

Tourism Development, Fishing, and Heritage Conception

Exploring Pathways to Sustainable Heritage Tourism on the Placencia Peninsula, Belize

Eric S. Koenig, MA Student in Applied Anthropology, USF



Abstract / Introduction

The Placencia Peninsula in southeastern Belize is undergoing rapid changes associated with widespread tourism development, and concerns have been raised about the sustainability of tourism-related development activities (Boles et al. 2011). At the same time, national tourism institutions and development policies have packaged heritage across Belize into discrete heritage assets for developing tourism products and marketing destinations.

Drawing on policy and multi-methods ethnographic research, I investigate how peninsula resident conceptions of fishing as “heritage” converge with or diverge from “tourist imaginaries” (Salazar 2010) and national policy discourse on heritage. I then consider the possibility of community-driven heritage tourism as a pathway for future sustainable tourism development.

Research Aims / Questions

Various national and local initiatives organized around tourism and alternative fishing livelihoods recently have emerged to promote novel pathways to ‘sustainable development’ in Placencia, Belize. Considering these initiatives, my thesis research examines:

- 1) To what extent and in what ways do residents conceive of fishing as “heritage,” and how do these conceptions compare with tourist imaginaries of peninsula heritage and relate to heritage discourse in national tourism policy and marketing media?
- 2) How do conceptions of fishing influence strategies to manage and use heritage places, landscapes, and resources for ‘sustainable (tourism) development’ around the peninsula?

Methods

Policy “Study Through”

To examine the intersection of fishing heritage conceptions on the peninsula with national tourism marketing media and policy discourse, I apply a “study through” approach within an “anthropology of public policy” framework.

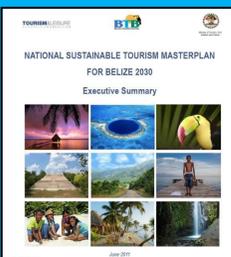
A “study through” approach is often used to trace the source of policy and its outcomes among various actors to illuminate power dynamics, roles, intents, and distribution of resources between them (Wedel et al. 2005).

Using this approach, I examine the roles that various stakeholders, policies, and plans have in heritage conception and ‘sustainable’ coastal tourism development in Placencia.

Policy Documents



(Draft) National Cultural Policy (NICH 2014)



National Sustainable Tourism Masterplan for Belize 2030 (Tourism & Leisure et al. 2011)

Data Collection & Analysis

Multi-methods ethnographic research:

- 1.) Semi-structured interviews (n = 8) with local tour guides, environmental NGO and fishing cooperative representatives, and fishermen.
- 2.) Targeted digital surveys with residents, workers, and tourists (n = 134 total)
- 3.) Participant-observation at local events
- 4.) GPS-assisted participatory mapping to document places associated with local fishing heritage (n = 4 mapping collaborators)

Data Analysis:

- 1.) Qualitative coding and memoing
- 2.) Exploratory, content, and thematic analyses



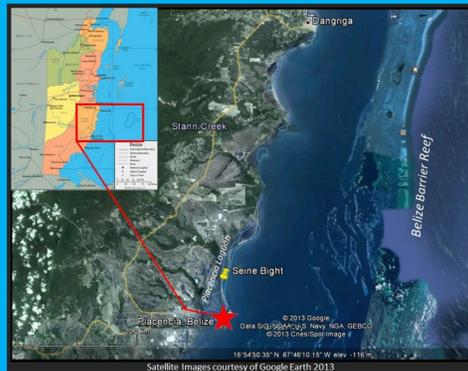
Participatory mapping can be used to elicit the social memories, identities, and meanings of places through documenting and discussing significant resources, landmarks, and landscapes in collaboration with local people (Chambers 2006).

Unpacking “Heritage”

“Heritage” is constructed and represented by diverse groups of people; constantly being disputed, negotiated, authorized, and authenticated to serve various ends. Although its meaning is debated, “heritage” generally represents a political construction of the past or present, a process, or a discourse used by people through time; highlighting tangible and intangible representations of a group’s memory, identity, traditions, livelihoods, history, culture, environment, place, and experiences at particular historical and political moments.

This research draws on Noel Salazar’s (2010) concept of “tourism imaginaries” and Laurajane Smith’s (2006) phrase “authorized heritage discourse.” “Tourism imaginaries” consist of the preconceived individual and shared expectations that tourists have of destinations before they visit, which are culled from various forms of circulating tourism media and “historically-laden fantasies” about travel to the destination (Salazar 2010:xviii).

“Authorized heritage discourse” represents an institutional, sanctioned form of communication about heritage meanings that generally privileges Western notions of tangibility, and is used to reinforce “grand narratives” of nation, culture, and the collective past (Smith 2006:42). I use these concepts as analytical lenses to explore the ways in which heritage associated with fishing is constructed, represented, produced, and disseminated for tourism management and consumption in Placencia.

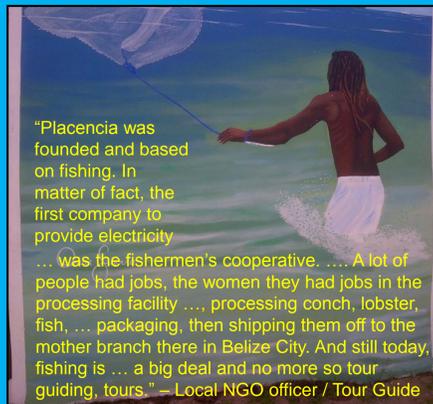


A “Tourism Imaginary” of Placencia (Source: Destination Belize Magazine (2014:81))

Placencia, Stann Creek District

Placencia is a multi-ethnic, multi-national village of over 1,000 residents located on the Placencia Peninsula. The peninsula is separated from the mainland of Belize by a 24 km long lagoon that provides important habitat for juvenile fish species and manatees. To the east of Placencia is the Belize Barrier Reef - a UNESCO World Heritage site - which serves as a primary draw for tourists seeking sun and beach, scuba diving, and ecotourism experiences.

Like other coastal towns in the region, the economy of Placencia was based around the fishing industry (Carne et al. 2013). Processing and export of lobster, conch, and fish through a fishing cooperative near the southern pier used to sustain many local livelihoods. With declining fishing stocks, competition, reformed fisheries regulations, and the rise of tourism over the past 25 years, the co-op has diminished and many residents made a transition to the tourism industry.



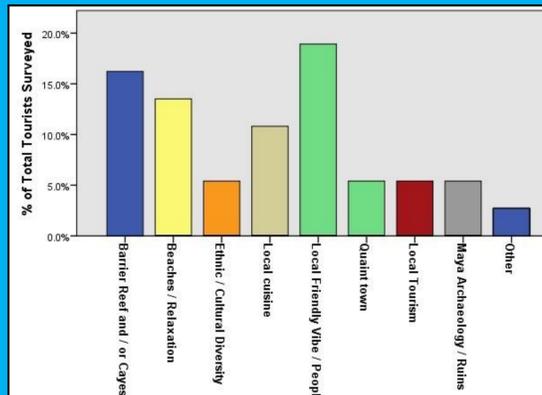
Local mural honoring Placencia's fishing history.

Results: Conceptions of Fishing as “Heritage” among Residents

Preliminary analyses of survey and interview data suggest that fishing remains a significant piece of the peninsula’s collective identity and heritage. 19.7% of residents surveyed during two field seasons noted fishing or associated places and events when asked to identify just one significant piece of culture or heritage on the peninsula. When residents were asked about what they identify as “heritage” from a list of fifteen items spanning national tourism conceptions of “heritage” and local and national events, holidays, and activities, 62% of those surveyed considered fishing activities to be part of significant “heritage” on the peninsula.

During the interviews and participatory mapping activities, respondents identified the cayes, the reef, fishing stocks in the Placencia Lagoon, the fishing cooperative, the pier, and the annual Lobsterfest celebrations as prominent pieces of local fishing heritage, often drawing connections between local livelihoods, coastal environmental health, island lifestyles, and fishing history.

Conceptions of Fishing as “Heritage” (Policy, Marketing media, & Tourists)

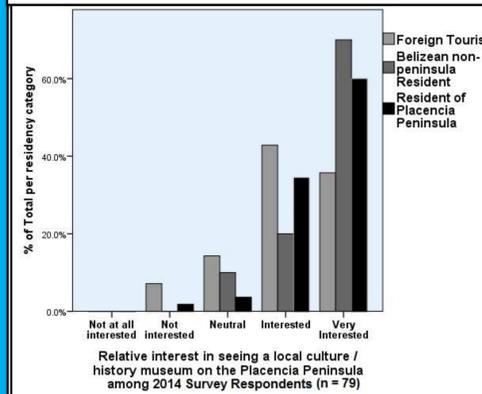


Although Placencia’s fishing history is recognized in prominent tourism marketing, sport fishing and seafood cuisine are identified as major tourism attractions over local fishing culture and events (BTIA 2014). At the national policy level, the Sustainable Tourism Master Plan conceives of the Belize Barrier Reef as a key environmental heritage tourism asset, promoting ecotourism and sun and beach tourism around key marine protected areas.

Survey results suggest that foreign tourist imaginaries of Placencia’s heritage draw partly from these marketed and authorized notions of environmental heritage and tourism. Overall conceptions of fishing as “heritage” appear to vary to some extent between tourists and residents.

Fishing Heritage Tourism as a Pathway to Sustainable Development?

Some local tour guides, fishermen, and NGO representatives who were interviewed recognize heritage tourism constructed around traditional livelihoods and history as a potential avenue of sustainable development in the future. In particular, a few projects recently developed by the local fishing cooperative aim to overcome challenges associated with rapid tourism expansion and ecological change by supporting alternative livelihoods for local fishermen. Notably, the co-op intends to develop a fishing history museum featuring exhibits containing oral histories and videos in addition to a heritage tourism program employing fishermen as guides to take tourists to traditional fishing grounds and seaweed farms in an effort to showcase local fishing livelihoods and history.



“... a lot of people still appreciate (the fishing) mode of living and lifestyle. But now that’s changed, people have strayed away those traditional mode(s) of living. I think it still can be captured, you know putting it into heritage tourism. You know a package that people from other parts of the world can come around and enjoy, but still be able to enjoy (what) we use to do 10, 20, 50 years ago.” – Co-op Manager

Survey results indicating a high relative interest in a local museum suggest that there is a market for heritage tourism as an alternative pathway to tourism development in the future, although the dynamics of this market have yet to be determined. Furthermore, local heritage tourism initiatives align with sustainable development policies at the national level, since cultural tourism

is recognized as the first priority tourism product for Belize by 2030 (NICH 2014; Tourism & Leisure et al. 2011).

Additional content, statistical, and spatial data analyses, and longitudinal studies of the market for heritage tourism on the peninsula are needed before the “sustainability” of these alternative tourism development approaches can be assessed. As an applied product of this research, community fishing heritage maps will be drafted from compiled participatory mapping information using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software, which then may be used by local stakeholders in various heritage tourism initiatives around Placencia.

References

Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA). (2014). Southern Coast: Placencia. Destination Belize, pp. 80-85.

Boles, E., A. Anderson, R. Cavich, et al. (2011). Rapid Assessment of Effects and Issues Related to Development in the Placencia Area, Dry Season 2011. NRMP 4552 Integrated Coastal Zone Management, Course Project. Belize City: University of Belize, Natural Resource Management Program.

Carne, Lisa (ed.) (2013). Way Bak Den: Preserving & Celebrating Creole and Garifuna Culture on the Placencia Peninsula, Belize. Inter-American Development Bank, Cultural Development Program. Published in Belize.

Chambers, Robert (2006). Participatory Mapping and Geographic Information Systems: Whose Map? Who is Empowered and Disempowered? Who Gains and Who Loses? EJIJSDC 25(2):1-11.

National Institute of Culture and History (NICH). Our Cultures. Our Values. Our Identity. Our Prosperity: Belize 2014 National Culture Policy (Draft). 52 pp. Belmopan: NICH.

Salazar, Noel B. (2010). Envisioning Eden: Mobilizing Imaginaries in Tourism and Beyond. New York: Bergahn Books.

Smith, Laurajane. (2006). Uses of Heritage. New York: Routledge.

Tourism & Leisure Program, Belize Tourism Board, and the Belize Ministry of Tourism, Civil Aviation and Culture. (2011). National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan for Belize 2030. Executive Summary. Barcelona: EuroPraxis Consulting Company.

Wedel, Janine R., Cris Shore, Gregory Feldman, and Stacy Lathrop. (2005). Toward an Anthropology of Public Policy. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 600:30-51.

This material is based in part upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number 1243510. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this presentation are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.