

Adaptation, Conflict and Compromise in Indigenous Protected Areas Management

Common property theory has increasingly broadened its scope from an initial focus on community-level systems, to recognition and examination of how these continuously interact and evolve in response to external dynamics, constraints and multi-level partnerships. The common property systems of indigenous peoples are clearly not static and brittle institutions, but have survived to the present day precisely because of their propensity towards adaptation. As indigenous peoples confront new challenges in a globalizing world, the co-management model for protected areas governance - parks which often encompass significant tracts of their traditional lands - has presented itself as an opportunity for safeguarding common property interests. In practice, indigenous peoples have enjoyed varying degrees of success in meeting these goals through protected area partnerships with the conservation sector, as will be illustrated through case studies drawn from southern Belize.

The Government of Belize (GoB) has shown itself unusually willing to assign protected area status to an extremely large percentage of its national territory. However, expectations that the national protected areas system would be instrumental in fuelling development in Belize were tempered by subsequent reality. The GoB has in practice failed to secure sufficient funds to effectively manage its protected areas, let alone generate income and profit from their existence. In light of this situation, various co-management and local management models have been used by the GoB to supplement weak and in some cases non-existent on-the-ground management, involving local organizations and communities alike.

In Belize's southernmost Toledo District, where the greatest concentration of protected areas, intact habitats and indigenous peoples not coincidentally are located, the GoB's willingness to engage in devolved management has created political opportunities for indigenous peoples to regain a measure of control over common property alienated by protected area boundaries. Although conservation partnerships have been entered by necessity, rather than design, indigenous peoples have capitalized on the political space created to promote common property interests.

This paper will examine examples from southern Belize where local indigenous communities and organizations have exploited opportunities provided by the creation of protected areas to promote their own local governance and development aspirations. The case studies will illustrate how local indigenous communities in Belize have advanced collective rights and livelihood interests through the prism of protected areas management, and at the same time, seen their options constrained by multi-scale partnerships with the conservation sector. The analysis will moreover consider the many challenges and constraints indigenous organizations have faced in effectively balancing conservation and indigenous imperatives, and delivering sufficient local benefits to compensate for the sacrifices and adaptations which conservation partnerships have necessarily enforced. Lastly, recommendations on future directions for the study of systemic complexity in common property management systems will be discussed.

Introduction

In their effort to safeguard or regain control of lands and resources traditionally managed as common property, indigenous peoples have pursued a broad range of adaptive strategies and alliances, varying in effectiveness and complexion from one context to the next. Common property management theory has therefore been challenged to adapt in pace with these grassroots developments, moving from an initial focus on community-based systems abstracted from their broader sociopolitical contexts and alliances, towards recognizing them as highly complex and adaptive systems, occupying a distinct space within an equally dynamic multi-scale arena (Berkes 2002; 2004). This reorientation of the commons paradigm has in turn fostered an enhanced appreciation for multiple resources and user-groups, regional and global commons (Keohane and Ostrom 1995) and multiple levels of management (Ostrom et al. 1999; Young 2002; Adger 2003).

The study of community-based management is therefore being enriched by recognition that local systems are the evolving product of multiple variables, many of an exogenous nature, which manifest themselves differently in each national context. Amongst the multiple-scale and dimensional factors which influence the robustness of local common property systems can be included the degree of accommodation afforded customary tenure by national constitutions and laws. While progressive examples of nation-states accommodating indigenous common property systems exist, in the majority of countries, constitutions and civil laws do not adequately protect community resource rights (Borrini-Feyerabend & Pimbert, 2004¹). The historical relationship between indigenous peoples and governments, and the degree to which these are characterized by conflict over land and resources, also play a role in determining how protracted or successful these struggles will be (Caddy, 2005).

In an age of global transition, beyond national governments and laws, indigenous efforts to gain formal recognition of common property rights must increasingly take into account a plethora of different competing actors and priorities. These dynamics become all the more forceful and complex as the protection provided by physical remoteness of indigenous common property lands in the past is increasingly reduced, and the environments they have traditionally depended on acquire new value in a global economy. Oil, logging and other resource extractive companies can create compelling revenue-generating opportunities for impoverished national economies and communities alike, which indigenous organizations must learn to contend with. The current global quest to develop 'bio-fuels' to reduce dependency on fossil fuels, which will require extensive land areas to attain viability, will have no less serious repercussions on forest peoples and their way of life. At the opposite end of the spectrum are conservation organizations, which work to protect biodiversity by opposing or attempting to reduce the pace and scale of traditional forms of development. In an effort to broaden their support base and enhance their effectiveness, conservation organizations are becoming increasingly involved in integrated

¹ Chapter 10, Pgs 8 & 12.

development and conservation efforts, promoting alternative models of growth, and seeking alliances with local indigenous groups by recognizing the value of their cultural resource use systems. With these multiple competing interests to negotiate, indigenous peoples have deployed their traditional adaptive strengths. While seizing upon opportunities for advancing their objectives through new multi-level partnerships, indigenous peoples are also simultaneously struggling with and attempting to reconcile the constraints which these alliances inevitably impose upon local institutions and common property systems.

This paper will explore the experience of the Maya of southern Belize, who after years of unfulfilled advocacy to secure customary land tenure recognition, are attempting to obtain control of common property resources through alternative, non-traditional, multi-level partnerships. In a globalized world, the engagement of indigenous peoples in cross-scale and sector partnerships is considered in this analysis to be a critical and indeed, inevitable strategy for self-advancement. The range of direct and indirect strategies and associated policy reforms by which the Maya are seeking to advance common property interests, and reduce the uncertain future of their common property systems, will be explored. The constraints and limited protections which these multi-level institutional alliances however impose upon common property systems will also be discussed. While cross-scale partnerships are critical vehicles in advancing indigenous common property interests, they can also undermine these goals when competing national interests, weaknesses or contrasting agendas of partners, or the inevitable compromises which the partnerships created to advance indigenous interests impose come into play. The adapted local institutions that emerge from these partnerships can moreover be undermined by indigenous communities themselves, if the benefits secured do not compensate for sacrifices and adaptations to traditional systems made at the local level. While the case study will illustrate many of these issues, it is implicitly recognized that the manifestation and impact of cross-scale partnerships will vary from place to place. Despite a confluence of similar factors, what might constitute an opportunity for effective cross-scale partnerships in one context, could prove difficult to replicate in the next.

Indigenous –Conservation Partnerships for Protected Areas Management

Cross-scale institutional alliances between indigenous peoples and the conservation sector over the management of protected areas represent a major focus of this analysis, and therefore deserve particular consideration. The historical relationship between indigenous peoples and protected areas has inauspicious origins. Traditional protected area models which emerged in the Western Hemisphere were transposed wholesale to developing countries, without taking into account different interpretations and values of nature in new context. Areas or species of environmental significance were effectively cordoned off from the impacts of human intervention, regardless of whether these expropriated lands and resources provided the means to livelihood security for local communities who had traditionally lived amongst them. In their enthusiasm to protect endangered habitats and species, conservationists explicitly or implicitly gave local - in many cases indigenous - communities the impression that biodiversity

had far more value than the protection of native peoples and their livelihoods. It is hardly surprising that indigenous peoples throughout the globe grew wary of these “colonialist conservationists” (Nietschmann 1997), perceived the establishment of protected areas as yet another strategy for expropriating their traditional lands, and therefore vigorously resisted them.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, as the rights of indigenous peoples and rural communities received increasing international attention, the traditional top-down approach to the establishment of protected areas came under criticism. By this time protected areas had proliferated throughout the globe, from approximately 200 million acres in 1970 to 1200 million acres in 2000 (IUCN). With this expansion, came greater incidences of conflict, with increased attention afforded them as a result. In multiple instances, the establishment of protected areas was shown to have directly undermined local cultures and livelihoods, most notably when physical displacements of indigenous communities to make way for national parks had occurred. As the moral imperative to address the historical marginalization of indigenous peoples grew, there was growing belief that protected areas needed to “make a solid contribution to poverty alleviation ... beyond simply doing no harm.”² The need for greater management efficiency was also a motivator; with the World Bank suggesting that at least \$15 billion dollars a year of government revenue is lost to illegal logging from poorly monitored forest reserves, protected areas and national lands alike (Forest Trends, 2004). The impossible challenge of sustaining remote protected areas in face of significant local and indigenous opposition fostered efforts at integrating indigenous peoples within the protected areas framework, and providing benefits beyond borders. Cash-strapped developing country administrations that lacked adequate resources to effectively manage protected areas and extractive reserves therefore had a clear financial incentive to engage local communities located at the frontline of resource conservation efforts. Increasingly, local and indigenous organizations have therefore been put in charge of administering protected areas which governments simply cannot afford to manage themselves. In conclusion, a variety of factors have led to the international community and national governments affording increased moral and political space to the concept and practice of community involvement in protected areas management.

Meanwhile, the scientific and conservation community's growing appreciation for the role played by ecosystems and biological interconnectivity in maintaining healthy environments had fostered similar accommodation to the role of local indigenous in conservation management. As the multiple scales inherent to environmental dynamics became recognized and mainstreamed, the effectiveness of the isolated protected areas model as a conservation tool came inevitably under critique. Protected areas, that had been established and managed with no concern for the fate of the broader landscapes on which their internal environmental integrity depended, were acknowledged as being artificial islands of nature. Since few protected areas were extensive enough to encapsulate and sustain these multiple levels of

² Mulungoy K, Chape, S. pg 17.

ecological interaction, in many instances environmental integrity was not being addressed by this model. As a result, conservation organizations had their own reasons to search for more integrated approaches to protected areas management. As the conceptual perspective of the conservation community broadened, their recognition of the fundamental common interests they shared with traditional peoples - principally a concern to protect vulnerable, ecologically-significant landscapes from being transformed and destroyed as a result of unfettered development – also grew. The scientific and conservation community had moreover come to appreciate the wealth and importance of traditional ecological knowledge; historical memories of ecosystem dynamics and species characteristics stored by indigenous peoples over generations. In their effort to develop more informed, adaptive and effective conservation management systems, conservationists therefore had additional motivations for pursuing collaborative partnerships with indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples were themselves developing their own reasons for exploring partnerships with the conservation community, both governmental and NGO. In many parts of the world, indigenous peoples were finding their efforts to secure formal ownership of traditional lands thwarted rather than resolved as a result of protracted, complex and inconclusive political and legal processes. In many instances, land claims had been sidelined by governments, national and international courts, relegated to a quagmire of red tape and endless delay. Hence the opportunity to advance indigenous interests indirectly by marrying efforts with conservation agencies and protected area processes became increasingly attractive. With national governments generally more amenable to supporting indigenous involvement in conservation and protected area management frameworks than in respecting traditional lands claims, indigenous peoples increasingly adopted conservationist partners and discourse to suit. Through these engagements, indigenous peoples were moreover afforded political visibility and management clout, benefiting from the significant financial resources wielded by conservation agencies in support of local indigenous communities and institutions. The national Bosawas Reserve, in Nicaragua, for example, the largest protected area in Central America, moved from being a paper park to a physical reality as a result of an alliance between an international conservation agency, The Nature Conservancy, and local Mayangna and Miskito indigenous communities. The Mayangna in particular have benefited from their alliances with TNC to build their national profile, and safeguard communal lands from the rapidly advancing agricultural frontier, and indeed, from the Miskito communities with whom they have an historically difficult relationship. According to Kaimowitz, this indigenous-conservation alliance was forged because TNC had come to see indigenous traditional livelihood systems to be largely compatible with conservation of the reserve. So long as the indigenous peoples “adopted TNC’s conservation rhetoric,” financial and technical assistance would be forthcoming in the defense of indigenous traditional lands” (Kaimowitz, 2002). This process, though as yet unresolved, has been assisted in no small measure by the recognition afforded by Nicaragua’s constitution to indigenous common property rights. A more recent regional case study is the Alto-Fragua Indiwisi National Park in Columbia, a site of great biological

and spiritual significance, which was created as a result of negotiations between indigenous communities, Government and conservation NGOs. The concept of indigenous park management was reportedly aided by the legal recognition afforded traditional leaders' in Columbian law to draft local development plans, including environmental regulations (Oviedo, 2003, Zuluaga et al, 2003). As these examples indicate, multi-level partnerships with conservation agencies can represent compelling strategies for indigenous communities, particularly when political and legal frameworks support such engagements.

Cross-scale institutional partnerships have therefore tentatively emerged in the last decades between indigenous peoples and conservation agencies over the management and establishment of protected areas. However, despite many common interests in safeguarding protected areas, the motivations of indigenous peoples and conservationists are often fundamentally different. For indigenous peoples, being involved in or in control of the management of protected areas which contain all or even just a portion of their common property, is a step towards safeguarding their cultural heritage, livelihoods and developmental interests. For the conservation community, protected areas provide a means of protecting biodiversity; for government conservation departments, they may also represent a means of safeguarding important natural resources for future development initiatives, or for promoting a certain national image on a global stage. These different fundamental motivators result in differing management visions for the protected areas. Indigenous peoples' desire to utilize resources in protected areas according to traditional or even non-traditional strategies, to thereby meet livelihood needs, and maintain the integrity of communal and cultural systems, can clash with the conservation sectors focus on the resources above all, and of limiting levels of change. The challenge of devising a management system that encapsulates these different perspectives, and remains acceptable to both, is not insignificant.

Partnerships forged between conservation agencies and indigenous peoples can moreover be undermined when broader national or regional considerations come to play. In their pursuit of partnerships with governments for the protection of vast tracts of national territory, major national and international conservation NGOs³ have tended to choose their battles strategically, shying away from overtly controversial political positions such as the defense of indigenous land rights. One of the most famous legal precedents in support of traditional land rights created in recent years, the Case of Awas Tingni vs the Government of Nicaragua before the Organization of American States' Human Rights Court of 2002, had its origins a decade earlier in a pilot effort in sustainable community-based forest management, involving one such conservation agency. Contracted to provide technical support to ensure that conservation and community interests were both served in a tripartite timber contract over indigenous-claimed lands involving Awas Tingni, the Government and a Dominican company, the agency abruptly withdrew from the process once the community began seeking permanent legal control over the

³ As distinct from international conservation advocacy NGOs such as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

lands, and incurred the ire of the national government⁴. With their expedient support for indigenous interests, these major conservation organizations have been strongly accused of catering to big business and governments whose money and support they depend on, and neglecting local people who reside in the areas they wish to protect⁵.

In order to maintain their cross-scale partnerships, indigenous communities and conservation organizations have therefore often been forced to turn a blind eye to the core interests of the other, and ignore the fundamental issues that distinguish them. The boundaries of indigenous land use areas and zones of conservation priority (at a protected area or landscape level) do not always coincide; nor does the relative value attributed to their whole and components. Challenges of capacity and resources to effectively manage protected areas are also a factor, with the finance leveraged by international agencies, and the power to bestow co-management rights over national territories wielded by national governments, having the potential to not only enable action, but dictate the parameters of permissible activity. As a result, in many instances, multi-level alliances between indigenous and both international conservation institutions and government conservation departments are inherently lopsided, with the balance of power firmly in the non-indigenous hands. From both perspectives, these alliances can be of convenience rather than innate compatibility, requiring modification and adaptation on both sides for working systems to be maintained.

The paper will explore the dynamics of these particular cross-scale linkages in the context of southern Belize, drawing one key and an associated cluster of other case studies from the Toledo District, that analyze institutional partnerships forged between indigenous community organizations and the conservation sector around the theme of protected areas management. The major focus will be upon the manifestation of conservation interests within a national context. The conservation sector will primarily be represented by local conservation NGOs and government departments responsible for protected areas management and conservation oversight, with international conservation NGOs playing a more background role. The unique challenges faced by local indigenous organizations who straddle both the conservation and community worlds, that have been formulated to capitalize upon political space provided by the conservation sector while aiming to strengthen local community property and livelihood interests through this medium, is of particular interest. Following a review of the history and political context of indigenous land advocacy and protected areas management in Belize, the case studies will serve to illustrate the opportunities and challenges for protecting indigenous common property interests through cross-scale institutional partnerships and policy reform.

The Maya of Belize: Cultural Characteristics, Political Struggles

⁴ Caddy 1998. The tripartite model only recognized the community's temporary 'interest' in the lands for the duration of the 5-year concession.

⁵ Mac Chapin, 2004.

Belize's Toledo District where this study is concentrated has a population of approximately 14,000 Ke'kchi and Mopan Maya, whose strong Mayan identity, as evidenced by the persistence of traditional language, livelihood and community leadership systems, has survived to the present day⁶. The Maya's livelihood strategies are historically dominated by agriculture, primarily of an itinerant land-extensive type (slash and burn, known as milpa), supplemented by stable but less dominant permanent cultivation plots known as *matahambre*, which provide emergency provisions in times when primary crops are scarce. Additional strategies are pursued to diversify and strengthen Mayan livelihood systems, such as hunting, gathering and fishing. A communal forest area is generally maintained where materials for house construction, consumption or medicinal purposes can be obtained. As increased opportunities for meeting livelihood needs through wage labour have developed, from employment in local government (e.g. Ministry of Works) and the private sector (tourism), Mayan communities are no longer entirely dependant on land and resource-based subsistence activities. That said, traditional pursuits continue to underpin and safeguard Mayan livelihood systems, with access to common property resources the primary reason for why though money is scarce⁷, starvation is pretty much unknown.

The survival of Maya culture and communal systems to the present day has occurred in spite, not as a result of, governmental support or recognition. The Belizean Constitution provides no legal recognition of indigenous traditional rights or communal property, while its land distribution laws contain no formal mechanism by which to demarcate or entitle these areas. Indigenous communities in southern Belize are by and large located upon national lands or reserves, or private property. The 10 'Indian Reservations' within Toledo, totaling 77,000 hectares, that were established during the colonial period only encompassed a portion of indigenous lands, and were never formally titled as Mayan lands (Maya Atlas, 1997). Successive governments have therefore treated these areas the same way they do non-reservation lands: distributing them over time through titles, leases and concessions, without consultation with the local Mayan communities. The Government of Belize (GoB) passively allows indigenous communities to occupy national lands, but provides no legal security over them. As a result, villages are gradually penned into smaller and smaller areas, as the surrounding landscape continuously parceled off and fragmented.

Toledo's Mayan leadership has attempted to resolve their communal land claims through national and international legal systems, and through direct negotiations with government. However, an implicit tactic of delay by the authorities has effectively these processes from yielding any tangible progress. In 1997, Mayan activists, working with geographers from the University of California at Berkeley, produced The Maya Atlas, a product of a groundbreaking indigenous mapping project in which Mayan cartographers using GPS, field investigations, and community interviews produced maps depicting all communal areas of Maya use and occupancy in Toledo. The maps were submitted as evidence to the Belize Supreme

⁶ See Caddy 2004.

⁷ 79% being classified as poor in Toledo according to the 2002 National Poverty Assessment; a figure which would rise if only the Mayan communities were included, and the regional capital of Punta Gorda excluded.

Court that indigenous peoples had the capacity to document their traditional lands, and that on the basis of Belize's international treaty commitments, these needed to be demarcated. After this process became deadlocked in the Supreme Court, the Maya Atlas provided the basis of an international report to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, submitted on behalf of Maya, which asked the Commission to investigate the claims of the indigenous peoples in southern Belize. In October 2004, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission eventually delivered its deliberations, in which it found Belize to be violating the human rights of the Maya by failing to protect their rights to property, equality, and a fair trial. The Commission called upon the GoB to set the boundaries of Mayan customary lands, recognize and protect Mayan communal customary rights, and obtain the informed consent of the Maya prior to authorizing logging, oil extraction or other actions that might affect their lands or territories.

The GoB has since totally failed to act on the OAS's report. The Maya Leaders - an alliance of the key cultural and political organizations from Toledo – therefore attempted through parallel negotiations with the GoB to resolve the situation in-country. Proposals were presented to the Government, presenting a resolution to community land claims framed within the context of national legislation established by the very same administration. In 2000, the GOB had ratified a law reconstituting Village Councils throughout the country, which recognized the rights of Village Councils to map their lands, declare their boundaries, and be given responsibility for managing forest reserves on their boundaries⁸. With modifications to the law to recognize indigenous traditional governance systems, and accept a broad interpretation of village lands encompassing lands use for productive as well as residency purposes, a model for addressing indigenous common property claims on a village by village basis appeared to have been provided by the Government itself. The GoB agreed in late 2005 to support a pilot effort by a Mayan community to produce a village map – more sophisticated than the Maya Atlas maps, using GIS technology, which negotiating and reconciled boundary disputes with neighbouring communities - and to consider the Village Council Act as a framework for resolving the dispute at a District level. However, although a 3 month moratorium on land leasing in the area was declared to allow production of the map to continue unimpeded, local government representatives continued to sanction the issuing of leases with impunity throughout, despite protestations by the Maya Leaders. Moreover, when the map was presented to Government in early 2006, it was summarily rejected, on the grounds that an extortionate area of land (approximately 1200 acres) was being claimed by a relatively small village of 200 persons. The GOB reiterated its interpretation of village boundaries as extending to the limits of municipal areas only, resulting in negotiations becoming deadlocked once more. With this protracted struggle in mind, it is hardly surprising that over the course of a decade of legal advocacy, the Maya of Toledo have also chosen to pursue alternative routes for addressing their common property interests. Alliances with the conservation sector have represented a primary strategy in this regards.

⁸ Village Councils Act, 2000.

Belize's Protected Area System and Policy

For a country of only 8,857 square miles, Belize has an uncommonly large number of protected areas, 94 at last count⁹. Terrestrial parks dominate the protected areas map of Belize, consisting of 42.2% of its entire land mass, in contrast to only 7.33% of Belizean waters to be found within marine protected areas¹⁰. The relationship between the number of protected areas and the size of Belize is perhaps not as incongruous as it seems at first sight. With traditional industries of sugar, citrus and banana subject to the volatility of international markets, and unable to compete on economies of scale, the export of tropical hardwood timber – whose abundance in Belize was the *raison d'être* for the British establishing the British Honduras colony – restricted by international CITES regulations and the overexploitation of timber resources in Belize itself, successive Belizean governments have come to place considerable weight on its natural resources, and the potential of tourism to serve as a major income-generator for the country. As stated on the Belize government website:

“The relative strengths of the Belizean economy include an abundance of land, forest, and water resources ... Belize's environmental resources also create substantial opportunities in the nature-based tourism market..... The declining preferred market access available to certain export products such as bananas and sugar under various international arrangements is another challenge for Belize.”¹¹

Expectations in the revenue-generating potential of nature-based tourism could provide the country is meanwhile highlighted on the Belize Tourism Board's website:

“With Public and Private sectors working together, Tourism will become a truly sustainable Eco-cultural tourism product that will provide economic growth while preserving our god given gifts for the future of our children and society. With its many natural, archaeological and cultural attractions, Belize takes pride in conservation and has adopted the concept of Eco cultural tourism. It explores nature in a manner that will protect the environment, which is enjoyed and appreciated by all.”

As nature-based tourism became a global growth industry, and with international finance to support conservation abounding, it is no coincidence that Belize made a significant effort to strengthen its conservation credentials, and safeguard environmentally-significant areas. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of parks in Belize were created in the mid- to late 1990s, in the wake of 1992's Rio de Janeiro conference, when serious amounts of finance were pledged for global conservation. Given the extent and relative intactness of Belize's 85 terrestrial and 2 marine ecosystems,¹² 4,000 species of plants, 121

⁹ A figure that includes archaeological parks and recognized private protected areas; still more private protected areas are waiting to be recognized.

¹⁰ When taken together, the total amount of Belizean territory (land and sea) that lies under protection is 18.52%

¹¹ Belize Gov website <http://www.belize.gov.bz/belize/economy.html>

¹² Central American Ecosystems Mapping Project (World Bank / Gov. of Netherlands).

terrestrial and marine mammal species, 504 bird species, and with the second largest barrier reef in the world, Belize felt well poised to reap the international economic benefits which conservation could offer.

However, while the number of national protected areas proliferated, the GoB failed to develop a financial analysis or business plan that thoroughly assessed and maximized opportunities for revenue to be generated from them. Instead, the National Protected Area System (NPAS) evolved in a hasty and ad hoc fashion, producing a variety of management regimes - including ones characterized by benign neglect – which could not effectively support their conservation, let alone income-generating, objectives. The likelihood that protected areas, without any uniform management framework, run by biologists not businessmen, would become readily self-sustaining, and become effective in protecting biodiversity and fuelling national development was tempered by subsequent reality. As a result, various approaches to co-management have been used to supplement weak and in some cases non-existent on-the-ground management, involving partnerships with local conservation NGOs and community organizations.

While participation by Government in site-level management was reduced over time, its role in setting the policy environment within which protected areas operate remained and remains dominant. Confronted by the limitations of the existing, ad hoc, protected areas management system, the GoB launched a process known as the National Protected Area Policy and Systems Planning (NPAPSP) project in 2004, which aimed at reviewing and rationalizing its framework. The objective of this process was to produce a comprehensive national protected area policy and system that would enable Belize's NPAS to become both more sustainable and responsive to conservation needs, social interests and national development priorities alike. After 18 months of research, overseen by a committee dominated by Government Ministries, with one representative for the NGO community, a final set of documents and recommendations for reform of the protected areas system were publicly presented in January 2006. An endorsed policy reflecting these recommendations, to form the basis of a reformed National Protected Areas Act, is anticipated to take place by the summer 2006. With respect to the role of indigenous peoples in protected areas management, the NPAPSP findings stopped short of recognizing common property rights over lands within protected area boundaries. They did nevertheless recognize that special consideration needed to be given to the relationship between indigenous and local peoples and protected areas in decision-making and operational management, though what these special considerations meant in practice was not clearly defined. The main NPAPSP report also noted that most communities continue to use protected areas to meet their basic needs, having no livelihood alternative but to do so. Although these incursions remain illegal according to the existing legal framework, they are nevertheless tolerated by management authorities sympathetic to local communities, or simply unable to monitor the areas; a factor that results in ineffective management and enforcement regimes. The need to resolve this situation was noted, but how to do so – through more enforcement or more concessions to indigenous communities - was not clarified. The project did recommend that the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples be respected and preserved; provided these actions did not conflict

with the ecological integrity of the protected area, or the various conventions or multi-lateral agreements to which the Government was bound. In sum, the role of indigenous peoples in protected areas management has been recognized in the reformed protected areas framework of Belize, but what this recognition means in practice to local communities has yet to be defined.

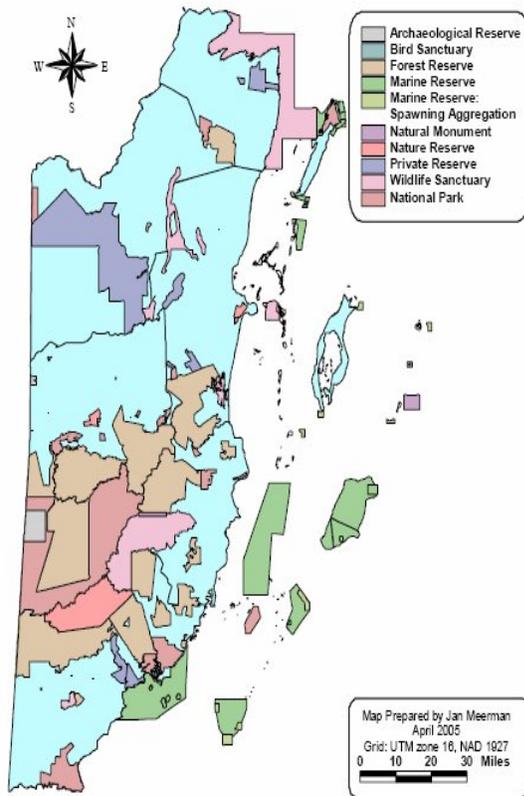


Figure 3. Protected Areas Map of Belize as per January 1, 2005.

The Government of Belize (GoB)'s willingness to assign protected area (PA) status to an unusually large percentage of its national territory has therefore been tempered by persistent difficulties in finding ways to finance active management of these same areas. The GOB has therefore actively embraced the co-management model, while stressing the importance of protected areas delivering benefits beyond borders. The GoB is moreover spearheading reform of the protected area system, designed to make it more financially sustainable and responsive to local needs. On many counts, it would appear that in Belize, a strong basis for collaboration and productive cross-sector institutional alliances between indigenous peoples and the conservation sector – both governmental and nongovernmental - exists. The review of pilot efforts in collaboration between indigenous and conservation partners in the management of protected areas in southern Belize which follows, will attempt to illustrate how these assumptions are tested and manifested in

practice.

Protected Areas in the Toledo District

Toledo has the greatest concentration of protected areas of any District in the country. This is hardly coincidental; the historical isolation of the south from the centre of national economic and political activity has played a key role in facilitating conservation of Toledo's resources, if by default rather than design. As such, Toledo contains a rich tapestry of varied and significant protected areas, as indicated below:

Table 1: Toledo's Protected Areas

Type	Name	Size in acres	Indigenous involvement in Management?
Forest Reserve	Columbia River	148,357	No
	Deep River	78,574	No
	Machaca	3,756	No
	Swasey Bladen	14,779	No
National Park	Paynes Creek	31,679	No
	Rio Blanco	100	Yes
	Sarstoon Temash	41,898	Yes
Nature Reserve	Bladen	99,670	Yes
Wildlife Sanctuary	Agua Caliente	5,492	Yes
Marine Reserve	Port Honduras	350km ²	No
	Sapodilla Cayes	125 km ²	No
Archaeological Reserve	Nim Li Punit	121	No
Private Protected Area (PPAs)	Golden Stream Corridor Preserve	14,970	Yes
	TIDE's Golden Stream & Rio Grande lands	30,000	No

Given Toledo's isolation, and the Government of Belize (GOB)'s inability to financially assume the cost of protected management, and associated willingness to share responsibilities with local partners, all the national parks, nature reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and marine reserves listed above are administered through some form of co-management. Only the Forest Reserves, under the exclusive management of the Forest Department, and the Archaeological Reserve, managed by the Archaeology Department with informal support from the local community, are still administered solely by the GOB. Private Protected Areas are managed by their respective NGO owner / managing agencies. This study will focus primarily on the Sarstoon Temash National Park, co-managed by the Sarstoon Temash Indigenous Institute for Management (SATIIM) and the Forest Department.

The Sarstoon Temash National Park and the Sarstoon Temash Institute of Indigenous Management SATIIM

The Sarstoon-Temash National Park (STNP) is located in Belize's southernmost District of Toledo, nestled alongside the Guatemalan border. The Park, which was created in 1994, is at 41,898 acres, the second largest National Park in the country. STNP contains the oldest and largest area of red mangrove forest vegetation in Belize, as well as pristine wetlands and an outstanding biodiversity of bird species, amphibia, fish and reptiles. Seasonally and permanently flooded forests predominate, with some 1,100

hectares of lowland sphagnum moss bog unique to the region, a saline/brackish inland lagoon, and 9,600 ha of saline swamps, with the country's most undisturbed and largest stand of red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) and its only stands of Comfra Palm (*Manicaria saccifera*).

There are five indigenous communities located close to the border of the Sarstoon-Temash National Park, who have traditionally used, interacted and depended upon the natural resources located within it. The four inland Ke'kchi Mayan villages, Midway, Conejo, Sunday Wood and Crique Sarco, and Barranco, the sole Garifuna and coastal-oriented community bordering the park, had a total population of 986 at the time of the 2000 census. The communities' first languages are indigenous, Ke'kchi Maya and Garifuna respectively, with English a second language spoken by most Barranco residents, and by on average, 60% of the Ke'kchi Mayans (Maya Atlas, 1997). About 51% of this population is unemployed, with the majority of families still depending on natural resources for food and shelter.

When the Government of Belize (GOB) established the STNP in 1994, it did so without any prior consultation with these five indigenous communities. As such, when the communities finally realized the park existed, approximately 3 years after its establishment, their first instinct was to fight to dismantle it, since they saw it as a direct threat to their livelihood interests. However, at a meeting between community representatives in 1997, facilitated by invited indigenous, environmental, governmental and international agency organizations, they eventually came to the position that their economic and cultural interests might be better served by securing co-management for the STNP instead. The indigenous communities' decision to fight for inclusion within Sarstoon-Temash's management structure was groundbreaking and even risky, given that they had no prior resource management experience, nor any successful national example of indigenous-governmental co-management to draw upon. However, with the encouragement of external technical experts, the communities saw an opportunity to strengthen their livelihoods by being engaged in direct management of their traditional resources. By June of 1998, they had secured political support of all relevant ministries for their proposal to become official co-managers of the Park, and had registered as a non-governmental organisation, the Sarstoon Temash Institute of Indigenous Management (SATIIM), on whose board all the 5 communities, as well as the Ke'kchi Council of Belize, and the National Garifuna Council of Belize, were represented. It nevertheless took several more years of advocacy effort before the GoB would finally sign a co-management agreement with SATIIM. Lobbying support from the Ecologic Development Fund, a US conservation NGO partnered with SATIIM, and the World Bank, with whom SATIIM was developing a Global Environmental Facility project for enhancing the STNP's management, proved useful in eventually persuading the GoB. In April 2003, an agreement was signed which laid out the structure for co-management between the community-based organization, SATIIM, and the national government represented by the Forest Department.

Later that year, SATIIM embarked upon a 3-year World Bank Medium Sized GEF project entitled the Community Managed Sarstoon Temash Conservation Project (COMSTEC), whose operational goal was

to reduce land degradation and conserve globally significant biodiversity resources in the Sarstoon Temash National Park (STNP) and its buffer zones. Expected outcomes of the project as listed below, prioritized conservation objectives, with indigenous community development a far distant secondary consideration:

1. Environmentally sound agricultural productivity improvements and small income generating activities introduced consistent with protection of STNP, with agricultural encroachment into the Park by communities significantly reduced.
2. Community self-organization strengthened.
3. Biodiversity assessed by communities, status and trends monitored.
4. Resource management plan for the STNP and buffer zones developed.
5. National Park Regulations and the Management Plan implemented and enforced.

The STNP Management Plan and Zonation System

One of the major focuses of SATIIM's work during the period from 2003 to 2005 was the production of a management plan for the STNP, which would fully document its biological resources, record traditional ecological knowledge, and produce a framework to guide its management. Working alongside the variety of consultants - geographers, social scientists and regional planners, and biologists – contracted were local indigenous experts, or parabiologists, hired from the STNP's buffer communities. Their participation ensured that traditional ecological knowledge was embedded in the research process from the outset, helped determine the management system for the Park, and engendered a strong sense of local ownership. It moreover helped identify a unique ecosystem to Belize within the heart of the STNP, collate the extensive species list, and help researchers assess ecological health abundance within the Park, including that of traditionally extracted resources.

This information in turn helped SATIIM draft a proposed zoning system for the Park unique for Belize, which incorporated not only the standard conservation and low-impact recreational activity areas (e.g. eco-tourism) standard to management plans in Belize, but also proposed a multiple use zone where continued traditional extraction of specific resources could be allowed. An indigenous zone which contained a spiritual mountain and cave system that communities frequented to perform ritual ceremonies was also demarcated, from where medicinal plants could also be extracted. To ensure that all relevant authorities felt involved in the oversight of this proposed system, in addition to preparing a list of species that could be extracted (dominated by house building materials, fruits for home consumption and traditional medicines), and methodologies for extraction and visitation, SATIIM prepared a permit system which both SATIIM and Forest Department authorities, in their capacity as co-management partners, would need to approve. Recommendations from the traditional community leaders, or Alcaldes represented the final component of the permit process, to ensure that local authority over such matters

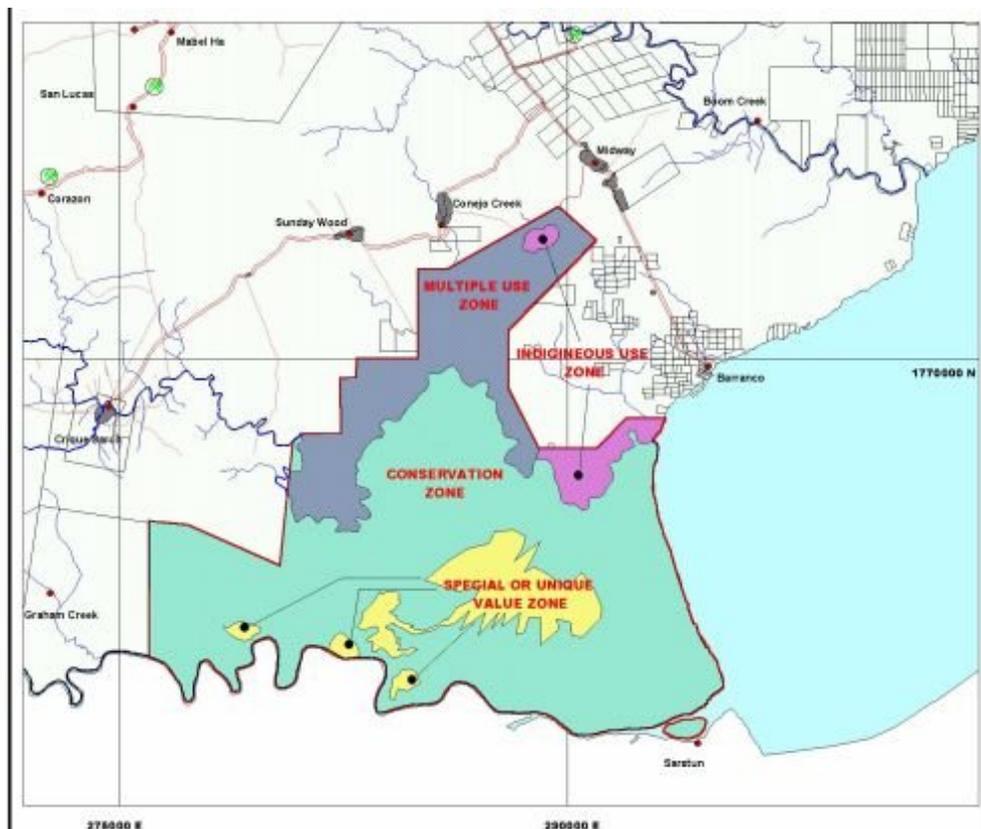
had been incorporated into the process. Through consultations, the local communities accepted that in order to maintain the conservation partnership forged through the STNP and COMSTEC project, self-imposed modifications of local governance systems were necessary. In return for accepting not to hunt or log in the park, and practice only limited fishing, SATIIM promised communities the right to continue to extract important medicinal, construction and consumption resources.

However, despite these compromises and agreements forged at the local level, the management plan prepared and presented to the Forest Department for review in early 2005 was summarily rejected, specifically because of the proposed indigenous extraction system. In the Forest Department's opinion, the entity responsible for overseeing all terrestrial protected areas in Belize, any type of extraction from a National Park, however culturally justified or well-managed, simply contravened the laws of Belize. With the NPAPSP review process still in its infancy, their reference point remained the National Parks System Act, which states that Parks can only be entered for the purposes of recreation, education or scientific research, with visitors prohibited from disturbing the fauna and flora, or damaging, collecting or destroying plants. What SATIIM was therefore proposing constituted a radical and in their view, illegal departure from national parks legislation. With the Forest Department refusing to endorse the plan, it therefore appeared that the management of the STNP by an indigenous NGO was not in any significant way assisting local communities to safeguard even a compromised version of their traditional livelihood systems. It also appeared that despite indigenous communities' participation in the process of data collection which had informed the management recommendations, and ensured that they were ecologically sound, their input was nevertheless not being allowed to alter the standard conservation-oriented management framework for protected areas in Belize. This rejection threatened to undermine any sense of ownership or engagement in the process which involvement in research and management had generated. SATIIM as the Park's managing entity was in effect being forced to act as watchdog over the area, without the ability to provide any commensurate benefits to local communities that responded to their traditional practices or livelihood needs.

Meanwhile, further disappointments were being experienced by the communities, as expectations raised by the COMSTEC project granted to SATIIM had failed to materialize in concrete livelihood benefits and community development as anticipated. Despite its stated growing concern for the social dimensions of conservation activity, the Global Environmental Facility funding mechanism, particularly at the time of the STNP grant formulation, was specifically geared to address biodiversity conservation goals. Although the project framework recognized that lack of alternative livelihoods options represented a threat to biodiversity conservation, since these fostered unsustainable resource use practices by rural communities, it anticipated that co-financing from another initiative launched in Toledo by the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Caribbean Development Bank - the Community-Initiated Agricultural Development Project (CARD) - would provide the necessary support for such activities. It

may nevertheless have been wise to include significant community development-oriented support directly within the COMSTEC project mechanism, but a lack of capacity within SATIIM to draft the complex GEF document had led to this activity being assumed by consultants from the same International Fund for Agricultural Development agency, who were confident in their other project coming on stream. As such, as reflected by the project outcomes listed earlier, the COMSTEC initiative though indigenous-managed, was in all other respects a typical conservation project. In practice, the CARD project was a major regional disappointment, which remained embroiled in red tape and bureaucratic procedures, failed to provide any significant measure of support to the COMSTEC initiative, and was indeed prematurely closed in late 2005. Although with the assistance of the Ecologic Development Fund, SATIIM was successful in raising funds for a modest agroforestry training programme for the buffering communities, the acidic soils of their area made progress difficult, only a limited number of people were involved, and the initiative was therefore not sufficient to appease local concerns. In sum, the enthusiasm of the local communities for managing the park and implementing the COMSTEC project had in no small measure been raised on the basis of these processes ability to address indigenous empowerment and developmental interests, but the reality was that beyond some intermittent employment and the construction of visitor centers in each community bordering the Park, they had received little tangible livelihoods improvements. Instead, they had rather seen their freedom to extract traditional resources curtailed, without any commensurate governmental recognition of this sacrifice, or sufficient developmental support.

Figure 1: The STNP Map and Zones



Faced with the opposition of the Forest Department's technical conservation staff, who were insisting that the plan fit national legal standards, the Ke'kchi Maya Executive Director (ED) of SATIIM, who was also the spokesperson for

the Maya Leaders Alliance and a recognized leader in the struggle for indigenous land rights, went directly to the top echelons of Government for support. It is a fair assumption that the Government, embroiled in parallel indigenous land rights negotiations headed by the same individual, encompassing the entire region of the District, believed that by conceding the indigenous and multiple use zones request, negotiations with the Maya Leaders might indirectly be improved. Moreover, while the principle of indigenous rights to use traditional resources within the park might not appeal, the community livelihood benefits that they could provide did, in demonstrating protected areas' ability to address local developmental needs. As such, the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, using his extensive power of discretion over protected areas, overturned the Forest Department's decision, and gave his support to the management plan and zonation scheme. On June 22nd 2005, what was billed as a "controversial and unprecedented management plan for the STNP was signed"¹³, providing the first instance of traditional extraction of forest resources being allowed within the boundaries of a national park. This important precedent was presented as a major step towards "sustainable co-management of the STNP, and in reconciling the needs of indigenous peoples and environmental conservation in Southern Belize" overall. ¹⁴ The STNP example is indeed likely to have directly encouraged the recognition afforded to indigenous communities in the NPAPSP documents which were issued later in 2005, discussed earlier.

Indigenous Empowerment through Protected Areas: Replication of the SATIIM Example

SATIIM's work in addressing traditional indigenous management resource extractive interests through the framework of protected areas management has directly inspired other indigenous communities and organizations in Toledo. These include the Ya'axche' Conservation Trust (YCT), a Toledo-based indigenous NGO which operates in the northern part of the Toledo District, and was formed in 1998 as a direct result of international conservation interventions in the area. YCT has evolved from a local board formed originally to hold and manage a 15,000 acre tract of private lands that straddle the length of a major watershed in southern Belize, were in danger of being converted to citrus plantations, and therefore purchased for conservation by an international conservation NGO, Fauna & Flora International. The local community representatives invited on the board were therefore given an opportunity to manage the land, and seek benefits from local communities from this administrative position, in return had for committing to the conservation objectives for which it had been purchased. YCT's stated institutional objectives are as a result, not coincidentally, to promote biodiversity conservation in the private protected area - the Golden Stream Corridor Preserve (GSCP) - and provide development and livelihood opportunities for the 4 Mayan indigenous communities situated around it.

¹³ SATIIM website

¹⁴ SATIIM July 2005 Newsletter. <http://www.satiim.org.bz/newsletter%20july%202005.pdf>

YCT is currently engaged in the process of drafting a management plan for the GSCP that is due for completion in May 2006, and whose biological, social and interrelated maps have been produced by the Mayan rangers, social scientists and mappers employed by the organization. In this process, YCT has followed SATIIM's lead in establishing both spiritual and multiple use zones in its protected area after consultations with 4 local communities. Since the GSCP is a private protected area, and Belize still has no legislation to define management criteria for private protected area governance, YCT benefits from not having to secure approval from the GoB before incorporating these zones within its draft plan, although the Forest Department does sit on the YCT Board, and has been consulted on the initiative. The model proposed by SATIIM has by and large been adopted by YCT, with the permit system modified to include only YCT and local leaders in the approval process, and reflect the different resource realities of the GSCP. YCT has moreover also benefited from observing the constraints experienced by SATIIM in addressing local community livelihood interests through the framework of its GEF project. In drafting its own recently approved GEF project, YCT, with the support of Fauna & Flora International, have attempted to design a truly integrated conservation and development project, building in specific funds to support biodiversity-friendly community enterprise. The pending project is therefore anticipated to be more responsive to the integrated realities and considerations of local stakeholders than COMSTEC was.

Several smaller community-based indigenous organizations (CBOs) in the District are also applying SATIIM's principles of addressing indigenous interests through the medium of protected area conservation. A group in one of YCT's buffering communities, Indian Creek, has begun the process of registering themselves, and lobbying for management rights over a cave system located behind their village, which has both spiritual significance and ecotourism potential. The Aguacaliente Management Team, an indigenous CBO formed to manage the 5,492 acre Aguacaliente Wildlife Sanctuary, have been working steadily without much external support to develop their organizational capacity and promote tourism to the area. The group has moreover recently launched an innovative gibbon-rearing programme alongside the park, to provide an alternative for communities to hunting within its boundaries. Meanwhile, the Rio Blanco Mayan Association, which manages the 100 acre Rio Blanco National Park, are successfully promoting the waterfall which the park was established to protect as a major tourism destination for Toledo, providing income which the surrounding communities are benefiting from. In sum, the example set by SATIIM, of how strategic partnerships with the conservation sector, including the establishment of indigenous-managed conservation organizations, alliances with international conservation organizations and donors, and integration with the national protected areas framework through co-management agreements with government, can benefit indigenous management and livelihood interests, and affect policy change, has been extremely significant in changing indigenous attitudes towards conservation and protected areas in less than a decade in Toledo. That said, with the only Mayan Minister ever to have been elected in Belize having been found illegally fishing in the

Aguacaliente Wildlife Sanctuary not long ago, the extent to which local indigenous communities are accepting self-regulation to fit with conservation partnerships is still somewhat in doubt.

Weaknesses of the Protected Areas Framework

Moreover, over the last year following the formalization of the STNP management plan, new developments have taken place affecting SATIIM and the park's management that have seriously put into question how far involvement in protected management can truly support indigenous common property interests in the context of Belize. Given the location of the multiple use and indigenous zones, only the 2 communities closest to these areas, Midway and Conejo, have actively been making use of their rights to continue with traditional extraction. Worse still, is the continued flagrant pillaging of the STNP's resources by Guatemalans, which SATIIM's 4 park rangers are largely unable to prevent. With the Sarstoon river representing the border between Guatemala and Belize, a border which continues to be contested by Guatemala, and is the subject of a mediated negotiation process by the Organization of American States to resolve a centuries old dispute, access is easy, and patrolling difficult to implement both because of the terrain, resource constraints and political sensitivity. Belize has remained severely hampered in its desire to stem the influx of Guatemalans into the country who are extracting all variety of resources the length of the border, since almost every time it does so, a major international dispute with Guatemala immediately ensues. Given its inability to place Belize Defence Force soldiers the length of the border, and in particular, its concern not to inflame Guatemalan sentiments by shooting or arresting trespassers to Belize, the incursions have been essentially allowed to continue with impunity. The communities surrounding the STNP are therefore prevented by park rangers from extracting timber or hunting wild game, while knowing full well that rosewood, orchids, deer and other resources are being collected on a regular basis by Guatemalans. As such resentment towards the protected area regulations, and to SATIIM for attempting to enforce them, has grown. Meanwhile, lingering difficulties in ensuring that Garifuna interests are equally represented within an otherwise-Mayan dominated process have not lent themselves to forging a strong sense of unity and collaborative action to prevent incursions by outsiders from emerging. As in the Bosawas Nicaraguan case, where historical ethnic tensions between Miskito and Mayangna Indians have undermined efforts at unified responses to the rapidly extending agricultural frontier, inter-ethnic tensions have weakened the Maya and Garifuna's capacity to collectively develop joint strategies to address common external threats.

To complicate matters further, only a week after the management plan was signed, oil was discovered in north-central Belize, along the border with Guatemala. This discovery followed decades of fruitless exploration, in which over 50 dry wells had been drilled. As noted by one of the directors of the company which discovered the oil, resulting revenues could have dramatic consequences in a country with only 280,000 inhabitants, and a gross domestic product of \$1.8 bn, which imports 100 % of its fossil fuels and

whose economy is straining under the weight of current global oil prices. "For an economy like Belize it really wouldn't take a whole heck of a lot of oil production to have a pretty meaningful impact on GDP."

This discovery has prompted a fever of parallel explorations throughout the country, and activation of dormant oil exploration licenses. Sarstoon Temash has always been an area of interest to oil explorers. Exploratory drilling had been conducted in the area of the national park starting in 1977, when the Esso Corporation opened wells near the village Crique Sarco which were capped shortly thereafter afterwards. In 1998 the Geology and Petroleum Department (GPD), which falls under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE), issued an oil exploration license to a U.S. corporation, A&B Energy Limited, for lands that encompassed the entirety of the Toledo District's terrestrial and coastal area, including the STNP and other national protected areas. In early November 2005, SATIIM was notified by the Forest Department (FD) that the GPD had granted rights to seismic testing in the Park, under terms of a Production Sharing Agreement for oil exploration held by US Capital Energy Belize, Ltd., dated January 24th, 2004, and that GPD was requesting the formality of an access permit from the FD to the park. Although the STNP is officially co-managed by SATIIM and the Forest Department, the GPD has jurisdiction over all sub-soil resources in the country, and has legal authority to issue permits in any part of Belize, private, national or protected lands. Ironically, just a month earlier, in October 2005, STNP had just been declared a Ramsar site (no.1562), out of recognition of the wetlands of international importance which it contained. In April 2006, SATIIM were informed that FD had granted GPD the access permit requested. As of late April, the company had already set up shop in the District capital, and are preparing to cut trails and set off explosives throughout the Park starting May 4th, 2006.

At the present time, SATIIM is attempting to mount an advocacy and legal effort to prevent the seismic exploration, which will undoubtedly have major impacts on its ecological integrity, from taking place. SATIIM has enlisted the same group of international human rights lawyers who have been supporting the Maya Leaders' case against the Government of Belize for over a decade, with indigenous interests, even if in a different guise, once more under threat from the authorities. Their international conservation partners have begun an online petition directed at the government authorities in Belize. But with Belize in a dire economic state, enthusiasm for pursuing oil as a means of raising economic and political capital abounds. Moreover, having developed an institutional platform of resistance to the oil exploration proposal, SATIIM are potentially putting themselves on a collision course with the local communities that they claim to represent. Having seen little tangible improvement in their wellbeing over the last decade from protected area management, a sizeable and growing community contingent is already reportedly eager for the jobs the oil company promises to create. SATIIM is therefore gearing itself up to fight not only the government and company, but communities themselves. By so doing, their authenticity as an indigenous-based organization is likely to be put under increasing scrutiny.

SATIIM's position is moreover not helped by the fact that the economic potential of Belize's protected areas to generate income and development has yet to be unrealized. The NPAPSP review process failed to produce an economic valuation of Belize National Protected Areas as anticipated, financing to determine protected areas' income-generating potential being ironically, too scarce. It was however recommended that when such an analysis took place, it would best be done on a bottom-up, protected area by protected area basis, from which the viability of the entire system could be determined. Two protected area business plans¹⁵, funded by the Protected Areas Conservation Trust, were coincidentally prepared by the Worlds Parks Commission parallel to the NPAPSP process in 2005, yielding uninspiring financial projections for the protected areas reviewed. Even with a variety of income-generating mechanisms and scenarios envisaged, in only one of the many scenarios developed could one of the parks selected – the most visited in the country – generate profits; but only after \$315,000 US had been invested in tourism infrastructure. Both parks are moreover better placed than most in Belize to benefit from eco-tourism visitation, and are therefore not typical case studies. The same analysis conducted for more remote parks is likely to be far bleaker. Indefinite reliance upon external donor support by Belize's protected areas was the inevitable conclusion of this business planning process. With these sobering reports in mind, both of which moreover cost \$50,000 US respectively to complete – a prohibitive expense for most local NGOs - omission of the financial analysis component from the NPAS review might not only have been the result of insufficient revenue. The oversight potentially also indicated the GoB's reduced expectations of the protected area system's potential to generate meaningful financial benefits and fuel national development, and its concomitant readiness to explore alternative means of them doing so - such as oil exploration - even if ecological integrity and local social interests might be compromised.

Limitations of the Conservation Sector Partners

The MNRE and GOB are therefore paradoxically proceeding with the revision of the NPAS policy, while forging forward with their oil exploration plans. In addition to the STNP, a range of protected areas, including the Bladen Nature Reserve, Port Honduras Marine Reserve, Paynes Creek National Park, and the private Rio Bravo Conservation Area are all the subject of planned oil exploration activities. While it is understandable that Government ministries and their technical conservation staff have been directed to support the oil exploration process, it may seem surprising that the various conservation NGOs in Belize have not banded together to oppose these common threats they face. This may yet occur. However, it must be recognized that in the context of Belize, opposition to projects presented as initiatives in the national development interest have in recent years, been successfully portrayed as unpatriotic by the Government, strangling debate as a result. This state of affairs is the consequence of a recently concluded, acrimonious struggle to prevent the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Macal River, for the purpose of reducing Belize's 100% dependency on imported electricity from Mexico. Opposition to the proposed dam became led by the managing director of the Belize Zoo, an American expatriate. Recognizing that construction of the Chalillo dam would flood 10 kilometres Macal River, an area with the

¹⁵For St.Herman's Blue Hole managed by Belize Audubon Society; Laughing Bird Caye, managed by Friends of Laughing Bird Caye.

highest density of the surviving big cats (jaguar, puma and ocelot) in Central America, which contained the principal nesting sites for scarlet macaws in Belize, she successfully harnessed international conservation support, including the Sierra Club, and global celebrities like Harrison Ford and Cameron Diaz. After efforts to have the dam contract rescinded through local courts failed, the Belize Zoo manager took the case all the way to the Privy Council Court of Appeals in the UK, on behalf of a national umbrella conservation alliance, the Belize Alliance of Conservation Non-Governmental Organizations, in which the zoo and most Belizean NGOs were at the time a member. The case accused the government of embarking on a development project whose energy-generating potential would be of negligible importance in reducing Belize's dependence on imported electricity, and of preparing a faulty EIA which disguised the true extent of environmental impacts which the dam would inflict. Faults to the EIA cited included the assumed intentional removal of a major fault line lying right beneath the proposed dam site from the geological map submitted by the company.

Despite strong evidence in support of the case, its critical Achilles heel was its failure to secure local NGO and national support. The adversarial campaign, which was highly critical of the Government and national development priorities in Belize, and whose self-appointed spokesperson despite years of residency in the country, was still considered a foreigner, made local Belizean conservationists uneasy. This weakness was successfully exploited by the GoB, who depicted the opposition as a foreign-led attempt by self-interested parties, who having come to Belize to make a living from its natural riches, were intent on preventing national development and livelihoods benefits to be shared by authentic Belizeans. The visual reinforcement to this message given by demonstrations in Belize organized against the project, in which white students paraded placards calling for the 'Defense of Our Macal River' did not help diffuse this impression. To complicate matters further, the largest Belizean conservation NGO whose lead was looked to by the other organizations, was receiving annual subventions from the GoB to manage a number of protected areas on its behalf, and moreover, had as its Board President an individual who had been involved in the EIA which had endorsed the dam project. With this organization failing to commit itself either way, and most other NGOs similarly inhibited by the co-management rights for national parks they had been given by the GoB, or tax breaks secured for the management of their private protected areas, while moreover feeling genuine patriotic support for the development of their country, no widespread conservation opposition materialized.

As a result, a division between the international advocacy effort, with its expatriate spokespersons in Belize, and the majority of established Belizean conservation NGOs, was created – so much so that a competing national conservation NGO umbrella entity, the Association of Protected Area Management Organizations (APAMO), was formed by those who wished to distance themselves from the controversy surrounding BACONGO and the case before the Privy Council. When the Privy Council eventually found in favour of the Government on the 29th of January 2004, recognizing its right to pursue projects of

national development interest - even while concerns raised by the appellant concerning the EIA were given due attention - the limitations to conservation goals and advocacy overall in Belize were clearly underlined. As a consequence partly of the Chalillo debacle, the national conservation sector in Belize can be broadly characterized as one which skirts controversy, and is passively reconciled to the fact that the GoB's development agenda will inevitably supersede conservation goals where the two are in conflict.

While continuing to pursue its attempts to oppose the seismic exploration, SATIIM is therefore realistic about the prospects of their effort becoming a national conservation advocacy movement. International advocacy with the support of conservation advocacy organizations is being explored, but has been made problematic given the recent events of Chalillo. Moreover, with government appetite for oil is considered far greater than its interest in hydroelectricity power, and with its intransigence towards international pressure as shown by both the indigenous lands and dam cases; it is not likely to concede readily in this. Most significantly, a growing proportion of the local indigenous communities, having to date derived minimal economic benefit from the STNP's establishment or their involvement in its management, are looking forward to the numerous, if temporary, opportunities for employment which US Capital Energy Belize, Ltd has promised them in meetings held in the buffer communities. In the first community meeting scheduled by SATIIM, in Crique Sarco, to discuss their opposition to the development, and talk about the potential impacts which oil exploration will have on the park, a climate of outright hostility reigned, during which the Crique Sarco SATIIM Board representative publicly resigned her seat in protest at SATIIM's position. Overall, the prospects of successfully protecting and building upon the incipient SATIIM model of indigenous protected areas management are not favourable. Continued opposition to the GoB could moreover jeopardize SATIIM's co-management agreement, which is due for renewal in 2008.

Conclusions

In sum, while co-management of protected areas in Belize provides a level of empowerment and inclusion for local communities in the management of traditional common property resources, the case study of SATIIM has also exposed the fragility of these cross-scale partnerships in sustaining these objectives, when competing national and local development interests arise. Through its strides in successfully positioning indigenous peoples and agencies as significant players in the conservation and protected areas framework in Belize, SATIIM has played an important innovating role, presenting novel technical, policy and institutional examples for adapting community systems to meet new complexities and opportunities, which other communities have actively learnt from and applied. Community organizational capacity has been strengthened, the importance of indigenous ecological knowledge in conservation planning recognized, and political space for incorporating traditional subsistence systems within the framework of protected areas legislation is being created, and expected to be reflected in a new pending policy. The Government of Belize has meanwhile taken commendable efforts to reform its historically fragmented NPAS system, devolve responsibility to co-managers, and encourage protected

areas to become more responsive to widespread socioeconomic concerns. These advances have been possible as a result of multi-faceted institutional alliances involving local communities, local indigenous conservation and development agencies, with international conservation organizations' support, and the strong participation of government officials from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

That said, how significant and stable are these advances in protected indigenous common property systems? Even with the current reform process underway, the anticipated policy framework does not appear to promise fundamental security to local common property systems. Decision-making authority in co-management partnerships still ultimately rests with Government. As shown by the examples of the proposed zoning and oil exploration systems, the local agency cannot institute any amendments to management of national protected area without GoB's approval; the GoB can however readily proceed with major infrastructural projects without the support of its local partner. The GoB only came to accept the proposed indigenous use zonation system for the park after political strings had been pulled; the concession given does not imply that a radical transformation in governmental organizational culture has taken place in Belize, which now embraces the importance of indigenous livelihood and cultural beliefs in protected areas management. The reform process has moreover failed to directly address the issue of ministerial discretion over protected areas, which allows the Minister of MNRE to grant development concessions within protected area boundaries, unilaterally realign the boundaries, or de-reserve them altogether if national interests predominate. Belize's conservation community appears to have implicitly accepted that co-management agreements, conservation interests and local common property systems are of secondary importance when national development interests arise. This situation not only provides little security for local protected area managers; it will likely cause international conservation donors and partners to think twice before investing substantial sums in support of local management. Local NGOs like SATIIM could find the financial support for their work undermined, if neither conservation nor development interests are addressed. In Belize, as in other countries in the region and developing world, the protected areas system is ultimately undermined by the contradictory and partial commitment of the government which established it, creating an unstable policy framework for safeguarding local community interests (Kaimowitz et al, 2003). While on one level, multi-sector co-management partnerships with GOB and conservation NGOs have created opportunities for local indigenous resource aspirations, their distinct limitations reflect sociopolitical power imbalances embedded at a broader societal level.

The case study also demonstrated the difficulty of effectively addressing indigenous livelihood needs through the framework of biodiversity conservation. Significant resources have been secured by SATIIM, with its annual budget since 2003 being consistently in excess of \$500,000 Belize. However, with the majority of these funds secured from conservation-oriented donors, despite SATIIM's indigenous empowerment rhetoric, in practice, its programmatic engagements have tended to follow those of a traditional conservation organization. SATIIM's limitations in realizing community expectations have

made its chosen position regarding the pending oil exploration particularly problematic. SATIIM has so far failed to demonstrate its ability to adapt to the new circumstances and strategic alliances presented by the oil development debacle. Rather than actively seeking to enter negotiations with the GoB and the company, and by so doing, work to mitigate the ecological impacts of oil explorations while securing concomitant benefits for the local community, SATIIM has chosen the route of outright opposition, while continuing to assume the duties of daily management of the Park. By so doing, SATIIM has forced itself into an unenviable position, in which it is policing its own people's activities in the park, is believed to have failed to secure substantial compensatory benefits for the communities, and is moreover opposing a development project which to the impoverished communities, is being seen as a much-needed opportunity for improving their livelihood conditions. Local criticism of SATIIM's overly conservationist stance amongst indigenous communities has grown, with many complaining that the NGO and co-management agreement has moreover only created jobs and unseen advantages for a very few. As noted by Borrini-Feyerabend & Pimbert¹⁶, achieving a balanced representation of actors in co-management regimes is a complex task, with individual communities themselves having internal inequities and imbalances of power which become increasingly visible as levels of scale increase. This case study underlines the challenges of maintaining coherent and locally-legitimate indigenous leadership and community-based governance systems while attempting to negotiate the compromises inherent to such partnerships. It also exposed the difficulty of justifying and sustaining adaptations in local governance systems designed to accommodate conservation partnerships, when commensurate compensation and benefits are not being delivered.

As stressed at the outset, different contexts create different opportunities. The challenges and constraints that have emerged from this case study from Belize should not suggest that successful multi-level partnerships with the conservation sector or other entities cannot be achieved, or that these alliances are undesirable strategies for indigenous peoples to pursue. Viewing the experience of SATIIM in struggling for institutional viability in the face of governmental and private sector opposition, YCT, another indigenous NGO mentioned earlier, has chosen to rather directly explore an investment partnership with a US consortium, interested in developing a tropical forest plantation on a portion of their private protected areas. Recognizing the difficulties in financing protected areas management and meeting local community livelihood needs, this indigenous organization is understandably enough looking to the private sector for an alternative partnership and set of compromises, which might better support indigenous livelihood interests, while sustaining the costs of its protected area management obligations.

In the context of a uncertain, continuously changing globalized world, cross-sector partnerships as vehicles for safeguarding traditional common property systems and resources are not only desirable. They are in fact the inevitable outcome of indigenous peoples' continued process of adaptation to

¹⁶ Chapter 9, pg 42.

opportunities that help them reinforce and renew cultural management systems, in a continuously evolving sociopolitical dynamic. In some countries, progressive legal frameworks that genuinely encourage and protect community conservation and local protection exist; but these are generally the exception rather than the rule (Molnar, 2005). Even those that do recognize indigenous rights within their constitutions, such as in Nicaragua, struggle or even resist putting them into practice (Smith, 2005). For most indigenous peoples, faced with historical marginalization and abuse, lack of tenure recognition in the present, and seeing their traditional lands continually expropriated, there is a constant imperative to pursue a broad range of strategies to protect their continued access to common property and natural resources ((Borrini-Feyerabend & Pimbert, 2004¹⁷). The case study provides an illustration of the opportunities and constraints which such mechanisms can impose in the effort to protect indigenous common property systems and resources through the prism of protected areas management. In Belize, indigenous management has yet to be institutionalized and unequivocally supported by cross-scale alliances with the conservation sector; a workable 'middle ground' for governance (Colchester, MacKay 2004) still needs to be defined. As academics pay increasing attention to the many complex, engaging examples of multi-level and stakeholder management models emerging internationally (Dolsak and Ostrom 2003), and utilize this material to inform multi-scale management theory, they must prioritize the design of conceptual tools and practical strategies for dealing with the challenges of creative, adaptive, cross-scale alliances and robust multi-partner institutions. A typology and analysis of successful institutional partnerships that have effectively encapsulated and supported multi-scale interests and management, which can be usefully applied by researchers and practitioners in the field, would represent an extremely practical contribution to the evolving field of common property research.

¹⁷ Chapter 4, pg 37.

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