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

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

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 (Boiles 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.

**Abstract / Introduction**

The Placencia Peninsula is a UNESCO World Heritage site indicating a high relative interest in tourism. Various national and local initiatives organized around tourism and alternative fishing livelihoods recently have emerged to promote local pathways to sustainable development in Placencia, Belize. Considering this, I outline the motivations for examining the intersection of fishing heritage and tourism.

**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 resident conceptions of fishing as “heritage,” and how do these conceptions compare with tourist imaginations of pensiona heritage and relate to heritage discourse in national tourism policy and marketing media?  
2) How do conceptions of fishing influence strategies 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 illustrate power dynamics, roles, interests, and distribution of resources between them (Wadel 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.

**Data Collection & Analysis**

Multi-method ethnographic research:  
1. Semi-structured interviews (n = 8) with local tour guides, environmental NGO and fishing cooperatives 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 collaborations)

**Data Analysis:**

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

**Policy Documents**

National Sustainable Tourism Masterplan for Belize 2030 (2011)

Tourism & Leisure Program, Belize Tourism Board, and the Belize Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Arts, and Heritage. Published in Belize.

Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA). (2014). Southern Coast:  
Tourism & Leisure Program. Belize Tourism Board, Culture, Arts, and Heritage. Published in Belize.

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 barrier for tourists seeking sun and beach, scuba diving, and ecotourism experiences.

**Research Results:**

**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 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. 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.

“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, experience, and places at certain historical and political moments.

**Conclusions:**

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.

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