

‘Dis Da Fi Wee?’: Oil, Conservation and Development in Belize

Leon Sealey-Huggins, Lecturer, Global Sustainable Development Programme,
University of Warwick

‘Fi Wee Belize’

*Pickney march tru di street di sing
yah dah fu wee Belize
mis Matie cross di street di halla
yah dah fuh wee Belize
even Shiela granny di brokdong to di tune
yah dah fu wee Belize
but tell mi, weh all dat really mean?*

*Yu si lang time befo time was time
dem bring wee yah pan this side
wi ancestors dem work sweat fi sweat
wid axe eena dem hand
yuh grampa neva tell yuh di stories
bout di logwood camp?
an how da slave blood build this nation,
not Europeans?*

*Bot dah more dan one story ah must tell
cause like mi fren Wilford seh
from the sarstoon to di Corozal land
all a wee dah wan
and the Maya yuh see
mi deh yah lang before Columbus and colonization
Dem build temples and great cities
at the height a dem civilization*

*So yah dah fu wee Belize
this blessed land by the Carib sea
all mi Garinagu brothers and sistas
join in wid wee
from Africa to St. Vincent
to a jewel in Central America
you brought a vibrant culture
and helped build our nation*

*So on our independence day
all a wee di sing ‘yah dah fu wee Belize’
cause Mestizo, East Indian, everyone
we made Belize what it is
Belize dah truly fi wee*

‘Fi Wee Belize’, Ritamae Hyde (1)

‘1.5°C to stay alive’?

[Hurricane Matthew struck Haiti](#) with predictably destructive force on Tuesday 4th October. Over 1000 people lost their lives, countless more lost their houses, farmland and livelihoods. [Reports suggest](#) that almost 800,000 are in urgent need of food; and the threat of cholera looms. Particularly depressing about these impacts was not just that they had been predicted, and would have been minimised were global societies organised more equitably, but rather that this is only one of what is likely to be an ever-increasing number of ‘extreme weather events’ that will blight the Caribbean region in years to come.

Many of the news media reports in this country focussed on [Australia’s Great Barrier Reef](#). Few made mention of the largest barrier reef in the Western hemisphere, and second-largest in the world, which is located off the coast of the Caribbean country of Belize.

Just over two months ago, for instance, it was widely reported that we were witnessing the [third-ever global coral bleaching event since 1998](#). Coral bleaching events, linked to the warming that accompanies climate change, essentially constitute an underwater heatwave on a global scale. They threaten to wreak havoc on ocean ecosystems by killing off coral. Many of the news media reports in this country focussed on [Australia’s Great Barrier Reef](#). Few made mention of the largest barrier reef in the Western hemisphere, and second-largest in the world, which is located off the coast of the Caribbean country of Belize. This neglect is unsurprising given that the Caribbean is not afforded a particularly prominent role in the discussion of global issues generally.

In relation to climate change, Caribbean countries have joined other vulnerable states in demanding an upper limit to warming of 1.5°C (‘to stay alive’), not the 2°C favoured by richer countries. In Paris at the recent COP21 UN climate change conference, the 1.5°C target was only given the vague ‘commitment’ that countries would ‘pursue efforts’ towards this figure, with the ‘long term goal of’ 2°C being that which was [formally agreed](#). In practice, much of this is moot. Under countries’ current commitments [we’re heading towards 2.8 - 3.8°C of warming](#). Such a trajectory spells more disaster for a region already disaster-prone through [no fault of its own](#).

Back to Belize then, where I spent 3 months in 2010 – 2011 while conducting fieldwork on the sociology and politics of climate change in the Caribbean region. While there, I was alerted to the conflicts and tensions that arose over proposed oil drilling in protected areas. A sociological examination of Belize’s history can help to better explain how and why conservation and development come into tension in Belize, and why drilling for oil – a notoriously toxic activity – came to be represented as a desirable development option.

‘Drill we will’... ‘is not Belize’? (2)

In 2010 a collection of NGOs managed to get hold of a map depicting the whole of the country divided into oil exploration concessions (the map can be found [here](#)). Crucially, the concessions included the over 26% of Belizean land and sea currently designated as a protected area. Joining forces to form a coalition, [the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural](#)

Heritage, these NGOs launched a concerted campaign to stop the Government of Belize from allowing drilling to take place both offshore and in Belize's protected areas.

Part of the reason that the leak of the map, and the campaigning that accompanied it, generated such opposition was because it came in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill. This spill, which occurred in the neighbouring Gulf of Mexico, has seen irrevocable damage done to the ocean, wetlands, and their flora and fauna, costing BP, the company found legally responsible, tens of billions dollars. For a country like Belize, that relies on a substantial proportion of its revenue from 'eco-tourism', the prospect of an off-, or on-, shore spill seemed unthinkable. Of particular concern was the threat to the UNESCO world heritage designated Great Barrier Reef.

...in a perversely paradoxical parallel, both as the leaked oil concession map and the Government of Belize's bullish initial statements indicated, one proposed 'solution' to the problem of development is the drilling of the very same fossil fuel that has contributed so much to the climate crisis in the first place.

Belize, like all Caribbean nations, is being particularly hard-hit by the unfolding of climate change. The prospect of rising sea-levels threatens inundation for much of Belize's low-lying land, for instance. In spite of not having contributed much by way of carbon emissions, and with much of Belize's virgin forest acting as a carbon sink, the country does not have many resources to actually respond to these climate changes, hence the need for some form of financial support, or 'development'. Yet, in a perversely paradoxical parallel, both as the leaked oil concession map and the Government of Belize's bullish initial statements indicated, one proposed 'solution' to the problem of development is the drilling of the very same fossil fuel that has contributed so much to the climate crisis in the first place.

Those in favour of drilling look to Trinidad and Tobago, where oil has helped to make it one of the richest countries in the region, with the lowest sovereign debt ratios in the Caribbean. The benefits of oil revenues are somewhat undermined by the vulnerability that accompanies global oil price shifts, however, as well as the damage caused by the seemingly inevitable spills that occur.

Oil is also, of course, a resource whose consumption exacerbates climate change through the emission of CO₂. The latest projections are clear that '[n]o new fossil fuel extraction or transportation infrastructure should be built, and governments should grant no new permits for them.' Unless this happens, alongside a rapid, justly organised decline in the production of all existing fossil fuels, then the 2°C target will be missed, let alone 1.5°C. Just the other week, the Ecuadorian government, who had once been held up as an alternative model for keeping oil in the soil, began drilling in the Yasuní national park in the Amazon. The Ecuadorian government noted that they had received nowhere near the \$3.6 billion that was promised in return for not drilling, and that many of the country's people are living in poverty.



‘Dis da fi wee’? (3)

In addition to the potentially toxic effects on the environment, one of the main flashpoints in the conflicts surrounding oil drilling occurred around the struggles over the rights of some of Belize’s indigenous Maya peoples. Since 2005, the Sarstoon-Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM), co-manager of the Sarstoon Temash National Park, a protected area in southern Belize, has been engaged in ongoing disputes with the Government of Belize over the latter’s [granting of a permit for seismic drilling in the park](#). Not only was the creation of the park itself seen as a potential threat to the Maya communities who had occupied the area for generations, but the granting of permits to a foreign company without the permission of these communities was seen as a deliberate disenfranchisement of these people from their traditional lands. ([The majority of indigenous peoples in Southern Belize are officially landless](#)).

As mentioned above, part of the reason why protests over the proposed drilling by environmental and conservation NGOs had such traction in Belize is because of the strong recent history of a legislative framework for conservation in the country. In 1996, for instance, UNESCO designated the Belize Barrier Reef as a World Heritage Site. An expansion in marine conservation followed. Whereas once the barrier reef offered protection to buccaneers and pirates, now it is protected for its biodiversity. Over half of the country’s 69% of forested land is currently designated as one or another form of ‘protected area’. It is worth asking, then, why such a potentially toxic activity is being pursued with such gusto by the government. This can only be understood if the history of Belize, and its status as a former British colony, is taken into account.

Unsustainable colonial development

Part of the reason why oil exploration seems attractive is due to the fact that, again, like most Caribbean countries, [Belize has a substantial sovereign debt burden](#). Consequently, a considerable amount of the revenue generated by the Government goes **towards keeping up the interest payments on that debt**. Yet the reasons why the country is struggling financially can be linked to the history of development in Belize.

Throughout its time as a British colony, ‘development’ in British Honduras meant the structuring of the country, and the use of its natural resources, was done in such a way as to serve the needs of the colonial elites. The focus of the initial colonial administration was thus geared towards ensuring the smooth extraction of tonnes of mahogany, for the European luxury furniture market, and logwood, for the dyeing industry. Land was portioned out to the new settlers with little regard for the existing indigenous inhabitants. Indeed, Maya peoples were often viewed either as a threat to the lucrative logging industry, or, especially in the wake of the abolition of slavery, as a potential source of cheap labour.

Following Belize’s independence, the country was entered into global relations in a disadvantaged position in part because of the fact that colonial elites had expropriated much of the wealth that had been generated by the colony. [Belize’s economy is therefore a highly dependent one](#).

And so it is that the relatively benign practices of communities of forest dwelling indigenous peoples, whose co-existence with the myriad species of tropical flora and fauna has been a model of sustainability for centuries, comes to be recast as ‘unsustainable’ when judged according to technocratic notions of sustainability applied in line with global north social imaginaries.

Promise has been sought in forms of conservation-orientated ‘sustainable development’, yet lurking in the background are often neoliberal models of economy and society which neglect peoples’ differing interests. Problems are reframed as opportunities for economic growth, with nature being protected via investment and consumption as in the case of the widespread promotion of ‘eco-tourism’. The system of protected areas management that underpins conservation in Belize, for instance, strictly regulates peoples’ use in accordance with quite specific development ideals. And so it is that the relatively benign practices of communities of forest dwelling indigenous peoples, whose co-existence with the myriad species of tropical flora and fauna has been a model of sustainability for centuries, comes to be recast as ‘unsustainable’ when judged according to technocratic notions of sustainability applied in line with global north social imaginaries.

Community members who have for generations practiced forms of subsistence agriculture might get retrained as tour guides for protected areas. Fishermen might be encouraged to change their practices of fishing in protected areas, and instead to participate in community banking. Inexperienced people are not always very well equipped to become market actors, however, and can be taken advantage of even when formal property rights exist. Moreover, financial recompense might not constitute sufficient compensation for the loss of access to land, particularly if part of that loss is spiritual. In addition, tourism is a fickle industry which

is subject to fashion trends, often leaving those who rely upon it vulnerable and less self-sufficient than previously.

Fortunately, it does seem that the efforts of the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage have borne some fruit. The Government recently announced a policy to partially [ban offshore drilling in an area near the reef](#). Elsewhere, the government has since [allowed offshore exploration contracts to lapse](#). Not all of the limitations on oil drilling stem from positive policy action though: the company, US Capital Energy, was forced to abandon drilling in the Sarstoon Temash National Park after [dangerous levels of the potentially hazardous gas hydrogen sulphide were encountered](#).

Ultimately, the situation in Belize will be largely dictated by the aforementioned developmental pressures, but in conjunction with worsening climatic conditions bringing ongoing bleaching events, and more intense hurricanes. Crucially, as we are set to far surpass 1.5°C of warming, concerns over the health of the barrier reef may fade in favour of the existential threats induced by catastrophic climate change.

References

- (1) From the collection ‘Mahogany Whispers’. Reproduced here with the author’s expressed permission.
- (2) The Prime Minister of Belize stated ‘Drill we will’, while members of the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage claimed that ‘Offshore drilling, is not Belize!’
- (3) Belizean Kriol phrase meaning ‘This is ours’.

An earlier version of this article appeared on [Discover Society](#).

Image Credit: [Yeti-legs](#), Belize 2015: Coral Gardens Flickr; [Wikimedia Commons](#)