Environmental Issues Affecting Belize Economy

Adele Bradley, Alex Campbell, Olivia Origer, and Jayden Sechrengost

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Dr. Irwin

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Abstract

An environmental factor affecting Belize’s struggling economy is the endangerment of scarlet macaws. The findings in this study will explain how the scarlet macaws affect Belize’s integration within the global economy. First, we will begin our research by emphasizing that some corporations and not-for-profit organizations help raise money to nurture scarlet macaws in safe environments and raise awareness of their declining numbers. Information for all of these topics will be pulled from different scholarly websites and books used in class as evidence. More information about these topics will also be given by talking to the tour guides, local residents, hosts, and brochures. Second, we will discuss the origins of ecotourism in Belize and focus on how and why Belize switched its agriculture-centered economy to one driven by ecotourism. Belize originally had an agriculture-centered economy. However, a shift in global perspective encouraged Belizeans to take advantage of the abundance of natural resources and develop the ecotourist sector. Third, we will expand on this research by highlighting the effects that ecotourism and international tourism have on Belize and scarlet macaws. Although tourism harms the land, it protects endangered species such as the scarlet macaw. Ecotourism brings attention to wildlife in Belize and helps it increase protection. Lastly, we will explain Belize’s political and economic relations with Canada, Guatemala, the United States, and the United Nations. These relations have a large impact on Belize’s economy and daily lifestyle.
Impacts of Corporations and Organizations

Belizeans are very proud of where they live, and they embrace their culture and the way they live, even if the country is not as developed as other countries. They welcome their environment of vast jungles and exotic animals. One of the well-known birds in Belize is the scarlet macaw. Scarlet macaws are a vibrant mix of red, blue, and yellow and spend the majority of their time in jungles. They also only hatch about two chicks a year, so they reproduce at a very slow rate (Barcott 2008, p. 136). They also lost their habitat to the Chalillo Dam, and while some managed to find somewhere else to live, others did not survive the transition. Sadly, they are also highly wanted animals in the black market due to their vibrant colors. Due to these factors, the scarlet macaw’s population is endangered, and many corporations and organizations are doing their part to help this stunning species (Packham).

Belize has many corporations and non-for-profit organizations that have selflessly given their time to help conserve the many animals, plants, and different environments that make Belize such a beautiful country. Specific organizations have put lots of time and money into protecting the scarlet macaws. One organization that directly helps the scarlet macaws is the Scarlet Six Biomonitoring Team (SSBT). They became aware of the illegal poaching occurring, and they made it their responsibility to deter these poachers. According to Harbison (2017), this team will set up camp underneath their nests for months at a time to ensure that the poachers won’t snag the newly born scarlet macaws. They also will drive their boats down the river to common nesting areas of the scarlet macaws to further deter the poachers. They’ve teamed up with Friends for Conservation and Development (FDA) who aid them in patrolling the forests. The FCD also preserves the scarlet macaws by bringing the birds who would not survive in the
wilderness or cannot be protected into their lab where they nourish them until they become adults and are strong enough to be released into the wild. Both groups rarely run into any issues, but the FDA is armed if something were to go awry (Harbison 2017).

One non-for-profit organization that we saw and worked with firsthand is Programme for Belize. They have several locations where they work to protect and conserve a variety of species as well as large areas of the jungle. They also are researching about Maya civilization, keeping track of endangered species living in the area, and ensuring that the forest is protected and managed properly. One main way they help promote the conservation of these areas is properly informing the tourists who stay in these areas. Our guide, Marcos, was very knowledgeable and told us which species were endangered in the area. He also told us a lot of natural uses for plants and trees in the area. This information allowed us to become well informed and therefore appreciate nature more than we did originally. It also allowed us to be more passionate in our own lives when it comes to conserving wildlife, especially because this generation needs to do their part in preserving the Earth. While this organization is helping in the efforts to preserve the wildlife in the area, sometimes they run into roadblocks. Unfortunately, many of the employees mentioned that they have had issues with poachers throughout the years who kill the animals to sell them through the black market and make a large profit. They also have had issues with people setting the forests on fire, which then kills many trees, plants, and animals who cannot escape in time.
Why Ecotourism?

Although it is now a prosperous ecotourism destination, Belize has not always had the economic stability that it sees today. Previously known as "British Honduras”, the colonized location was occupied by British settlers for nearly one hundred and fifty years before becoming an independent country. Under the control of the British crown, Belize was exploited for its natural resources and became an important trading port for its motherland. Although the colonists had difficulty navigating the tropical terrain at first, the British quickly realized the value of the extensive volume of timber that existed in the rainforests. The pursuit of lumber, particularly mahogany, which held considerable value in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, encouraged Britain to maintain control of the land, despite pushback from inhabitants of the land (Barcott 2008, p. 52). The British would have likely continued their depletion of the rainforests in British Honduras were it not for the decline in demand for mahogany products as World War I progressed. Without the mainland to purchase the natural resources provided by British Honduras, the colony made little profit, and thus, colonialists turned to new sources of environmental exploitation for economic gain. When Britain’s economy again began to stabilize, colonists began producing a dye that could be drawn from the basins of specific trees within the rainforests. However, the trade of the logwood dye was short-lived, as pirates and lack of support from the British parliament left many colonists hopeless and desiring to move on (Belize History). After facing over-exploitation for several years, many areas of rainforests in British Honduras were exhausted. However, the exploitation of Belizean forests for their natural resources did not end with the departure of British settlers.
Although Belize became the new, official title of "British Honduras" as the country gained its independence, the invasive economic practices in the rainforests did not also experience the same great changes. Although the market for mahogany and timber had vastly declined, the demand for sugar, citrus, and bananas seemed to only grow (Belize History). However, this agricultural demand was nowhere near as exhaustive to Belize's natural reserves as was the market for timber. Plus, economic success is derived from the market was of great importance to Belizeans who had just been in an economic depression several years (Belize History). Aside from this, Belize was beginning to become a popular tourist destination for wealthy, predominantly American tourists. Traditional tourism, as it is referred to, began to develop in the 1960s but remained relatively small and did not consistently drive the market (Wiezsman 2001, 3). Although traditional tourism is harmful to ecosystems, the presence of foreign tourists forced Belizeans to recognize the significance and beauty of the natural landscapes which surrounded them. However, even with the existence of various environmental preservation groups, the immediate economic gain derived from traditional tourism and exploitative agricultural practices remained more important to the majority of Belizeans and its national government for many years.

Education not only plays a key role in a society's understanding of ecological concerns but also their efforts toward preserving the natural habitats around them. Bruce Barcott, within The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw, highlights Belize's historical deficiency in environmental education for its citizens. Barcott correctly points out that most Belizeans do not intentionally harm their surrounding ecosystem but instead, do so ignorantly or unknowingly, as they were not
made aware of the extent of the damage they are creating. For several of years, the hunting and killing of scarlet macaws for food was not an uncommon practice in Belize. Their consumption of the bird, which caused the population to sink further into the endangered species classification, was the result of Belize's failure to educate its citizens on the vitality of the bird to Belize’s natural ecosystem. This education would prove vital to the rescuing of the scarlet macaw, as population numbers began to stabilize after Belizeans were made aware of the significant impact of their actions (Barcott 2008, p. 53). In addition to depleting the population of scarlet macaws in Belize, littering is another huge issue that puts the country's wildlife in danger. Because the Belizean government has not placed any restrictive laws against leaving trash along roadways and in nature, in the more populated areas of the country the natural environment is filled with garbage and waste, which can be very harmful to plants and animals. Were citizens to be educated about the toxic effects of litter to wildlife, Belize would likely see a decrease in the trash within their natural environment, as they saw an increase in the scarlet macaw population. The environmental education of Belizeans has greatly improved the overall health of the environment in Belize.

In addition to an increase in environmental education, Belize has strengthened its economy significantly on the foundation of ecotourism. Beginning in 1987, when a group of American students traveled to Belize for an educational trip, Belize began to plant the seeds of what would become a large ecotourist economy (Blersch & Patrick 2013). At first, ecotourism did not seem as if it would become a lucrative industry and was certainly not the main driver of Belize's economy. However, what originally only attracted small groups of predominantly
American students began to grow into an important industry for Belize. The global perspective surrounding travel and efforts to be environmentally conscious began to shift in the 1980s, causing a greater number of people to explore Belize as an ecotourism destination (Wiezsman 2001, 3). The influx of people arriving in Belize encouraged Belizeans to take advantage of the abundance of natural resources that surrounded them. Thus, Belize's government and environmental organizations heightened their ecological preservation efforts to further encourage the growth of their ecotourism sector.

**International Tourism and Ecotourism**

Belize may be known for its production of sugar cane, rum, or bananas, but these products can only go so far. They must also make a profit elsewhere. According to Sood (2012) in *Belize’s lessons in eco-tourism*, tourism is one of Belize’s top sources of revenue (Sood 2012). With such a high dependence on international tourism and ecotourism, Belize is in a constant battle to protect its nature. Sood (2012) says, “Thirty-six percent of Belize’s landmass enjoys protected status. Thirteen percent of its waters...are protected as well.” Though this is a highly protected percentage, most of the land’s protection comes from private owners, not the government. When in Belize, we learned that these protected places can be sponsored by the Belize Audubon Society. They donate money to organizations for the protection of their land. The government also does not fund many of the tourist attractions in Belize. These places are funded by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or by their profit (Sood 2012). In *The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw*, Sharon opens the Belize Zoo with no funding. She kept the zoo open off of her profits, and when she ran out of profits, she begged (Barcott 2008, p. 38). This
verifies Sood’s statement saying that many of the tourist attractions are self-funded. Belize being mostly funded by ecotourism may be good for the Scarlet macaws in some ways. This tourism is based largely on the environment, which means people come primarily to see the animals and nature. This means more macaws will be protected because of the interest in seeing them firsthand. Belize is also dependent on international tourism along with ecotourism. Many artisans depend on tourists to sell their goods. When in Belize, we visited a bush doctor who also sold small crafts like magnets, jewelry, and paintings. Aside from his medical practice, he makes money off of tourists wishing to get souvenirs.

Though tourism is the main source of revenue for the country, it is taking a toll on the land. Cruise tourism, deforestation, and overfishing are several of the ecological risks posed by tourism (Sood 2012). These travelers leave behind large amounts of waste which are not good for the land. According to “Belize Environmental Issues” (n.d.), most solid waste in Belize is burned which then adds harmful chemicals to the air. Macaws depend on the land for their livelihood. Harmful waste and chemicals will likely endanger them more. When in Belize, we also witnessed many fires set by Mennonites. They make living off of farming, but to do so they must burn down everything in their farmland. This can be very dangerous for the environment. As a whole, Belize depends on their land, but only to a certain extent. Once these land resources run out, they must turn to ecotourism.

Political Relations with Belize

According to Barcott (2008, p. 107), the endangerment of the scarlet macaws sparked the establishment of the Chalillo Dam. The Chalillo Dam is a 150 feet tall dam that was developed
by a Canadian power company. Unfortunately, this dam blocks the Macal River; therefore, the scarlet macaws’ habitat was drowned and lost. Also, the scarlet macaws’ population decreased due to other countries poaching these rare birds. Even though the poaching rates are low, it has a significant impact on the scarlet macaws because the population is small. Fortunately, the United States has a strong relationship with Belize and is willing to support the long-term efforts Belize has to conserve the scarlet macaws (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2019).

The Chalillo Dam was developed by the Fortis corporation, which is a Canadian power company (Barcott 2008, p. 6). In 1999, Fortis bought Belize’s electrical utility as “part of the Belizean government’s privatization program” (Barcott 2008, p. 6). In other words, Fortis planned to spend $25 million to build the dam which will benefit Belize’s economy. Although the Chalillo Dam produced enough energy to power at least six thousand homes, this development has done everlasting damage to the scarlet macaws’ habitat. The primary environmental issue that the Chalillo Dam created was that it flooded nearby habitats and left thousands of dead trees the macaws used for nesting. This flood causes a significant decrease in the macaws’ population – especially in the Red Bank. However, the Red Bank’s macaw economy developed since the habitat was nearly wiped out (Barcott 2008, p.108). Therefore, the endangerment of the scarlet macaws sparked ecotourism and contributed to Belize having a small presence in the global economy.

Poaching is (and was previously) a factor regarding the endangerment of the scarlet macaws. According to Martha Harbison (2017), Guatemalans cross the border into Belize for economic reasons and poaching parrots including the scarlet macaws. Namely, Guatemalans will opportunistically poach wildlife, which is being given national exposure (McReynolds 2016).
Poaching nests is a primary source of income for Guatemalans even though it is legal to poach scarlet macaws in Belize. Since scarlet macaws have low fecundity, low poaching rates still put nest viability at risk. (The Belize Bird Conservancy 2017). For example, in 2008, illegal Guatemalan palm leaf harvesters extracted around thirty chicks and illegally sold them for 1,500 – 2,000 Quetzals (136 – 181 U.S. dollars) per bird (McReynolds 2016). Poaching is an environmental issue because it endangers the population of the scarlet macaws. As a result, it also harms Belize’s global economy because the Belizean government cannot conserve the macaw population for ecotourism or ecological balance.

The United States has a strong relationship with Belize. Namely, the United States accounts for approximately 19.6 percent of Belize’s total exports, 35.6 percent of its total imports, and 185 United States operations in Belize (U.S. State Department 2019). Therefore, they are willing to help conserve the scarlet macaws’ population in Belize. Our tour guide, Marcos, explained that countries such as the United States and the United Nations help contribute to environmental conservation through donations. For example, the United States’ support was exercised in 2019, when Belize received protection under the United States Endangered Species Act (Barcott 2008, p.108). Additionally, U.S. Fish and Wildlife has supported long-term efforts to conserve the macaws (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2019). Other allies such as the United Nations support Belize striving for conservation. An example is when the United Nations Development Program and Nature Conservancy gave money to help establish the Red Bank Scarlet Macaw Conservation Project (Barcott 2008, p. 108). These examples of international aid for the scarlet macaws’ conservation benefits Belize’s economy. The economic aid helps the Belizean government maintain its current position in the global economy and help
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restore environmental issues (regarding the scarlet macaws) that become risks for Belize’s
decline in the global economy.
References


