

COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM IN THE MAYA
FOREST: A CASE STUDY FROM BELIZE
The Nature Conservancy USAID/MAYAFOR PROJECT
Written by John Beavers, Consultant to The Nature
Conservancy October 1995

THE TOLEDO ECOTOURISM ASSOCIATION (T.E.A.) AND
ITS PHILOSOPHY

The TEA was founded in 1990 by a group of Toledo District Mayas, Garifunas and Creoles. The residents wanted to become involved in tourism in their villages and were looking for a way to improve their incomes through these types of activities. They approached a Punta Gorda businessman, Chet Schmidt, who was involved in tourism through his own guesthouse, restaurant and tour operation. From this meeting developed the idea for a system of guesthouses to be established in the villages primarily located in the foothills of the Maya Mountains. The TEA's program, called the "Village Guesthouse and Eco-trail Program" was developed to give local residents the opportunity to participate in the planning, management, benefit and control of ecotourism in their villages. With the increase of tourism to the area, a major concern of the Association is to control tourism in the communities so that it does not negatively affect village life and culture. This requires striking a balance between the needs of villagers and tourists. In order for this balance to be struck local residents need to be the main developers and beneficiaries of tourism in their villages.

The TEA philosophy is that every community has a carrying capacity for the number of tourists that it can handle. So as not to be overrun, they have developed a system where each village works on a rotation system so that the tourists that visit the area are shared among the villages. When tourists arrive at the TEA office in Punta Gorda, each village takes its turn in receiving those tourists. Once a village has received a group, it waits its turn until all of the other villages have received visitors. In this way the income from tourism is shared and so is the impact. Within each village various families participate in the guesthouse program by preparing meals for the guests, attending the guesthouse, serving as guides, and in some cases being story tellers, dancers and musicians. Once a family has performed a service such as cooking they take another turn only after every other family has taken their turn so that the benefits are spread equally. The other purpose of!

this rotation is to minimize conflicts in the communities and between residents so that no single family or group monopolizes the guesthouse. In this manner families do not become overworked or overexposed to tourism. The experience remains a novelty for families and tourists alike. Finally, because tourism is not meant to replace traditional economic activities but to supplement them, rotations spread the benefits around the community so that everyone can work in the tourism trade without sacrificing their other activities.

The area is rich in natural, archaeological and cultural attractions which the TEA encompasses into their program. The Maya Mountains offer tropical rain forests which contain a high level of bio diversity. There are also many rivers and caves in the area which can be explored and the TEA villages are located close to various archeological sites. Tours of the attractions can be taken on foot, on horseback or by canoe. Culturally the Garifuna, Creole and Mayan cultures in the area have many traditional activities; dance, music, story telling and crafts that they produce and which are promoted by the TEA. Visitors stay overnight in the village guesthouses and have the opportunity to view village life and eat traditional meals.

Of the approximately 30 villages in the Punta Gorda area, five (Laguna, San Pedro Columbia, San Miguel, Santa Cruz and San Jose) began to participate in the program in 1990. With few resources the five TEA groups began to build their guesthouses. It was not until 1992 that the guesthouses were actually completed and a very few guests began to arrive. In 1993 more tourists began to arrive and since then the numbers have increased. Although the original groups have a lost some members and the amount of tourists that have arrived are few, the villages appear to have a positive outlook on the future of the program and more villages are interested in joining the TEA. In each community the average number of families participating in the TEA is about 7 to 9. However, food and other service providers who do not appear to be members are also participating.

Presently, the group is attempting a major improvement and expansion of their program with grants from The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and The Nature Conservancy(TNC). With the help of these grants, the TEA will upgrade the five existing guesthouses and construct new ones in seven other communities (Barranco, Blue Creek, Corazon Creek, Medina Bank, Pueblo Viejo, Santa Elena and San Antonio). The expansion also includes the construction of multipurpose buildings financed by WWF in all of the 12 villages These structures will house small museums, libraries and an area to sell local crafts. With this expansion more communities will be able to participate in the TEA program and it is hoped that a greater number of families in each community will participate. To date, the group has done little promotion of their program, but this promotion is one of the objectives of this expansion. As the program has grown it has suffered from lack of staff and administrative capabilities. With this expansion, the TEA will try to generate enough revenue to hire a full time paid administrator in order to improve the administrative capabilities of the program.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE, ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE TEA PROGRAM

The development of the guesthouse system in the original five participating villages was done using the same standards

and designs in each site. Every guesthouse is constructed under the same plan so that each one is no better or worse than any other. Every village has one guesthouse which is divided into two rooms and sleeps up to eight people. Each room has two bunkbeds and all of the necessities to spend a night such as sheets, mosquito netting, lanterns, towels, eating utensils, water, etc. Construction of the original guesthouses was completed over a two year period because funding was minimal. Between 1990 and 1992, the only portions of the houses that were constructed were the floors and roofs. The guesthouses are rustic and were constructed of local materials including palm thatch roofs and wooden walls. Also outhouses and other outbuildings are bathing have been constructed. The amount invested in the construction and outfitting of each guesthouse in 1992 was ! US \$1,646.

Each community will establish a village protected area in order to develop an eco trail for tourists and to generate further income for the community. Within each village protected area commercially grown organic crops such as cacao, medicinal plants and a reforestation area which includes other flora used in arts and crafts and for food will be developed to give tourists a view of the local flora and fauna and traditional agricultural practices. The income generated from the production in these areas will be shared among group members.

Overnight stays, meals, tours and other services are priced the same in each village. TEA members who provide services in the community retain 80% of the money that is left by tourists and 20% is retained by the TEA office in Punta Gorda. Of that 20%, 10% goes to a health and education fund which is saved for three months and then distributed to the village schools (the money is used for pencils, notebooks and other materials) or to help subsidize health services (such as lending money for medicine or paying for transportation to take someone to the doctor or hospital, etc.) 10% goes into a conservation fund which villages use for trails, reforestation or other conservation projects. 55% goes to administrative costs for the office, such as brochures, copies and other materials. 15% goes to promotion and advertising and the final 10% is allocated to government taxes and professional dues paid by the organization. From the money generated through the accommodations, of the 80% left in the community, about 5% is allocated to supplies and maintenance, 7.5% is collected by the government as hotel tax and about 87.5% is retained as salary for members working in the guesthouse during that rotation. For meal and other service providers, 20% of their income goes to the general fund and the remaining 80% is retained by the service provider

In order to maintain a high level of service in the guesthouse system, standards have been established to help maintain quality (cleanliness, availability of clean water, safe food preparation, etc.) In order to help monitor and guarantee this,

each tourist is given a "trip ticket" which gives them a chance to evaluate the project by describing what they liked or disliked and to mention any problems that arose. This guarantees that standards are being met. If there are repeated problems at a specific guesthouse, the district executive board, comprised of TEA members, votes on whether to take the community out of the rotation. Only when the community successfully address those problems are they allowed back into the rotation by the board. This action has been taken on occasion.

The organization of the TEA is democratic with two levels of leadership; one level oversees all of the TEA villages (called the TEA district executive) and the second is established on the village level. On both levels a chairman, treasurer and secretary are elected every two years. On the village level, local group members from each community vote for their officers. On the district level, every member of the TEA votes for the district executive officers. Along with the district officers, a senior advisory council helps the group in matters of administration, management and other matters. This group is comprised of the three district executive officers and representatives from The Belize Tourism Industry Association, the Toledo Maya Cultural Council and the Toledo Homesite Farming and Ecology Center. Also the Toledo District development officer (a representative of the government) is included. Chet Schmidt's relation to the TEA is as a "volunteer consultant."

The success of the guesthouses in terms of economic impacts has, so far, not been very high. The number of tourists who have stayed in the guesthouses has not been sufficient to significantly affect the villages or members of the TEA. There are two reasons for this. Although the TEA has received a lot of publicity from articles and studies, they have done very little promotion of the guesthouses on their own. Most of the tourists that have arrived have heard of the TEA through articles or word of mouth. Also, from 1990 to 1992 the buildings were under construction and since then the policy has been to give the villages experience in managing the guesthouses in order to work out any problems in the system. This slow growth policy is about to change as the present expansion will upgrade the existing guesthouses and complete seven new ones. With this expansion will come more emphasis on publicity and there will be sufficient capacity to handle a large number of tourists.

Although the number of visitors has not been very high, members feel that they have received enough tourists to continue the program. The members appear to have a sense of the potential for the development of tourism in their villages. An estimated 600 visitors have stayed overnight in the guesthouses since they began receiving tourists about two and a half years ago. The first documentation of tourists began in 1993 in the five villages and the number of individual guests can be estimated at 676 overnight stays. (Some tourists stayed in more than one guesthouse). In 1995

(as of April 5th), of the 79 tourists that have stayed in the guesthouses, 65 spent one night, 10 spent two nights, and four spent three or more nights. In three out of four of the guesthouses, the trend in overnight stays is moving upward. One of the major reasons for the low count in the San Pedro Columbia guesthouse is because of the lack of interesting tourist attractions in the village compared to others. Another factor that affects the number of tourists that may stay in any of the villages is that if TEA members do not adhere to the established rules (such as the rotation policy), tourists may not be sent to certain villages until they correct the problems.

CONCLUSIONS

The natural attractions that the Maya Mountains offer (tropical forests, archeological sites, caves and rivers) and the cultural attractions (Creole, Garifuna and Mayan Cultures) give the Toledo District a good foundation for building a strong tourism industry. It is apparent by the amount of investment taking place that tourism will grow quickly in the area. From the debate taking place in Punta Gorda and from the strategy that the TEA is proposing, it is evident that the economic, social, and ecological impacts of tourism are very much of concern to the villages in the southern Maya Mountains. In order to compete with other investment taking place in the area, the TEA is hoping to expand to a total of twelve villages in order to have a share of this market. To maintain viability the TEA will have to compete for tourists with the other tourism businesses in the area. In order to do this the level of organization and the quality of the service (and the experience) will have to compare favorably with others. Also, promotion of the TEA will have to be increased in order to increase the flow of tourists. Finally, the TEA must adhere to its own philosophy in order to ensure positive economic, social and ecological benefits for the villages.

Probably one of the most important aspects of tourism that the TEA is trying to manage is that of fair distribution of tourism generated income. The TEA believes that tourism can only supplement peoples' incomes and that it should complement traditional economic activities taking place in villages. The concept of a rotation, both within each TEA village and among all of the villages in the system, provides tourism opportunities and income for villages and villagers that probably would not be involved in tourism of their own. This rotation also diminishes the possibility of one or two villages (or one or two families in each village) from completely monopolizing tourism. The rotation reinforces the TEA concept that tourism should complement traditional economic pursuits by lessening dependency on a single economic activity such as agriculture. Tourism in this context represents diversification of economic activities instead of the replacement of one activity for another. ! Also under the TEA the development of tourism includes the subsidization of other activities that can further benefit the entire community, such as the 10% overhead that is applied to

community education and health services and the 10% that is destined for conservation and sustainable agriculture.

The social aspects of tourism development that the TEA is concerned with revolve around controlling the negative impacts of tourism on communities. The TEA believes that each community has a carrying capacity for the number of tourists that it can reasonably handle before there is too much of a strain on the community. The ability to rotate tourists lessens the amount of individual contact that the community has with tourists on a day to day basis. This may help retain the novelty of tourism for residents which, in turn, may make the contact for tourists more authentic and of higher quality. Villagers will also not have to take a substantial amount of time away from their traditional activities. Also, the TEA is concerned about the maintenance of traditions, such as music, dance, and crafts which are part of the attractions built into TEA villages. Tourists' payment for these services may help subsidize these traditions.

From a financial standpoint, the 10% of overhead which goes directly to the school systems in the communities may directly affect local residents, because this money helps students with materials that can help them continue their education's. Although this money has so far not been a substantial amount, if tourism increases it could become more important to the villages.

Finally, the participatory approach of the TEA and its democratic structure may help members realize that they can have meaningful participation in the TEA program. This may help participants to learn more about organizing and working in groups and it offers them the opportunity to take an active role in the community by being elected into one of the positions available.

One potential negative consequence of the experiences offered to tourists visiting the community is that everything including the dance, story telling, music and crafts have a price. Although this adds a monetary value to these cultural traditions and may help subsidize them, the danger is that these aspects of the culture may become only commodities which no longer have cultural and spiritual meaning but are only offered as products to be sold.

Tourism in the villages may have both direct and indirect influences on conservation. Directly, the development of ecotourism could increase the value of the standing forest because this "attraction" could be worth more by bringing in tourists compared to other possible uses such as logging. Also, because tourism is only supposed to complement other activities and increase incomes this could lessen communities' dependence on unsustainable farming and forest use. The TEA also has developed a conservation fund that as tourism grows could be important in supporting village conservation activities. Indirectly, the eco-trails and village protected areas that are being developed, besides being

tourist attractions serve as areas for maintaining traditional sustainable agricultural practices. These demonstration areas may show villagers conservation and sustainable resource use practices that may work in their own parcels.

UPDATE

As of December 1996, there are 13 villages fully operational within TEA.

#