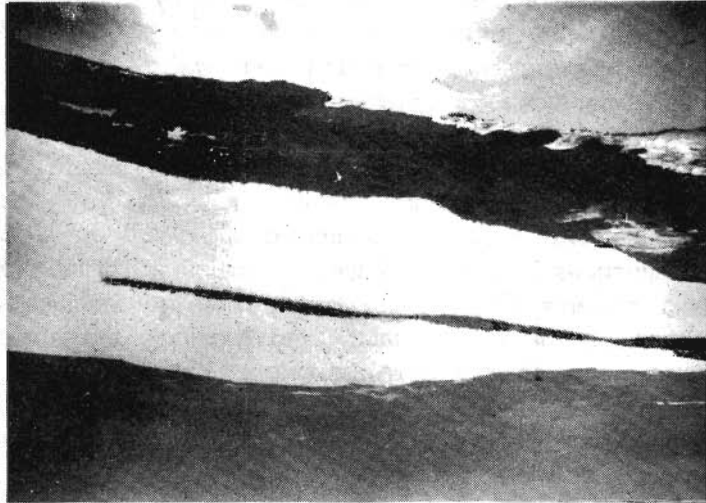


Community Conservation And Ecotourism Gales Point, Manatee

By Robert Horwich and Barbara Boardman

Conservation and community - two words that may at time seem at odds with each other, but community conservation is something that is catching on rapidly in Belize. In 1985, an experiment in grass roots conservation began with the initiation of the Community Baboon Sanctuary along the Belize River. This project included the pledging of some forest areas for the protection of the black howler monkey (called locally baboon) by private landowners, mainly subsistence farmers and small ranchers. The sanctuary, which began with the landowners of Bermudian Landing now includes over 100 landowners and the seven additional villages of Big Falls, Double Head Cabbage, Flowers Bank, Isabella Bank, Scotland Half Moon, St. Pauls Bank and Willows Bank. These landowners have made a decision to protect their wildlife and concurrently to improve their village economies through ecotourism.

With the inspiration of the Community Baboon Sanctuary, the seeds of community conservation have spread throughout Belize from St. Margaret's Village to Barranco. In Gales Point, Manatee, the proposal of a community based sanctuary began as a grass roots effort in 1990. Villages from Gales Point, with help from Ministries of Tourism and Natural Resources and Community Conservation Consultants, a US based non-profit organization, initiated a conservation plan for protection of natural resources. The Gales Point Progressive Cooperative was created with the expressed goals of protecting the Manatee natural areas and of increasing economic development through ecotourism, agriculture, and environmentally sound light industries. A plan for a multiuse



land management system was proposed to the government of Belize to protect public lands and use private lands in a renewable, sustainable manner. The general philosophy of such land use is that some lands must be completely protected while others can be used for various functions. However, all land use must be accomplished in such a way as to insure its long term use for generations to follow.

The Government of Belize responded quickly to the general conservation plan for the area by creating two special development areas, the Manatee Special Development Area (MSDA) in November 1991 and the Manatee West SDA, created later. This was a recognition by the Government of Belize that the area contains many national treasures that need to be protected. The SDA system is a forward looking system proposed by the Ministry of Natural Resources to begin zoning various areas within the country for proper land use. A zoning plan was then created by an advisory committee which included spe-

cific recommendations for resource protection for the Manatee Special Development Area. These recommendations include identification of specific resource needs to allow sensitive planning for them, to protect water quality, to maintain ecosystem integrity, to develop an interconnected corridor system, to preserve the biological and cultural diversity of the area and to plan for sustained resource use. These recommendations have been submitted to a Lands Utilization Authority subcommittee for final approval.

Such zoning recommendations are important both for the eco-tourism industry for the area and for protection of the natural resources and rural lifestyle. The two Special Development Areas compose a very varied area of ecosystems which include pine savannah, karst hills riddled with caves containing Mayan artifacts, coastal beaches, brackish lagoons, mangrove forests and a variety of rivers and riverine forests. The MSDA is a matrix of 40% wetlands which include mangrove forests, swamps, marshes, savannahs, rivers and ponds. The flat coastal plain is bounded to the west and south by spectacular karst hill formations which grade into the foothills of the Maya Mountains.

These Maya Mountain foothills, which comprise the main part of Manatee West SDA, are the main watershed of the lagoon complex. This watershed protection is of the utmost importance not only for the village health but for the health of the lagoons themselves. The shallowness of the lagoons concentrates the effects of sediment accumulation as well

as herbicide, pesticide and fertilizer runoff. Such runoff products can profoundly affect the water quality and thus the fish, both in the lagoons and beyond as the water runs out the river to spread throughout the reef system. The importance of proper land use of these areas for agriculture and

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other industry can have wide ramifications for the whole area. It can thus be seen that there is a natural affiliation of the two SDA's which should be brought together into one protected area.

The lagoons additionally are inhabited by the West Indian manatee, an endangered relative of the elephant. Southern Lagoon has been found to be one of the most populated areas in Central America for this unusual mammal. Manatees seem to visit the area for fresh-water drinking sources and for mating and calving. Thus far, lack of disturbance from de-

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velopment and high speed boat traffic has made the area a safe haven for the manatees. This, plus the rich variety of ecosystems within a relatively small area make the area, well suited for a conservation and ecotourism area.

The village of Gales Point, which is the only village located within the manatee SDA, is situated on a long thin peninsula which extends into the Southern Lagoon in a south to north direction. The Northern and Southern Lagoon complex has long been a vacation spot for Belizeans. The protected inland waterways of the Burdon Canal and the lagoons allow scenic boat travel between Belize City and Gales Point. Gales Point is a traditional Creole village based on subsistence farming, fishing and hunting. Villagers see ecotourism as a welcome addition to their pursuits and the village, with the help of Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology (BEST), is mobilizing in this direction. The Gales Point Progressive Cooperation, with government assistance, is currently constructing a hotel to be cooperatively owned and managed. The hotel will complement the active Bed and Breakfast association which is currently operating in the village. Under this association, villagers provide simple lodgings and meals for visitors.

Ecotourism is a concept which has taken Belize by storm and is an economic field that is being used to help communities to gain some benefit from their lands and wildlife in a non-consumptive manner. It is a tool which has already shown benefits to the villagers of the Community Baboon Sanctuary and the village of Gales Point, Manatee. It allows villagers to take an active role in the protection and management of their own natural resources and lands, and allows a strengthening of the rural lifestyle and the rural economy.

However, the word ecotourism has come to mean simply showing nature to visitors and it

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has become merely another system by which business can exploit the environment and local communities for its own profits. If ecotourism is to work, it must become not just a passive event of viewing nature but must take on the active role of true conservation. If members of the tourism industry wish to practice true ecotourism conservation, they must begin to put money and effort back into the basic component resources on which their industry is dependent, wildlife and its habitat and the local communities which live within natural areas.

How can tour groups and tourists be real ecotourists? Tour groups and hoteliers can easily help projects such as the Community Baboon Sanctuary or the Gales Point, Manatee project. Tour organizers can include a per person fee within the package rates for each tour which would go directly to the conservation groups which man-

age the parks visited, like the Belize Audubon Society. Tour leaders or organizers can arrange for day tours to take their meals from local villagers who are equipped to provide them with local style meals. These simple ideas are only a few by which tourists and the tourism industry can strengthen the community conservation efforts that rural Belizeans are pioneering.

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