Left of Nowhere

The Paradoxical Role Between Sustainability and Tourism and How Belize Can Successfully Promote Them Both

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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The Paradoxical Role between Sustainability and Tourism and How Belize Can Successfully Promote Them Both
To my advisor, Dr. Michael Hawkins. Thank you for introducing me to the complicated potential of the tourism industry and for your patient willingness to sponsor my honors thesis.

To my family, Dave, Carol and Jill Blackford. Thanks for your inspiration, encouragement and helpful support.

Dedicated in Loving Memory to Virginia Kaiser (Grandma Kai), Ball State class of '37, for always listening to my dreams and for teaching me to "live as if I were going to die tomorrow and learn as if I were going to live forever."

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

-Marcel Proust
Abstract

Belize has always been left of nowhere. Recently, though, this Central American country finds itself in the center of attention. Tourism, arguably the world’s largest industry, is pushing Belize to the brink of popularity.

In today’s fast paced global society, developing countries are desperately trying to catch up with the West and all too often willingly exploit their greatest natural resources in an effort to become “civilized.” They feel mass tourism is the only way to leapfrog into a postmodern existence. Tourism’s negative side effects, however, can easily cast a shadow of gloom on a developing country’s attempts to progress.

Belize, too, is turning to tourism as a viable option to better their future. Unlike other developing countries, however, Belize is making cautious efforts to advance without sacrificing its cultural diversity and environmental sanctity. Belize hopes to utilize sustainable tourism to venture from the doldrums of obscurity.

Still, sustainable development is a tricky business. Fortunately, Belize is well suited for the challenge. The first part of this paper relates Belize’s unique past, the second outlines the intricacies of tourism development and the third illustrates how Belize can continue to promote itself through sustainable tourism.

"The use of traveling is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are.”

-Samuel Johnson
Nestled snuggly below Mexico’s thumb at the northeast tip of the Central American arm is a small, peaceful country whose obscure existence has long been its greatest resource. Tucked unassumingly in its tiny corner of the world, Belize is overshadowed by its more bold and beautiful neighbors – the often politically unsettled Central American nations to the west and south and the sun-drenched Caribbean islands to the east. Aldous Huxley once wrote, “If the world had any ends, British Honduras (Belize) would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but uninhabited.” (Sutherland 262).

Being left of nowhere, though, has landed Belize in the center of attention. Shaped by a past cut from one of history’s most unorthodox stones, Belize’s unlikely present is a monument to cultural diversity and environmental sustainability. Over the years, Belize has managed to progress slowly but effectively. Tourism has played a major role in Belize’s development as a civilized nation. Unlike in other developing countries, however, Belize has made a cautious effort to advance fiscally through tourism without conceding too much cultural pride or environmental sanctity.

Perhaps, in an era long since passed, Huxley’s view of Belize was an accurate depiction. Today, however, Belize does not signify an end, but the beginning of a happy coexistence between sustainability and tourism. Understanding Belize’s unique background and the basic ideas behind different forms of tourism will help illustrate how this small country can make such a large impact on Mother Earth and her inhabitants.
Belize is regarded as a pioneer in sustainable tourism practices and can serve as a model for other developing countries and the tourism industry if its methods are better understood through research and if the delicate role promotions play is put into proper perspective through carefully coordinated and unique IMC (integrated marketing communications) solutions.

Belize has not always been off of the beaten path. In fact, most experts feel that Belize was once the hub of the vast Mayan Empire (Mahler 4). In the two millennia prior to Christ, over one million Maya inhabited the landmass that would become Belize. Excavations have recently shown that Caracol, Belize’s largest ruin, is even more massive than the Tikal site in Yucatan, which has long been considered the most significant Mayan remains (Mahler 5). These highly advanced people reached the height of their civilization during Europe’s dark ages. Findings suggest that the Maya were skilled astronomers and mathematicians as well as proficient farmers and engineers. They were also accomplished tradesmen. Trade routes stretched from the Andes Mountains in South America to the plateaus of New Mexico (Mahler 6).

Something, however, brought an unfortunate end to the Mayan dominance. For some reason, be it war, famine or natural disaster, most Maya migrated north to the Yucatan peninsula. The few that remained soon succumbed to the onslaught of European colonialism (Mahler 6).

Twenty years after Columbus first sailed westward, he “discovered” the Bay of Honduras and opened the door to the Central American wilderness (Pariser 43). Few explorers, however, were willing to pass through its threshold. Perhaps the circumstances that depleted the Mayan civilization in Belize also cast a shadow of
indifference on the region. Spanish conquistadors were the first to claim Belize but, with the exception of a few Catholic missionaries established at Lamanai and Tipu, lacked sufficient interest to maintain significant control (Mahler 6).

A group of English-speaking Puritan traders are generally believed to be the first settlers to permanently occupy Belize. Ironically, the Spaniards, despite their apathy towards Belizean affairs, soon forced the Puritans to abandon their settlement. Little else is known about this era in Belizean history. Complete records of this time period were not kept; therefore a cloud of uncertainty envelops much of Belize’s past.

During the 17th Century, a logging boom added to the mystique. Colonialists from Europe soon discovered Central America’s abundant lumber resources and several countries began harvesting timber in the region. Spain and Britain were the primary competitors. After the Puritan attack, the Spanish seemed to tolerate the British presence. They only made mild attempts to remove the English who snubbed each raid by quickly returning to their logging camps. John Fingas was the first to mention Belize in print when in his account he described the country as, “the river of Bullys where the English for the most part now load their logwood” (Pariser 43).

With the loggers came pirates. The Belizean seashore, dubbed the Mosquito Coast, provided the perfect hideaway. The dangerous offshore reef kept Belize’s few inhabitants isolated and protected. Mahler states, “By the late 1600s, the most infamous Scottish, French, and English pirates had established permanent bases in Belize, from which they mercilessly attacked Spanish galleons carrying gold, silver, dyes, hardwoods and other raw materials back to Europe” (8). This corrupt activity led to several treaties that would place the region under Spanish control until their retreat from Central America
in 1820. For forty years, the region remained in perpetual limbo. During this time, Guatemala laid claim to Belize, something that continued to be an issue until recently. In 1862, unconcerned with Guatemala’s declaration, mighty Great Britain planted her flag on Mosquito Coast and officially incorporated Belize into the British Empire (Pariser 46). Throughout her reign, Britain was forced to fight off more Guatemalan advances as well as Mexican attempts to occupy the territory.

British Honduras quickly became a stereotypical product of colonial control. As with other colonized Caribbean nation states, slavery became an integral part of the life and times in British Honduras. Instead of tending to sugar cane or cotton, however, slaves in British Honduras continued to log the wilderness. Strangely, the British did not turn to the indigenous Maya for slave labor. Fearing their forestry methods would pose a threat to the ecology, the British forced much of the Maya into reservations and called upon black Caribbean slaves to tend to the jungles (Pariser 44). This infusion of ethnicity, along with others that would soon follow, led to a diverse cultural climate that makes Belize so unique today.

In the mid-1900s, a weakening economy had Belizeans crying for their independence. By 1964, Belize was granted a large degree of autonomy and was given control of the local government. Nine years later, Belize became the official name of this Central American nation state (Pariser 51). It would take another nine years, however, for Belize to gain official independence and even today a force of British troops remains to protect an otherwise defenseless country (60 Minutes 7).

And so, a modern existence sprang from an improbable past. Always desired, but never really wanted, Belize remains in a timeless state of ambiguity. Today, Belize is not
poor nor is it rich. It is in partly Central American and partly Caribbean but entirely
Belizean. Likewise, Belize has gained a reputation as an ideal place to visit yet it remains
on the edge of popularity.

Foreign visitors began coming to Belize in the 1950s when it was still a British
colony. Then, divers and fishermen arrived to explore the adventure-laden waters
surrounding the tropical reef near the Belizean coast (Mahler 12). Not many tourists,
however, followed suit. Throughout the next two decades, Belize remained a mainstay
only to the rare, offbeat individual with a thirst for discovery that could only be quenched
by the world’s backwaters. Belize attracted tourists looking to escape the daily grind of
post industrialized societies, the kind of people who literally subscribed to Robert Frost’s
axiom about taking the road “less traveled by.” Due to the hectic lifestyle in the United
States, American “hippies” were among the first to take solace in Belize’s serenity.
European antiestablishment youths, often referred to as Euro-trash by Americans, were
quick to jump on the bandwagon (Sutherland 96). These individuals were desperately
grasping for simplicity and Belize put them in direct touch with life in its most basic
form. Many expatriates from this era believed Belize’s calming effect on the soul was
nothing short of miraculous. A story still floating through the muggy Belizean air
suggests one woman, who was near death in her more civilized homeland, came to the
Mosquito Coast and was nurtured back to life by the purifying qualities in the atmosphere
surrounding this seaside paradise (Sutherland 94).

This attitude of simplicity remains deeply embedded within the Belizean culture.
During the 80s, however, the tourist situation became increasingly complicated. Because
of shows like CBS’s 60 Minutes, which ran a feature story on Belize, the masses began
taking notice. The country soon found itself in the spotlight cast by Western media outlets. In front of a captive TV audience, reporter Morley Safer effectively captured the attractive essence of Belize, “The place is magnificent, the world as it was before package tours. The beaches go on forever, and are forever empty...” He continued, “Hyperactivated North Americans quickly adapt themselves to Belize’s more civilized pace. The tallest building is a Mayan ruin...there’s not a single traffic light in the land” (CBS 7).

More recognition quickly followed. In the early 90s, blurbs about Belize began appearing in Caribbean guidebooks. Within two years, Pariser’s An Adventure Guide to Belize was published for the sole purpose of relating the Belizean way of life to interested tourists. Its introduction illustrates the atypical tourism opportunity Belize offers.

...Belize encompasses a cultural potpourri. Among its bountiful treasures are the hemisphere’s longest coral reef, hundreds of sandy offshore islands, 250 varieties of wild orchids, 500 species of birds, cats and other wildlife and innumerable Maya ruins – many still unexplored...Both the relatively small population and the nation’s physical isolation have made the construction of roads a formidable task, and many parts of the nation remain inaccessible today. If you’re looking for a large resort with a pristine white beach and attendants holding out white towels and catering to your every need, then Belize is not the place for you. Belize is for the adventurous traveler – one who doesn’t mind trading a modicum of discomfort for a maximum amount of experience (Pariser 1992:1).

Similar messages have been echoed throughout the decade that has followed. An advertisement in a 1996 Minneapolis Star Tribune issue gave it an enchanting spin by urging vacationers to visit and “enjoy the unspoiled world of ‘Make Belize’” (Mosaic 263). The fairy tale existence that this promotion depicts is seemingly an honest manifestation of reality. The country’s national icon, after all, is the toucan – a bird known to most Americans as the Fruit Loops spokesman.
In addition, Belize still remains remarkably pure and natural. Most of the world’s population can only dream of living in such an environment, but for 255,000 inhabitants, spread sparsely throughout the Belize’s six political districts (Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek and Toledo) and countless offshore cayes (islands), it is an everyday reality. Belize is the least populated independent nation on the American mainland with a density around 17 people per square mile (Pariser 61). This tidbit is made more impressive by the fact that the majority of Belizeans are city dwellers. Approximately one-third of the people have settled in Belize City, the nation’s largest metropolitan area (Mahler 1).

The population, although small, is amazingly varied. A plethora of ethnic backgrounds have diverged on this sliver of beachfront property throughout its fascinating past. Surprisingly, Belizean society remains cohesive and peaceful. This is in large part due to the fact that Belize has never subscribed to a class system like Jamaica and other former British colonies have. The social make-up is as follows:

**Belize’s Demographic Profile**

*Based on recent government statistics, the population of Belize breaks down into the following ethnic categories:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mestizo (Spanish-Native American)</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayan</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garifuna</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Indian</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mennonite (mostly White)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian and Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Annual Growth Rate = 2.6 %

Source: Mahler 13
Like the lack of human occupation, the extent of Belize’s ecosystem is startling. Throughout Latin America, 80 percent of the native forests have disappeared during the last two centuries. Belize forests, however, have undergone a far different fate. In stark contrast to its geographical cohorts, 65 percent of Belize’s forests remain intact. Trees cover more than 60 percent of the country’s landscape. The size of Massachusetts, Belize has five major ecosystems giving thousands of species of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish, as well as countless plants, the ability to flourish. Almost as numerous as the political states that fill Belize’s borders, these ecological regions include northern hardwood, southern hardwood, mountain pine ridge, coastal savanna and pine ridge, and mangroves and beaches. Further distinctions can be made based on rainfall amounts, altitude (from sea level to nearly 4,000 feet) and soil types.

Belize’s culture and environment enjoy a successful marriage, the harmony of which outsiders are eagerly beginning to experience. Belize’s rich ethnic heritage and undefiled ecology gives visitors an opportunity to get back to the basics and enjoy life as it was before the world went and got itself in a big hurry. Dean Barrow, Belize’s former Foreign Minister, Economics Minister and Attorney General told 60 Minutes, “I think we’re a society that’s fairly free from paranoia and fairly free from hysteria and fairly free from excesses” (CBS 6). This freedom from Western normalcy is what makes Belize an ideal vehicle in which to promote sustainable forms of tourism. The government and its people have begun to do just that. Sustainable tourism, though, is a tricky business. In theory, it is an inviting prospect. In reality, it is a complicated matter that is simultaneously promising and devastating.
Tourism is the world’s biggest industry (Earthpledge 2). Humanity has been fascinated by travel since the ages began. Some embark on journeys to solidify images of far off places that dance through their dreams. Others travel for religious, political, social or economical reasons. Still others, as Robert Louis Stevenson reflects, do so for no reason at all, “I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel’s sake. The great affair is to move.”

Determining the various reasons for this movement from one place to another is not an exact science. Scholars define various forms of travel differently and the ever-changing trends within the industry are continually adding new types of tourism to the overall spectrum. Swarbrooke and Horner define the basic forms of tourism as:

- Visiting friends and family
- Business tourism
- Religious tourism
- Health tourism
- Social tourism
- Educational tourism
- Cultural tourism
- Scenic tourism
- Hedonistic tourism
- Activity tourism
- Special interest tourism

(Swarbrooke and Horner 29)

Each of these types of tourism plays a unique role within the travel and leisure industry. Scenic and particularly hedonistic travel, though, are the most relevant to the sustainability issue. Scenic tourism, or the “desire to view spectacular natural scenery,” became immensely popular with the ‘Romantic Movement’ in the arts during the nineteenth century (Swarbrooke and Horner 37). It is what spawned the National Park system in the United States and helped bring the delicate relationship between tourists and their surroundings to the forefront.
Hedonistic tourism is the antithesis of sustainable tourism. Its mass appeal is, for the most part, the reason why sustainable forms of tourism development has become a necessary option. Often referred to as sea, sand, sun and sex tourism, hedonistic travel enjoys a storied past (Swarbrooke and Horner 37). Its roots can be traced to Ancient Rome when citizens utilized the Empire’s massive network of roads to escape the hassles of city life and see what pleasures could be found beyond the stretches of their urban wasteland. Later, Paris became the defining model of this form of travel. Europe’s romance center became the capitol of hedonistic tourism during the nineteenth century and is still one of the most sensual destinations. The need for pleasure erupted during the mid-1960s when many of the world’s citizens reaped the benefits of a greater expendable income (Swarbrooke and Horner 38). This increased spending power helped make packaged holiday tours to paradisiacal destinations a viable and popular option. It is believed that individuals travel for reasons of pleasure up to 75 percent of the time (France 1). Mass tourism, then, enjoys an extensive market and has become a powerful moneymaker for tourist organizations.

To better understand the importance of sustainable development, it is important to consider the impact of mass tourism. There are many definitions that describe mass tourism. One suggests that if the following conditions exist at a tourist location, mass tourism is present there. These conditions include:

- The holiday is standardized, rigidly packaged and inflexible. No part of the holiday could be altered except by paying higher prices.
- The holiday is produced through the mass replication of identical units, with economies of scale as the driving force.
- The holiday is mass-marketed to an undifferentiated clientele.
• The holiday is consumed *en masse*, with a lack of consideration by tourists for local norms, culture, people or the environments of tourist-receiving destinations. (Wahab and Pigram 50).

The mass tourism phenomenon spans the entire globe. One area particularly susceptible to its practice is the Caribbean. Here, less developed countries such as Jamaica encourage large resorts to inhabit their sandy beaches in a desperate attempt to boost their bottom line. Mass tourism has its benefits. Developing countries can increase their global position in terms of accessible income by attracting foreign investors and visitors. As immaculate hotels begin to dot a respective country’s landscape, its people anxiously await the promise of a better tomorrow. Each new resort helps a struggling country pad their financial status with increased jobs (Wahab and Pigram 60). Or so it seems. Unfortunately, the perks of mass tourism are spoiled by its negative impact.

Tourism is a polygot business. It consists of countless components. Some deal entirely with tourism practices while others encompass a broader scope. A fisherman in a tiny Caribbean village is, for instance, as much a part of the region’s tourism industry as an event coordinator at *Sandals*. The role the *Sandals* employee plays can be easily assessed. That of the fisherman, however, proves more difficult because he serves other facets of the local society and not just the visitor. His service is not mutually exclusive to the tourism industry. Like a rainbow, the tourism industry is made up of individual entities uniting to create a better whole but remaining distinctively individualized.

This complexity is the crux of the mass tourism dilemma. It is difficult to decipher the exact impact and determine the actual validity of a certain tourism activity within each locality. Among other problems, the benefits resulting from increased tourism expenditures in a resort destination is seldom shared by all involved with the
process. In most cases, the foreign company who runs the resort and employs the event coordinator reaps the rewards while the local fisherman is left at sea in terms of getting a fair share.

Mass tourism has other harmful side effects. Excessive outsider presence could destroy traditional livelihoods, leading to a commodification of culture. Packaged tours, after all, readily promote an opportunity for its consumers to have a "cultural experience." This experience, though, is most generally staged so that mass consumption becomes possible. In addition, many critics fear that tourism, especially in overwhelming doses, is nothing more than colonialism disguised by a less menacing presence - the almighty dollar instead of brandished arms. Many former colonies are now dependent upon tourism like they were once dependent upon their foreign governors.

Another major problem that can be easily quantified and therefore more substantially argued is that of leakage. Leakage occurs when the income from tourism does not equal the money spent to import goods and services consumed by the tourism industry. This is especially problematic for smaller nations who simply do not have the physical resources to efficiently support mass tourist consumption. Ultimately, these negative effects cause the greatest harm to the natural environment and local culture. They are all too often sacrificed to appease the throngs of tourists willing to spend money to satisfy their pleasure-seeking desires.

Admittedly mass tourism is the easiest way for a developing country to leapfrog from rags to riches. The more that it is studied, however, the more obvious it becomes that while successful in many ways, it is not the best method in which to progress. Many countries, like Belize, are making concentrated efforts to advance through sustainable
development realizing its long-term benefits may be worth the wait. Sustainable tourism provides a much greater redeemable value than its all-to-common counterpart.

Sustainable tourism is the alternative to mass tourism. It encompasses a prodigality of “new” forms of tourism, all of which are challenging more traditional, or “old,” forms of tourism for their piece of the tourist pie. The following chart depicts the relationship between old and new.

*Major Tourism Variations and Their Relationship*

Other classifications have also been made. They include: Heritage Tourism, Ethnic Tourism, Rural Tourism and Cultural Tourism. Tourists have begun seeking these alternatives because of their higher degree of authenticity. They are perceived to be more real, giving tourists a greater opportunity to experience a destination in its purest state. Their eco-friendly approach is another primary selling point.

Arthur C. Clarke once said, “We are just tenants on this world. We have just been given a new lease and a warning from the landlord.” This sentiment appropriately
captures the rationale behind sustainable development through tourism. It is also the attitude that has made sustainable practices in all facets of consumption a popular trend throughout the 90s. In a general sense, sustainability is limited development that, “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” (Wahab and Pigram 18).

Humanity has shown increasing interest in and concern for environmental issues as time has passed. Teddy Roosevelt introduced the National Park system near the turn of the last century and Earth Day was created in the wake of the 60s social revolution. The sustainability snowball did not begin rolling, however, until the mid-80s when the World Conservation Strategy and the Brundtland Commission were conducted to tackle this very complicated subject. The Brundtland Commission outlined the following components of sustainability:

- Revive growth
- Change quality of growth
- Meet basic needs
- Stabilize population
- Conserve and enhance resources
- Reorient technology and manage risk
- Put environment into economics
(Source: France 12)

These beginnings were solidified and subsequently magnified during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro when the Agenda 21 was outlined, further defining the path to sustainability:

1. Social and economic development, including: international cooperation, poverty, sustainable consumption, population, health, settlements, and integration of environment with development.

2. Resource management, including: atmosphere, land resource planning, deforestation, fragile ecosystems, mountains, rural development, biodiversity, biotechnologies, oceans, freshwater, toxic
waste, hazardous waste, solid wastes and sewage and radio active wastes.

3. Strengthening the participation of major groups. This includes virtually everyone: women, children, indigenous people and NGOs are among groups specified.

4. Means of implementation includes finance, institutions, technology, transfer, sciences, education, capacity building, international institutions, laws and information for decision making.

(Source: France 12)

Realizing their dependency upon a healthy environment, in terms of biophysical elements as well as socioeconomic and cultural phenomenon, the tourism industry especially took heed of the sustainability dilemma (Wahab and Pigram 18). Tourism and the environment are closely related. These relations are often adverse. Much of the popularized tourism, such as packaged tours, erodes the environmental vitality of a given area. The often-inverse relationship between development and local perception is illustrated in the following chart. The importance of sustainability as a method to achieve overall environmental cohesiveness is made evident.

![Diagram of Tourist Impact and Local Perceptions](Source: France 126)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Tourism:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Explorer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Elite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Off-beat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unusual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Incipient Mass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Charter</td>
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A beneficial partnership, however, can be obtained. The tourism industry because of its vested interest and close relationship with the environment is in a highly influential position in terms of positively effecting environmental concerns (Wahab and Pigram 19).

Sustainability within tourism is far reaching, giving the industry ample opportunity to make a decided difference for the better. Efforts to maintain a healthy environment range from placing cards in hotel rooms that promote less extensive cleaning methods guests can opt for to conserve water and limit environmental waste to eliminating corporate control of local tourist attractions all together (Hall and Lew 27).

Travel and tourism was one of the few industries to be singled out by Agenda 21 as, “having the potential to make a positive contribution to a healthier planet” (Earthpledge 2).

Without question, the potential is present. The complexity of the tourism industry, though, makes it difficult to tap. Numerous entities play a role in the implementation of tourism ideas in a particular place. Travel agencies, tourism boards, community zoning panels and local citizens are just some of the players in the game of tourism development. In addition, tourism is subject to boom and bust cycles and is continually evolving. The growth stage at which a tourism area is located greatly influences its sustainability capabilities. Geographers have defined tourism life cycles differently. One of the more respectable and often utilized models is that of Richard Butler’s (Harrison and Husbands 18).
Each stage is described further:

1. **Exploration:** A small number of “explorers” makes individual travel arrangements and follows irregular visiting patterns. No specific facilities are provided for tourists.

2. **Involvement:** As numbers of visitors increase and assume some regularity, some local residents begin to provide facilities for visitors.

3. **Development:** This stage reflects a well-developed “institutionalized” tourist market area and is shaped in part by advertising in tourist generating areas. Local involvement and control of development decline rapidly, being replaced by large, more elaborate, and more up-to-date facilities provided by external organizations.

4. **Consolidation:** The rate of increase in the number of visitors declines, but a major part of the area’s economy is tied to tourism.

5. **Stagnation:** The peak number of visitors has reached, and capacity levels for many variables (e.g., water supply, available labor, costs of infrastructure) have been reached or exceeded, with attendant environmental, social, and economic problems.

6. **Decline/Rejuvenation:** The area may not be able to compete with new destinations and thus will face a declining market, both spatially and numerically. On the other hand, there may be an increase in tourists if major efforts are made to add built attractions or to take advantage of previously untapped natural resources. A third possibility is a complete change in function.

(Source: Harrison and Husbands 18,19)
A tourist attraction’s position along the development curve greatly affects its ability to successfully engage in sustainable practices. Once mass tendencies have begun, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain loyalty to the local culture and environment. Therefore, it is vital for an area highly susceptible to tourist curiosity to prioritize its planning strategy in terms of sustainable tourism before it advances too far along the development curve, otherwise goals may never be attainable.

Belize’s uncanny foresight makes it an ideal model for success. The government and its people have managed to consider the future without sacrificing too much in the present. Belize is taking great measures to ensure that its natural resources remain intact. Yet, they do not want to limit their ability to progress through tourism.

A strong concern for the environment began over twenty years ago. Many of the offbeat travelers who arrived at the time of Belize’s independence stayed long enough to become environmentally concerned inhabitants with a strong influence on the government’s decisions. At the time of Britain’s forfeit of her thrown, Belize was one of the final frontiers on earth. Environmentalists were determined to keep it that way and lobbied to have the Law for Protected Areas passed so that it could. Its effectiveness is apparent today. Nearly 40 percent of the Belizean countryside is designated as a protected area. The goal, according to John Howell of the Natural History Museum in Belmopan, is to set aside at least half of the country’s landmass (Sutherland 125). So far, Belize is well on its way. Between 1990 and 1992, for instance, some 535,235 acres were put under permanent protection and the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (the world’s only jaguar preserve) added nearly 100,000 acres of land to its preservation (Mahler 18). Belize’s concern is apparent elsewhere. The 1991 Caribbean Ecotourism
Conference was held in Belize. Not surprisingly, Belize was the best-represented country at the event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution of the 1991 Caribbean Ecotourism Conference Delegates by Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Belize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Central America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ UK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: France 72)

Both the public and private sectors are accountable for Belize's dedication to limited, yet meaningful growth. Belize's Minister of Environment, after all, is also the Minister of Tourism. In addition, environmental NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations) are an integral part of Belizean politics. NGO's have been instrumental in cautiously developing ecotourism in Belize. The World Wildlife Fund, the Belize Audobun Society (BAS) and Wildlife Conservation International have successfully garnered close and influential ties to government agencies by funding and administering government parks and reserves. The BAS was formed in 1973 and became the first Belizean member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, a leading environmental organization based in Switzerland. Belize is often compared with Switzerland. A European expatriate living in Belize was urged his adopted land to model its environmental behaviors after an "old world" protégé.

When you don’t take care of this land today you are a traitor against God and your children...Don't cut down the rainforest. Don't shoot the wildlife...You can make your country the Switzerland of Central America. You have a wonderful land with parts of intact rainforest, wide varieties of tropical flora and fauna, wonderful islands with the largest living barrier
reef. You have low mountain regions. You have an evergreen country with friendly hospitable people. You have all those good conditions which were the basis for the European Swiss to develop a touristic country (Sutherland 101).

Belize’s government and non-government agencies are working together to remain environmentally loyal while pursuing tourism opportunities. Jim Bevis, the past president of the Belize EcoTourism Association (BETA) expresses the importance of a healthy relationship between the government and privately controlled groups, “We in the private sector have a tremendous opportunity to do something for conservation in conjunction with government” (Mahler 18). Bevis’s statement is personified throughout Belize. Perhaps no better example of sustainable tourism exists than in Belize’s Toledo District.

Its inhabitants call it “the forgotten land.” Located at the far southern tip of Belize, the Toledo District is 1669 square miles of wilderness that is dotted with small villages and ancient Mayan ruins. Perhaps it is easy to forget, even by Belizean standards. Toledo is the poorest region and tourists visit it less than any other district in Belize (www.travelbelize.org).

This has begun to change in recent years. Todedo’s people are predominantly indigenous. The Maya account for over 50 percent of the population. In 1990, these native people (the Maya, Garifuna and Creole) formed a group called the Toledo Ecotourism Association (T.EA). The residents wanted to become more involved with the tourism ventures in their respective communities. Locals also realized the potential to advance economically by capitalizing on the profits. The result was the development of the Village Guesthouse and Eco-trail Program.
Guesthouses have been built in Laguna, San Pedro Columbia, Santa Cruz, San Jose and San Miguel. The accommodations are hostels with thatched roofs. That is, men and women are generally separated into lodges containing eight bunks and the shared bathrooms are detached. Guests dine with various Maya families. Staying in the villages and interacting with the local people seems to be the highlight for many T.E.A participants. One offered this insight, “To visit Belize, one must visit the people. Only in their eyes can one discover Belize, and I know of no better way than the T.E.A Village Guesthouse and Eco-trail Program to gaze in their heart” (www.public.usit.net).

Each village has many alternative destinations within a close proximity. Several caves adorn Laguna’s village limits. One is lined with pictographs, while another is infested with bats. Santa Cruz is located near Rio Blanco Park and the Uxbenka ruins. One of the most well known attractions in Toledo is just a short distance from San Pedro Columbia and San Miguel. Lubaantun, the “Place of the Fallen Stones,” is one of the foremost Maya archaeological sites in Belize.

The villages and the surrounding attractions play a major role in Belize’s tourism economy. The Village Guesthouse and Eco-trail Program is sustainable tourism in its purest form. The local people operate the venture through an organization (T.E.A.) they created and more than 80 percent of the funds are returned to the respective villages (www.public.usit.net).

Programs such as the T.E.A have brought much deserved recognition to Belize. Author Richard Mahler states, “Belize has won praise from international conservationists for the so-called sustainable development strategies it has implemented to protect its impressive treasures of nature and artifacts of Maya history, while at the same time
making sure that its people benefit from the public lands set aside for environmental and other purposes” (17). In 1995, Caribbean and World Magazine awarded Belize the Caribbean Ecoregion of the Year honor. The accolades continue. Belize Online reports that Belize is the country with the greatest percentage of landmass dedicated to natural reserves, conservation refuges, parks and wildlife preserves in the world.

Not everyone, however, agrees. Critics are quick to pass judgment on Belize and eager to point out its shortcomings. Ian Munt and Egbert Higino, who have both devoted time to Belize’s development strategies in the past, have a different take on things. They penned an entire chapter in Lesley France’s book, Sustainable Tourism, calling it “Belize: Ecotourism Gone Awry.” It is their belief that Belize’s “new” tourism is nothing more than “old” tourism masked in deceptive idealism, “Despite some promising results, much ecotourism in Belize merely replicates the problems characteristic of traditional mass-tourism – foreign leakage, foreign ownership and environmental degradation” (France 99). Hunt and Higino point to the Ambergris Caye controversy as evidence. The Belizean government bought back the northern two-thirds of the island to make good on its 1989 election platform, “Belize First.” Their goal is to better Ambergris Caye through “sustainable development.” According to naysayers, this seeming ‘ecologically sound development’ will in actuality include the following environmentally unfriendly features: at least one international hotel, two ‘all-inclusive spa hotels,’ three to five upscale lodges, two golf courses, town houses and villas, a thousand luxury homes, polo fields and stables (France 100). Tourism and Environmental Minister Glenn Godfrey addressed the Ambergris Caye situation while at a tourism symposium in Costa Rica, “Conservation and therefore ecotourism thrives best where the sunlight penetrates to the lowest levels of
autonomous local community government” (France 101). He reiterated Belize’s commitment to sustainability assuring an audience at the Rio Summit that, “community-ecotourism forms the government’s main marketing and development thrust” (France 101).

Those who question the sustainable tourism practicality do raise important issues with their doubts. Perhaps the most complicated matter in tourism is how to progress so that all entities involved – the environment, indigenous people, tourists and businesses – can benefit without excessive concessions. Godfrey admitted that Belize was prioritizing efforts to market sustainable development. In lies the ultimate paradox. How can tourism be marketed in a way that allows progress but limits growth? Butler’s model suggests that it cannot be done. Too much advancement, after all, marks the end of a sustainable existence.

Belize is able to successfully engage in sustainable tourism because it is still on the brink of mass recognition. Sutherland writes, “The environmental progress that Belize has made in just a few years is, in fact, quite staggering. There is no question that the transnational environmental movement can consider Belize one of its major success stories. An underpopulated country with only the mere beginnings of development and a revenue-poor government looking for sources of financial backing, Belize was the ideal target for the movement” (125). This small, once unheard of Central American country, though, is on the verge of tipping the scales of prominence in their favor. Can Belize remain a model of proper sustainability practices?

Belize is making a name for itself through organic and production marketing. American television first brought Belize out of the woodwork in the 80s when 60 Minutes
aired a story highlighting their simple way of living. In 2001, the sights and sounds of Belize were projected onto millions of television screens once again. Fox’s sultry reality show, *Temptation Island*, was filmed in Belize. Also, articles highlighting Belize’s untainted existence are becoming increasingly common. During the past three months, Belize has been featured in *Forbes, National Geographic Traveler* and the *Indianapolis Star*. Internally, Belize tourism authorities have also produced advertisements for the *Travel Channel*.

More recognition equates to greater awareness and increased tourism. Because Belize is currently aware of the dangers involved with too much tourism growth, it cannot be automatically assumed that the result will be detrimental. Still, Belize must not throw caution into the wind. For developing countries, there is a fine line between choosing sustainability or possibility. Fortunately, that line straddles a gray area and Belize is in a rare position to tip toe back and forth, mapping out the most plausible way to both worlds.

That route is becoming increasingly clear in part because of efforts already being made. In his guidebook, Richard Mahler outlines a set of rules for responsible tourism:

1. **Stay on the Trail:** Don’t trample delicate vegetation.
2. **Plants:** Do not remove or disturb them.
3. **Marine:** Do not stand on, touch, or kick sand on coral reef systems. Sand raised by fins can suffocate coral or lower its disease resistance.
4. **Wildlife:** Maintain a minimum distance of 30 feet from wildlife; stay on the periphery of animal assemblages; never surround an animal or group of animals for the sake of a photograph; keep decibel levels low; listen to the sound of the jungle; be unobtrusive when viewing wildlife.
5. **Sustainability**: Local guides, landowners, and conservation representative should tell you their plans to ensure the sustainable use of wildlife habitats as you participate together in implementing these plans.

6. **Waste Disposal**: All trash must be contained and carried back to a designated landfill; no littering is tolerated.

7. **Wilderness**: Trips to wilderness areas must be led by experienced, well-trained, responsible naturalists and guides.

8. **Souvenirs**: Do not buy any sea turtle products, or any other products from wild animals, even if they are incorporated in artwork.

9. **Participate**: Become a positive contributor to Belize’s experiment in developing a new, responsible tourism ethic. You help such a country’s conservation projects succeed by joining, by financing, by visiting, or by volunteering to participate in them. Your presence is itself a vote of confidence in the difficult decisions government and business leaders must make.

Mahler’s words of wisdom are a step in the right direction and illustrate the strategies being utilized to promote sustainable tourism in Belize. Still, these honorable suggestions are only effective if the tourists who read them actually subscribe to their ideology. A selective promotional campaign, therefore, is the best way to ensure that the market being reached is a suitable one. They must be a respectful delegation ready and willing to honor sustainable practices. One Belizean ‘resort’ in the southern half of the country ends their marketing literature with the following words, “Come, Join Us. Explore our Land, Experience our Culture, Escape to our Island and Enjoy our Reef. Take many pictures, leave only footprints and come find a hammock of your own.” Finding tourists who take only memories and leave only footprints is perhaps the only way to solve one of humanity’s most bewildering challenges – sustainable tourism.
Not all tourists are alike. Varied travel interests place tourists at different points along a behavior spectrum. On one end, is the allocentric individual and at the opposite is the psychocentric individual. Allocentric travelers embark on uncharted journeys for the thrill of new experiences while psychocentric travelers retreat to the comforts of packaged tours. In recent times, “new” tourism has bridged the gap between allocentric and psychocentric travelers. A more distinctive mid-centric range has broadened the tourism horizon. New tourists are ideal consumers of sustainable tourism. The following model helps illustrate why.

![New Tourists Diagram](image)

Source: France 52

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Experienced</th>
<th>Changed Values</th>
<th>Changed Lifestyles</th>
<th>Changed Demographics</th>
<th>More Flexible</th>
<th>More Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More travel experience</td>
<td>From having to being</td>
<td>Flexible work hours</td>
<td>Empty nesters</td>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
<td>Consumers want to be in charge during their free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality conscious</td>
<td>Just for fun</td>
<td>More income</td>
<td>Aging of population</td>
<td>Hybrid consumers</td>
<td>Unpredictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better educated</td>
<td>Sensitive to Environment</td>
<td>More free time</td>
<td>Smaller households</td>
<td>Less Holiday Planning</td>
<td>Risk-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More variety</td>
<td>Search for real and natural</td>
<td>Healthy living</td>
<td>More singles and couples</td>
<td>Changed booking behavior</td>
<td>Want to be different from the crowd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special interest</td>
<td>Appreciate the different</td>
<td>More frequent short breaks</td>
<td>Nestification</td>
<td>Yuppies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick to learn</td>
<td>High touch</td>
<td>Travel is a way of life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26
In the marketing world, new tourists are primarily classified as Experiencers. That is, individuals who are young, vital, enthusiastic, impulsive and rebellious. With an insatiable taste for the new, these out of the ordinary individuals relish excitement and adventure. They are risk takers.

Experiencers can be found exploring the world’s hidden tourist gems long before the masses have an inkling they exist. An advertising campaign geared towards Experiencers wants and desires can solicit appropriate, environmentally conscious business to Belize and other developing countries in their situation. Direct mail and viral marketing (sending promotions via email) campaigns that highlight Belize’s commitment to sustainable tourism as well as its diverse cultural and environmental climate can be sent to Experiencers, subsequently boosting tourist activity in an acceptable manner.

As France’s chart displays, however, new tourists are more broadly defined. Their psychographic tendencies encompass more than the Experiencers category. Actualizers and Achievers are other possible target markets. These individuals are older and more financially stable. They travel often, but in the past have not been followers of the ecotourism ideology. This could change, however. Actualizers and Achievers enjoy
setting trends because of the positive image it gives them. A campaign highlighting the “trendy” benefits of sustainability in all aspects of consumption and not just tourism could increase awareness of the entire movement. This, in turn, correlates to a broader market of tourists partaking in responsible tourism.

Kurt Vonnegut once said, “I really wonder what gives us the right to wreck this poor planet of ours?” The people of Belize have been pondering that very question for some time. They feel that humanity has no right to shatter Mother Earth’s beautiful countenance and they care enough to do something about it. Their effort to grow through sustainable tourism has given the world a reason to notice Belize. Can this land, first put on the map by pirates, rob one of nature’s most argued issues of its overwhelming contradiction? Can Belize successfully find a way to achieve a happy coexistence between tourists, locals and the environment? Both critics and supporters of Belize’s methods curiously await the result. In the meantime, Belize remains on the fringe of the civilized world, just below that bump in Mexico, determined to join the West, but not desperate enough to lose their identity or hastily sacrifice their environmental and cultural conscious for an entirely superfluous existence. No, for now Belize is content with being left of nowhere.
Works Cited


Welcome to the Belize Districts Tour, (2000).