Valley at the core of the Reserve. Several other protected areas that act as buffers surround the Bladen Nature Reserve:

- Maya Mountain Forest Reserve to the northeast and southeast (two parts);
- Deep River Forest Reserve to the east;
- Columbia River Forest Reserve to the southwest; Chiquibul National Park to the northwest;
- Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary to the northeast; and
- The privately-owned Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE) parcel to the northeast.



Map 10: Bladen Nature Reserve

Cockscomb Basin is managed by the Belize Audubon Society (BAS) under a co-management agreement with the Forest Department. The Forest Reserves are managed by the Forest Department. Bladen Nature Reserve and the Chiquibul National Park also fall officially under the auspices of the Forest Department. Of the surrounding parcels, the Forest Reserves are the least restricted and the most vulnerable to future de-reservation. Notably, all of these organizations are currently Consortium members.

Bladen is oriented along the axis of the Maya Mountains, which traverse Southern Belize from the southwest to the northeast. The Reserve's geologic diversity, with both limestone and granite bedrock, creates its unique and varied topography, including towering karst formations, extensive cave systems, and peaks, as well as lowlands. The varied topography in turn supports a rich diversity of flora and fauna. More than 600 species of trees are found in the Bladen with its intact lowland, tropical, seasonally moist forest. According to Jake Marlin the founder of BFREE, "It's probably one of two or three lowland rainforests left in the New World that has this level of diversity and structure". The area contains plants that are not found anywhere else in Belize or even in the world.

The diversity of wildlife is also rich in Bladen. All five species of native cats live here: jaguars, ocelots, jaguarundi, puma, and margay. Other mammals found here include spider monkey, tapir, agouti, and the gibbon. The Bladen Valley contains the richest herpetofaunal region in Belize, with a previously undescribed species of frog discovered in recent years. (Iremonger et al 1994)

The Bladen area was originally declared a Forest Reserve in May 1977. The area became the focus of scientific investigation in the late 1980's. National Geographic also filmed a movie on the Bladen called *Mountains of the Maya*. The findings from the investigations and the attention drawn to it by the National Geographic film drove the re-designation of the Bladen as a Nature Reserve in 1990. Simply changing the designation of the area did not guarantee its protection, however.

Organizations involved in the consortium

When the Consortium first met in 1995, thirty individuals representing ten organizations attended. As discussed later, these numbers quickly declined as the meetings of the Consortium continued. The core organizations in the first phase of the Consortium were the Belize Center for Environmental Education, BAS, the Toledo Alcaldes Association, the Forest Department, BFREE, the Department of Archaeology, and the Toledo Maya Cultural Council. In the second phase, the leaders have been BFREE, Toledo Institute for Development and Environment, Ya'axche' Conservation Trust, and the Forest Department. These four have recently been joined by BAS and Belize Lodge & Excursions (BLE). Each organization brings assets to the Consortium. YCT is recognized for its skill in community relations. TIDE excels in public, Government, and funder relations. BAS is experienced in protected areas management and is very connected with Government officials. Finally, BLE offers a well-trained staff of rangers and connections to international funders. While each of these organizations plays a role in Bladen, the Forest Department and BFREE, introduced below, have been the lead participants in the consortium to date through key staff.

Forest Department

The Forest Department is one of the three divisions of the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MNRE). The Forest Department is responsible for managing the forestry resources of Belize, which include all national forests, protected areas, wildlife and biological diversity of terrestrial zones. The mission of the MNRE is to improve the quality of life for all Belizeans by effectively managing and conserving the natural and environmental resources in order to improve the sustainable economic development of Belize. The Forest Department oversees the management of terrestrial protected areas.

The Forest Department gets most of its funding from the MNRE's annual budgetary allocations. Recently, it has been able to receive medium-sized grants from the Protected Areas Conservation Trust. These grants are small, however, and still do not adequately address their funding needs, which are substantial. A UNDP/GEF Project Report (Ravndal 2002) states:

The Protected Areas Programme [of the Forest Department] receives less than ½ of 1% of the already very restrictive budget assigned to the Ministry to which it belongs, the MNREI... With an annual budget of only US \$116,629, (Estimate of Revenue and Expenditures for 2002-2003, Government of Belize), and with none of this amount allocated for on-the-ground management of PAs, the Protected Areas Programme cannot possibly adequately co-manage (or manage) PAs, even with backstopping from the entire Forest Department. According to the new institutional structure, the entire Forest Department (as opposed to the Protected Areas Programme alone) should be more involved in PA management. Nevertheless, it seems highly unlikely that the overall situation regarding management of PAs will significantly improve. After all, the Forest Department is, itself, stretched to the very limit. The entire Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment, Trade and Industry (to which the Forest Department belongs) receives a mere 1.6% of the national budget (Estimate of Revenue and Expenditures for 2002-2003, Government of Belize). Given these extreme resource constraints, it is highly unrealistic to assume that the Forest Department can adequately manage the nation's PAs, or even monitor the management of these PAs by others.

The Department also receives some revenue from protected area entrance fees, but at insignificant levels. Due to poor financial resources, the Department has very little technical resources deployed there in the Toledo District, and this has been the case for a number of years. Wayne Bardalez, the District Forest Officer at Toledo's Machaca Forest Station stated:

The Forest Department appears to be handicapped due to lack of resources. Over ten years, even though they have qualified people and generate revenue, the Government of Belize has not provided financial support. NGOs, which have good experience, have been helping the Forest Department to do its monitoring. (2002)

Nonetheless, Forest Department staff – first Rafael Manzanero and then John Pinelo – have been leaders in establishing and maintaining the Bladen Management Consortium, offering expertise in protected areas management, time, space, and resources for coordination, commitment, and legitimacy because of their official jurisdiction over the Bladen. Legitimacy, as discussed further, proved especially important in convening group members. Significantly, John Pinelo left the Forest Department this year and joined the Belize Audubon Society as a senior staff member, from where he has continued to lead the Consortium.

Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education

In 1995 a young American herpetologist named Jake Marlin and his partner Kelly Marlin established BFREE, an environmental non-profit organization. The Marlins had spent time in the Bladen and sought to locate a research and environmental education center next to it. BFREE secured a lease for a 1,153 acre parcel of land abutting the Reserve and began to establish their facility. The land also abuts the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and the Maya Mountain Forest Reserve.

The parcel is strategically located at one of the major access points to the Reserve. From this vantage point and through subsequent research trips in the Bladen, the Marlins observed that the natural and archeological heritage of the site was being eroded through persistent and damaging activities, including looting, fishing with poisons, logging, and hunting. Furthermore, they learned that the Reserve was not actively managed on site by Forest Department personnel. Jake Marlin approached Rafael Manzanero at the Forest Department and together they initiated the first meeting of the group that would become the Bladen Management Consortium in late 1995.

The goals of BFREE are to promote education and research of the Belizean rainforest, as well as to protect the Bladen Nature Reserve. BFREE is financed by private donations, mostly from funders from the United States. BFREE, in the person of Jake Marlin, is the prime organizing force behind the Bladen Consortium today, along with John Pinelo.

Management challenges

The biodiversity of the Bladen Nature Reserve is unparalleled in Belize. The majority of the forest cover in the area has never been cut, due to the remoteness of the valley, the rugged karst topography, and the thick tangle of jungle vegetation. These same factors also make management and monitoring of the Reserve challenging, especially for a budget-constrained Government agency or a cash-strapped NGO.

Main issues surrounding the management of the Bladen Nature Reserve are unmonitored and illegal extractive activities occurring within the reserve. These include poaching, fishing, illegal logging, looting of Maya archaeological sites, and bio-prospecting. According to John

Pinelo, of the Forest Department, these activities are undertaken by opportunists, because they are “the ones that can get out the most stuff in the fastest amount of time” (2002). Surrounding communities also impact the Reserve through their customary subsistence practices.

Traditional activities

Neighboring Maya people, many from the adjacent community of Medina Bank, have traditionally used the Bladen Reserve for hunting, resource extraction, and other traditional activities. IN 1989, one year prior to the declaration of the Bladen as a Nature Reserve, Joseph Cal and his family founded the village of Medina Bank (TMCC and TAA 1997). This Kekchi and Mopan village is particularly dependent on the Reserve, as it is surrounded by private and Government protected areas, and they have few places where they can go to fulfill their subsistence needs. This predicament often pits the local community against managers of the Reserve. Pinelo explains:

Medina Bank is an island located within the protected areas. They have nowhere to go and the soil they have is not very good, so they have to go into the park to hunt. Basically, this is why they are against the management of the park and against the implementation of the plan. (2002)

Many of these activities, such as collecting palm fronds to make the traditional thatch roofs, incur relatively few impacts when conducted on a small scale. Villagers also collect fruit from the Reserve and market it as a “Genuine Mayan Product.” (Pinelo 2002)

Other traditional practices place greater pressure on the Reserve. Uncontrolled fishing and hunting within the reserve can destabilize certain ecosystems. Sometimes toxic chemicals are poured into streams and rivers to catch fish. Also, local hunters occasionally light fires to keep savannah areas open for better hunting. As elsewhere in Central America (Nietschmann 1973:88), this practice helps maintain pine-savannah ecosystems although frequent fires inhibit patches of pine regeneration. While fire occurs naturally in the savannahs surrounding the Reserve, it also can spread into the protected area. Last year, an uncontrolled fire burned down a ranger station near the Bladen.

Extraction of natural resources

The illegal extraction of other natural resources also damages the Reserve. These activities include bio-prospecting and logging. Illegal bio-prospecting is the systematic search and unsolicited removal of biological sources of new compounds for economic gains that are not shared with the people or place from which the material was extracted (INBio 2003). According to a GOB official, a previously-unknown species of cacao was discovered in the Nature Reserve and was clandestinely collected and smuggled to Trinidad (Anonymous 2002).

The difficulty of accessing the reserve has not stopped illegal logging completely. Much of the logging in the Toledo district uses chainsaw mills. These are small, basically a chainsaw and a metal frame, and can be carried into the reserve. Trees are cut down and quickly cut up into boards. Illegal chainsaw mills waste timber as well as damage the forest. John Pinelo of the Forest Department commented, “The blades are really thick, you lose a lot just in sawdust” (2002).

Extraction of archeological resources

The Maya Mountains, including the Bladen Valley, contain an abundance of understudied and unexcavated Maya ruins (Prufer and Wanyerka 2001). In addition to the research of professional archaeologists, this cultural wealth in South Belize draws the attention of occasional and professional looters. Looting, or treasure hunting, is often conducted by methods that destroy the site’s context which prohibits the interpretation of the significance of the find. Jake Marlin described one site in the Bladen, “I found clay idols with thousands of little saucer cups, jaguar skulls at the base of these cliffs, stuff you just wouldn’t believe” (2003). On a subsequent trip, Marlin discovered that the site had been plundered and largely destroyed. Highly organized looters have operated in the area for decades. Explosives are sometimes used to crack open uninvestigated Maya structures. Artifacts commonly surface on the black market. According to an official from the Department of Archaeology:

Looting is a huge problem. We [the Department of Archaeology] have one staff member dedicated to deal with the issue of looting and we have 1,400 sites all over the country not counting the [unexcavated] mounds. (Anonymous 2002)

While archaeological research recovers important data for understanding regional history, such projects direct looters to previously undisturbed areas. Long term research projects like the Maya Mountains Archaeological Project (MMAAP) create additional debate through the training of local field crews. The MMAAP began in 1992 under the direction of Cleveland State University archaeologist Peter Dunham, one of the contributors to the National Geographic film project. On one hand, Maya organizations argue that local people have rights to their cultural heritage and demand inclusion in research projects. One Maya leader explains, “The Mayan community needs to be involved in all the expeditions. We want to make sure that the community can manage the archaeological reserves” (Anonymous 2002). On the other hand, conservationists argue that many research projects damage the natural heritage of the Reserve. The MMAAP employed local people to cut trails and a helicopter pad and a camp within the reserve. After the field season, many of the ruins were looted and poachers started using the trails and camp. Jake Marlin blames Dunham for this destruction because “he showed the way, he paid them to cut the trails” (2002).

Another interviewee corroborated that training local people in excavation techniques may increase looting in the absence of alternative income generating opportunities:

Skilled labor equals skilled looters. When these [archaeology] operations are not here, you end up with trained looters for the off-season. The guys doing milpa end up going and doing some pilfering of a site. The country and the issue are so large that the best we can do is raise public awareness. One example is a 5” x 8” engraved zoomorphic limestone artifact that sold for US\$270,000 at Sotheby’s Auction. (Anonymous 2002)

Scientific research projects

Authorized research expeditions also pose challenges for the management of the Reserve. Officially, the Bladen Nature Reserve is open only to scientific studies, but even these activities can bring about damaging effects on the environment of the reserve. For example, Jake Marlin described a project on mammals that a student was undertaking within the reserve:

[A young researcher] needed a 500 meter transect. So Peter [Dunham] had his Mayan guys cut a line for it. I got up there two weeks later and walked that transect. So this girl had walked the transect several times, and it was all useless information. We estimated that several thousand trees had been cut down. (2002)

Although the 1987 National Geographic film, *Mountains of the Maya*, did create the momentum to establish the Reserve, it also attracted the attention of many individuals interested in profiting from the natural and cultural wealth of the area. Marlin argues that the activity surrounding the making of the movie and the increased exposure it brought contributed to more rapid degradation of the area, due especially to the cutting of trails and the uncovering of archeological sites, both of which enhanced illegal access to game and artifacts.

La Sierra Multidisciplinary Field Station

La Sierra Multidisciplinary Field Station is a comprehensive research initiative located three kilometers south of the Bladen Nature Reserve. To complement a similar research station in northern Belize, the GOB and the London Natural History Museum planned La Sierra with support from Cleveland State University. Work on it began in 1998. The University intends to sponsor programs at the Field Station in geology, biology, archaeology, and medicine. It is expected to be a US\$10 million project by the estimated date of completion in 2004 (CSU 2003).

Dubious circumstances surrounding the creation of La Sierra have led to controversy in the Bladen Nature Reserve and the village of Medina Bank. In the mid-1990s, project initiators acquired 600 acres of land claimed by the village of Medina Bank to build the Field Station. Dunham, a principal organizer of the station, suggested to officials in Medina Bank that the Government would compensate for the land taken by de-reserving land in the Deep River Forest Reserve (Anonymous 2002). While some of the villagers were discontented, Dunham placated the local leaders and gained their agreement by promising benefits for them and for the village. As the Department of Archeology does not have powers related to de-reservation of forest reserves, however, the takings caused several years of bureaucratic hassle for numerous Government agencies. Furthermore, the reduction in land available to the villagers

resulted in greater pressure on the Bladen Forest Reserve. In addition, the creation of a new road for the research station has created a new access point for illegal entry into the Reserve.

Land speculation

The improvement and expansion of the Southern Highway increases pressure on the Bladen Forest Reserve by facilitating the de-reservation of suitable agricultural lands along the highway that are currently protected in forest reserves. These reserves serve as critical buffers for the Bladen and their conversion to banana or citrus farms would both reduce the buffer and place additional pressures on the reserve as plantation workers move in (Marlin 2002; Pinelo 2002). Additional land pressures stem from fragmentation of surrounding communities. On one occasion, the Consortium was forced to remove a new settlement that emerged within the Bladen with the help of a “renegade” U.S.-based religious NGO (Marlin 2002).

History of the Bladen Management Consortium

In the late 1980s, the Belize Audubon Society agreed to manage national parks at the request of the Government of Belize. The Government of Belize and others assumed that BAS was also responsible for the management of the Bladen Nature Reserve, but none of the agreements that BAS signed with GOB explicitly included Bladen. The assumption of BAS management was likely based on the following facts:

- Up to 1989/90, BAS was the only NGO managing public protected areas. In fact, at that time, BAS was responsible for the management of all the national parks, with the exception of Bladen.
- In 1992-1994, BAS worked along with a regional TNC/USAID project that carried out a Rapid Ecological Assessment of the Bladen.
- In the late 1980s, BAS secured an endowment fund to support its protected area work. This fund stipulated that BAS provide support to the management of the Bladen.

Given limited staff and budget and faced with a broad mandate to manage protected areas across Belize, however, BAS was unable to take on the difficult task of managing Bladen on their own. At the time, Rafael Manzanero was the Protected Areas Officer at the Forest Department. As a member of the Protected Areas Technical Committee which was responsible for coordinating the formulation of management plans for national parks, Manzanero became aware of limitations of BAS managing the reserve, and determined that Bladen needed greater attention. Given Bladen's size and challenges, he realized that no one organization would be able to effectively manage it on its own. The only thing protecting the area at the time was a single sign. Having also recognized the need for greater management in Bladen, Jake Marlin of BFREE had contacted Manzanero. Together, Marlin and Manzanero came up with the proposal for the Bladen Management Consortium.

The beginnings

The Consortium started out with ten organizations, out of fifteen that had been invited. Marlin tells the story of the inception of the Bladen Management Consortium:

The Bladen Consortium had its first meeting at the Pelican Resort in the fall of '95 or early '96 . . . It came out of meetings to get stakeholders together, whether they be local Mayans, scientists, NGO's, to talk about the Bladen and discuss the issues . . . There were a lot of people interested in Bladen – individuals, communities, NGO's, Government – [but] there was no one managing it. Some people thought BAS was supposed to be managing it, but they didn't have capacity at the time. It [officially] falls under [the auspices of] the Ministry of Natural Resources, but they didn't have the capacity to manage it [either] . . . [So] someone put up some money and we had our first meeting with about 30 people . . . What came out of it was that we should form a committee to create a permanent forum, and it would be called the Bladen Consortium. So we started having meetings regularly. (2002)

Toward a management plan

Despite broad interest at the start, many groups and individuals lacked the time, resources, or interest for continued participation in the Consortium and its regular meetings. According to John Pinelo (2002), the group met “upwards of 30 times” in its first phase as they laid the foundation for a management plan. Marlin recounts:

The group got smaller, and we drafted these terms of reference, what our goals were. There were six: review opportunities for developing the Bladen Nature Preserve, develop mechanism to draft a management plan, things like that. The main players were BAS, the Belize Center for Environmental Studies (the predecessor of TIDE), which became defunct about that same time, the Forest Department, BFREE, the Department of Archaeology, Toledo Alcaldes Association, and TMCC. We even invited the loggers on, the New River Enterprises, people who have logging concessions. The meetings kept taking place, and we would draft minutes and memorandums, gaining information about the reserve.

We came up with a threats analysis, ‘What are the threats to Bladen and how can they be resolved?’ We contacted TNC and they sent down their protected areas specialist, Hernan Torres. He came down and sat in on some Consortium meetings; we picked his brains on coming up with a management plan. We wanted to get a management plan drafted, but we didn’t have the money and weren’t sure who would write it. Eventually, what started happening was that the protected areas specialist for the [Forest Department], Rafael Manzanero, and myself wrote it. We got a lot of people to help . . . It took about two years, and it didn’t cost anything. It’s a damn good document, it outlines everything that should be done. It was finished in ‘98, and *it’s been sitting on a shelf ever since*. (2002; emphasis added)

Pinelo similarly relates that the management plan is currently in limbo, and adds that with the management plan complete, the Consortium lost steam:

The group’s first goal was to write a management plan for the area, which was completed and submitted to the department [in 1998] and *is still awaiting approval*. With the first task complete, the group stopped meeting, as our primary goal was accomplished. (2002; emphasis added)

The management plan for the Bladen addresses four key issues: fire prevention, environmental education, monitoring, and research.

Changing participants

The Consortium relied heavily on the efforts of Marlin and Manzanero. Through his position in Government, Manzanero gave the Consortium legitimacy that Marlin, as a non-Belizean and director of a small start-up NGO in the middle of the jungle, could not give to the Consortium. Manzanero’s departure from the Government was thus a major setback for the Consortium. As Marlin describes,

In about '98 the [Protected Areas Officer of the Forest Department], Rafael Manzanero, left his post and took a job in the private sector. At that time, no one stepped forward in the [Forest Department] to take his place, that was active and had the background and understanding that he did. So I tried to keep the Consortium running as best I could. Because BFREE and the Forest Department were the primary players, we kept the ball rolling.

I kept calling meetings and no one would show up. It's because BFREE, four years ago we weren't as well respected as we are now. *Being a white guy and calling meetings for all these Belizeans, it didn't work so well.* The Department of Archaeology, out of about 30 meetings, came to one. That wasn't unusual. BAS was represented by their Cockscomb manager; they were regulars, that was great. [But] most people weren't involved. So very little happened, while things were [still] going on in Bladen. (2002; emphasis added)

Revitalizing the Consortium

Several years passed and management plan for Reserve still was not being implemented. Marlin wanted to get things started again, and tried to decide who to get involved in the next stage of the development of the Consortium. In assessing which groups to involve in the revived Consortium, Marlin considered where various groups operate, their jurisdiction, the level of each group's interest in Bladen, and the resources they could bring to bear to either enhance the Consortium if they were involved or to frustrate the Consortium's efforts if they were not involved. At the same time, he hoped to keep the Consortium small and efficient. As he recounted, he asked,

Who do we need to get involved to get things rolling [again]? Of course, the Forest Department, it's their jurisdiction. BFREE is involved, and we weren't sure from there. BAS, it's out of their range, maybe they don't need to get involved. TIDE, they didn't exist when we started the Consortium, [but] they're very active now in promoting themselves. Politically, we need the Maya involved. The [Toledo] Alcaldes Association (TAA) always shows up, but they change every two years and they never have anything to say. TMCC [the Toledo Maya Cultural Council], well we know what their interests are. The Consortium isn't going to provide much income for the local people, because there's no tourism.

YCT and Golden Stream has popped up in the last couple years. They're our neighbors. They're close to here and they've got wardens, representing the Maya pretty well. Bartolo Teul is someone we've been working with before with the Forest Service and BFREE directly for a while now, a very solid relationship, let's get YCT involved.

Then I was like, if we don't get TIDE involved, there's going to be all sorts of hoopla, I know there is . . . That's why I got TIDE involved in the Consortium.

[So we decided to] have our first [revived] Consortium meeting. It [was] Forest Department, TIDE, BFREE, YCT. All local but the Forest Department. [Pinelo and I thought] let's limit it to that right now and see what happens. If you have too many organizations and people involved, then nothing ever gets done. Things hardly get done down here anyway. (2002)

Marlin thus assembled a team for the Consortium that brought local contacts (YCT), legitimacy and technical expertise (Forest Department), proximity, ecological knowledge, and enthusiasm (BFREE), and powerful external relations (TIDE). La Sierra Multidisciplinary Field Station was also invited to join due to its location and potential role in blocking illegal access to the Bladen, but Dunham was not available, as he is based in the United States.

Recent problems with the pine beetle outbreak and fire provided additional incentive for the revived Consortium to continue meeting, and, as noted earlier, two more organizations – BAS and BLE – have since joined. According to Pinelo (2002), the group has started taking “a more proactive stance,” and is actively implementing education, fire protection and awareness, boundary demarcation, and patrols. While they have not formally asked the Government for management status, they have already fought fires in Bladen, and last summer they hired rangers to patrol the Reserve. This winter, BLE offered additional assistance with monthly patrols.

Active management is part of the Consortium's overall plan to gain co-management of the Reserve. According to Pinelo:

We want to show the Government that we can get the work done even if we are not official managers. Hopefully, after that, we will approach the Government and request co-management of Bladen . . . We [the Consortium] are putting our money on the line to get it done. We haven't asked them [Government] for anything. We've hired three people and we're paying them with funds we found somewhere else. We've done educational work in the communities and have done firefighting. Now we're doing boundary demarcation, all this with little funds that we've identified. Hopefully, this will give them more confidence in the group. We hope to do more of this, and then later go to the Government and say, “we've been doing this for a while

now, we'd like to get co-management." They'll have a track record of our performance. That's our strategy. (2002)

The Bladen Management Consortium has gained momentum as of late. Continuing forward will require the Consortium to address the many challenges to collaboration that the group still faces and that it takes advantage of the opportunities for enhancing joint management presented by increased interest and shared goals among member and non-member organizations.

ANALYSIS

Challenges for collaboration

The Bladen Management Consortium has faced, and continues to face, many challenges. The Consortium must contend with: 1) organizational challenges; 2) continued funding limitations; 3) varying levels of input and involvement among Consortium members; 4) potential political obstacles to co-management; and 5) difficult relations with local communities.

Organizational challenges

The organizational composition of the Bladen Consortium has a tendency to remain in flux. Changing personnel, such as Manzanero's and Pinelo's departure from the Forest Department, limits the stability of the Consortium. Recent changes within the Forest Department make it unclear at this point who will have the responsibility for the Bladen Consortium.

While the Forest Department's representative in the Bladen Consortium remains unfilled, leadership will fall to Marlin. Unfortunately, due to his status as a U.S. national, his legitimacy to lead may not be recognized by Belizeans in the local villages and the Toledo NGO community.

Difficulties posed by bureaucratic hurdles may limit the effectiveness of the Consortium in the near future. The delay in the adoption of the management plan has stymied efforts to bring the Consortium to full operational capacity. Jurisdictional concerns are also an issue, given that the Consortium is not a registered NGO and has not yet been delegated authority to manage the preserve.

Resource constraints

Funding. One major challenge for the Bladen Consortium is keeping people involved when little funding exists to support the process. When attending meetings, participants incur costs, and many seek to have these expenses covered. Time is also a factor, given limited human resources. As Pinelo laments:

Many people advocate for the park but then when asked to act they don't show up or they want their expenses paid for, their food and hotel room. But we are in the same situation they are in, we don't have funding for this.

This is the 'project syndrome.' So many projects have taken place in Punta Gorda and so much money [has been provided] that people expect to be paid, fed and housed. But this is for their own benefit, why should we have to pay them for something that's going to benefit them. So a lot of people say they can't afford the bus, can't miss work, don't have the money to go, and then when you start doing stuff they criticize. That's the biggest problem. (2002)

In addition, the Forest Department has little available funding to support Bladen Consortium. The Department lacks the funds to purchase vehicles for its staff, let alone to support projects.

Sharing the burden. Involvement in the Consortium is costly, both in terms of time and money. Current Consortium members disagree as to whether all members are "pulling their weight." According to Pinelo, all of the current members of the Consortium are contributing to its functioning:

Those that are currently involved with the Consortium now – YCT, BFREE, Forest Department, TIDE – are genuinely interested. They donate time and money to the meetings, they work above and beyond what they do normally, to get the Consortium to operate. (2002)

In contrast, Marlin suggests that work is not evenly shared among the groups.

To be honest, in the last few months, BFREE has put in about ten grand and a lot of effort. [The Forest Department] has put in quite a bit of work. YCT has been invaluable in the interview process, finding information. TIDE hasn't done [much] . . . (2002)

Feelings of unequal input may frustrate attempts to work together over the long term. Discussing expectations about levels of involvement among Consortium members may ease brewing frustrations, especially given the varied levels and types of expertise, resources, and interest among organizations.

Power and politics

Political obstacles could prevent the establishment of co-management, depending on the interests of key decision makers. As noted, the management plan has been awaiting approval since 1998. It is not clear to the participants in the Consortium whether this delay is the result of neglect or active resistance. However, it is clear that support from local stakeholders and politicians may be necessary to secure co-management. As Pinelo describes:

[Getting co-management] depends on who is supporting you, whether the [Forest] Department supports what you are doing or not. That makes it fast or slow. I have seen co-management agreements signed by other ministers. Our minister has the mandate or responsibility to sign the co-management agreements. I have seen some drag on and on, because they didn't have the contacts or support behind them, community-wise or politically. There is no one strategy for getting co-management. We want to show the Government that we are being proactive. (2002)

Community issues

Given the possibility that local resistance to the Consortium's plans could lead to opposition at the ministerial level, a major challenge faced by the Consortium is managing its relationship with the local communities. Given that the land in the Reserve has traditionally been used by local communities to meet subsistence needs, its closure to these activities is a source of friction with these villages. Pinelo (2002) states that, "Mayan communities are not opposed to Bladen itself rather they are opposed to not being able to go into Bladen and log

and hunt and fish.” Due to Bladen’s strict protection status, it offers fewer benefits to local communities through alternative income generating strategies or tourism. As Marlin confides,

That’s the catch with Bladen, it’s the strictest level of protection, one of the most diverse areas in the country, but research and education are pretty limiting. We’ll need some guys to pack stuff around for the students or researchers, but let’s face it, it’s not going to generate a lot of money or employ a lot of people. That’s why an endowment fund is going to be the best way to sustain it.

It may not only be the restrictions on traditional use that cause community opposition. It appears that local community leaders may not be satisfied with their current level of participation in the process of planning for the Bladen. While the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) once had a seat on the Consortium, no local leaders currently take part in it. When invited to past meetings, they would rarely participate. It appears that leaders from Medina Bank were upset by the approach taken by the Consortium. Marlin describes a recent incident:

So I sent these wardens up to Medina Bank a week ago to do a patrol going through La Sierra [Research Station] to see if anyone was using that access point to enter Bladen to commit illegal activities. When they got there, the alcalde said they had no right to go into La Sierra or the Bladen. He wouldn’t authorize them to go in there. He had no right to stop them. So they came back and said that the alcalde wouldn’t let them go in there. (2002)

A few days earlier, an interview with the Medina Bank leaders revealed their frustration over this very incident. They took the visit of the rangers as an insult, it appears. Joseph Cal, a leader in Medina Bank, expressed his dissatisfaction as follows:

To contact people here, *they just send rangers*. They have three. People hear about things by word of mouth! (2002; emphasis added)

An official from the Department of Archeology suggests that dealing directly with village leaders is key for local buy-in and understanding:

We always have dealt with the alcalde and chairman in the villages. If you want to get anything done, you have to talk to alcalde first: hire some men, cut the grass, or put up a sign. We have had some bad experiences in the past, from not communicating, when we didn’t talk to alcalde. But we found out that we can do just about anything if we first talk with the alcalde. It is simple. You need to talk with these people. (Anonymous 2002)

Community involvement was not a major part of the Consortium or the development of the management plan, although according to Marlin it was attempted and TAA did have a seat at the table. John Pinelo said that he feels that “communities are often the main threat to protected areas, and giving too much power to communities might undermine the resource.” He continued by saying:

Mayan communities are ‘temperamental.’ They can agree with you at the table in the morning and in the evening they’re at the minister’s desk telling him they don’t want you in the area. They have different agendas. We can’t change our operations to suit them in the morning and the evening. They didn’t participate in the writing of the management plan, even though they were invited. (2002)

Given the potential of the communities to prevent the Consortium from gaining co-management, however, engaging local leaders may further Consortium goals, despite the many difficulties associated with involvement efforts.

The immediate costs of strict protection for neighboring communities may, in the absence of viable alternative income generating strategies, far outweigh the benefits. Communities may therefore choose to ignore restrictions. The reserve has little to offer in terms of employment or benefits. Getting community buy-in may be possible by creating economic opportunities outside of the reserve. Developing an organic shade-grown cacao initiative within the Toledo district, for example, would create the kind of opportunity for a more cash-crop based economy in the villages. Tying the protection of the Bladen Nature Reserve to sustainable agroforestry development in the area would foster the kind of collaboration needed to protect this important resource.

Opportunities and facilitating factors

Despite so many obstacles to success, the Bladen Management Consortium has survived for more than seven years and has continued to move forward. In the last year it has been as active as ever. Continued motivation for involvement appears to be derived from a fundamental commitment to the protection of the stunningly beautiful and diverse Bladen Nature Reserve that is shared by conservation professionals, funders, and other supporters throughout Belize and beyond.

Potential for joint gains

To date, the Consortium has relied on small infusions of money from member groups, especially BFREE, whose mission is most closely associated with the protection of Bladen. Consortium members have been working on securing more permanent funding for managing the Reserve, however, and current signs point to success in this endeavor. Fortunately, the high profile of Bladen attracts international donor interest. So while it cannot generate revenue through tourism, the Consortium may be able to generate grants to protect its remarkable biodiversity.

Political support

In addition to demonstrating their management readiness by implementing patrols, conducting education, and fighting fires, as discussed above, the Consortium has made efforts to ensure a high level of interest in Bladen among politicians and other influential Belizeans. In addition to keeping these individuals informed, they seek to keep them excited. The Consortium works with the NGO Lighthawk, which provides free airplane trips to conservation organizations, to show politicians and others the Bladen from the air. Marlin also invites key contacts to the BFREE facility to see the Reserve first-hand on-the-ground.

Interest in moving forward

Committed individuals. Marlin and Pinelo are the driving forces behind the Consortium, and have overcome bureaucratic and organizational inertia to move management forward. Pinelo left the Forest Department for the BAS in the Fall of 2002. In his interview during the Summer of 2002, Pinelo suggested that he would continue to work on the Consortium in his new post, which indeed he has, though he does so as a BAS staff member, not just an individual as he suggests below:

I myself participate out of interest; while I currently represent the [Forest Department] with the Consortium I will continue to do so once I move to BAS. Then I will participate as myself not as an organization. Whomever replaces me may or may not continue to support the Bladen Consortium. This isn't a problem for the Consortium: They know how to move independently and find their own support. (2002)

The Forest Department by no means required that Pinelo participate in the Consortium. It seems that, like Marlin, he is driven by a passion for Bladen. When asked why he participates in the Consortium, Pinelo replied:

I'm trained in park management and there's only one other person in the country trained in park management . . . I have some skills to help. I'm [also] impressed by Bladen. It's really wild . . . I've been with the Consortium from the beginning, when we started from scratch. It's part of me, like a child raised from the time it's born. It's also a park with lots of potential, if not for recreation then for research. Bladen has the potential to become the first self-sustaining park in the country if given proper management. I want to be part of that if it ever occurs. (2002)

Renewed interest in the Consortium. Pinelo noted that now that the difficult work of creating the plan and having it accepted by the Government is near completion and new funding is imminent, several more groups are now expressing interest in becoming involved in the Consortium. Managing a possible growing membership and setting equitable criteria for who may join may prove challenging. Nonetheless, the groups that have recently become involved have brought helpful resources to the Consortium.

Belize Lodge & Excursions (BLE), for example, has begun assisting with management of the Bladen. BLE rangers have conducted patrols of the Bladen Nature Reserve along with other Consortium members. As reported on BLE's website:

BLE Rangers began participating this December in patrols held once a month in the Bladen Nature Reserve. The joint patrols include the Forest Department, BFREE, TIDE, the Belize Audubon Society and YCT. This unprecedented effort by the NGO, private, and government sectors working together is helping to protect one of Belize's most valuable protected areas. (BLE 2003e)

Ken Karas, Managing Director of BLE, was an assistant producer for *Mountains of the Maya*, and is a passionate advocate for the Bladen. Furthermore, the integrity of the Golden Stream corridor, with Bladen at the headwaters of the watershed, is "essential to the trans-habitat experience" for BLE customers (Karas 2002). BLE's significant resources may prove to be a helpful addition to the Consortium, despite BLE's potential interest in using the Bladen for purposes of tourism, which is currently not permitted.

Other opportunities

- Through his contacts with Peter Dunham, Ken Karas may be able to persuade La Sierra Multidisciplinary Field Station to participate in the Consortium, which Marlin believes could help in addressing problems of illegal access to the reserve through the La Sierra property (Marlin 2002).
- Interest among Archaeology staff in the prevention of looting and strong relationships between Archaeology and the Forest Department may present possibilities for partnering to protect important Maya sites.
- With his move to BAS, Pinelo may now bring to the table the resources of one of Belize's oldest and most well-respected conservation organizations, potentially more than offsetting the loss of legitimacy incurred by no longer wearing the mantle of the Forest Department.

CONCLUSIONS

The story of the Bladen Management Consortium not only highlights constraints and opportunities specific to one context; it also offers broader lessons that may apply to other collaborative efforts. These lessons include the following:

- The Bladen Management Consortium did not simply arise out of a general interest in the area, but rather out of a shared perception that several critical management issues threatened the area's integrity. Interest was later rekindled by new threats, namely an insect infestation and fire, underscoring the motivating power of perceived threats to valued resources.
- Individuals passionate about protecting the resource played a central role in overcoming the many barriers to collaboration that the Consortium faced over the years of its existence, highlighting the role of committed individuals. Additionally, having more than one leader of the Consortium allowed it to continue despite the loss of a key individual, demonstrating the value of shared leadership.

- Community support for management efforts has proven difficult to garner in the absence of real incentives for such support. In general, meaningful local involvement may reduce conflict even if it does not eliminate opposition altogether.

- Striking the optimal balance between involving too many and too few individuals and organizations in the Consortium has been a challenge for group members. Multiple organizations and individuals with varying skills and resources, however, have strengthened the group by bringing these diverse and complementary assets to the table.