



WWF

2018

CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE IN WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN DANGER -
JOURNEY OF THE BELIZE BARRIER REEF RESERVE SYSTEM WORLD HERITAGE SITE

POWER OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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ABOUT WWF

At WWF, we believe that a living planet – from the global climate to local environments – is vital not only for wildlife, but also as the source of our food, clean water, health and livelihoods; and as a source of inspiration, now and for future generations. So we are tackling critical environmental challenges and striving to build a world with a future where people and nature thrive.

To do this we are educating, inspiring, influencing and engaging the public, policy-makers, business leaders and influencers. In particular, we are strengthening our voice at the heart of decision-making in the rapidly-growing economies of the global South and East. These are becoming ever more significant as they gain greater economic and political influence and use a larger proportion of the world's natural resources – and they are located in regions where much of the world's most important biodiversity is concentrated.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
Belize in focus	5
Collaboration leads to conservation in Belize.....	6
 1 CONFRONTING THE BARRIERS TO CONSERVATION	8
Barriers to remediation	8
Belize	10
 2 BELIZE - DRIVERS FOR SUCCESS	12
Importance of collective action	12
Stakeholder roles.....	14
Key drivers of positive transformation in Belize	15
 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17



Red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) shallow water coral reef meets the mangrove island Belize coastal zone, Pelican Cays, Belize

INTRODUCTION

The World Heritage Convention, which came into force in 1972, embodies a visionary idea – that some sites are so important that their protection is not only the responsibility of a single nation, but of the international community as a whole.¹

UNESCO has designated 1,073 World Heritage sites located in 167 countries around the world: 832 are cultural sites, 206 are natural sites and 35 are mixed.² These sites are carefully selected according to 10 criteria that underline their Outstanding Universal Value, from being a masterpiece of human creation or an exceptional example of their kind, to having superlative natural beauty or being an important habitat for biodiversity.³

By conserving large areas of habitat, natural World Heritage sites increase resilience to natural and weather-related disasters, support community livelihoods, and provide communities with vital protection against the impacts of climate change.

There are currently 54 World Heritage sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Sites can come under serious threat for numerous reasons including armed conflict and war, earthquakes and other natural disasters, illegal logging and fishing, oil and gas extraction, large hydro projects, poaching, uncontrolled urbanization and unchecked tourist development.⁴ Some sites remain on the danger List for a relatively long period: this may be due to unresolved conflicts making progress difficult, or the time it takes for habitats or species to replenish themselves to resilient levels.

The List acts as a way of alerting the international community to these situations in the hope that it will join efforts to save endangered sites, and to allow the conservation community to respond to specific preservation needs with a programme for corrective measures.

This study examines what a programme of this kind entails, using the positive transformation at the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System World Heritage site as an example. It focuses in particular on how to engage effectively with stakeholders including government ministries, experts from UNESCO and the IUCN, the advisory body on natural World Heritage sites, local civil society and funders.

BELIZE IN FOCUS

The Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System World Heritage site (BBRRS-WHS) is the largest barrier reef in the western hemisphere, and is home to almost 1,400 species, including the endangered hawksbill turtle, manatees and six threatened species of shark.⁵

The Belize Barrier Reef is not only a natural wonder, but also supports the livelihoods of more than half the nation's population. It provides numerous benefits including cultural heritage, protection from storms, and habitat for endangered species. It is Belize's biggest tourist attraction, contributing between US\$182 million and US\$237 million a year to the nation's economy.⁶

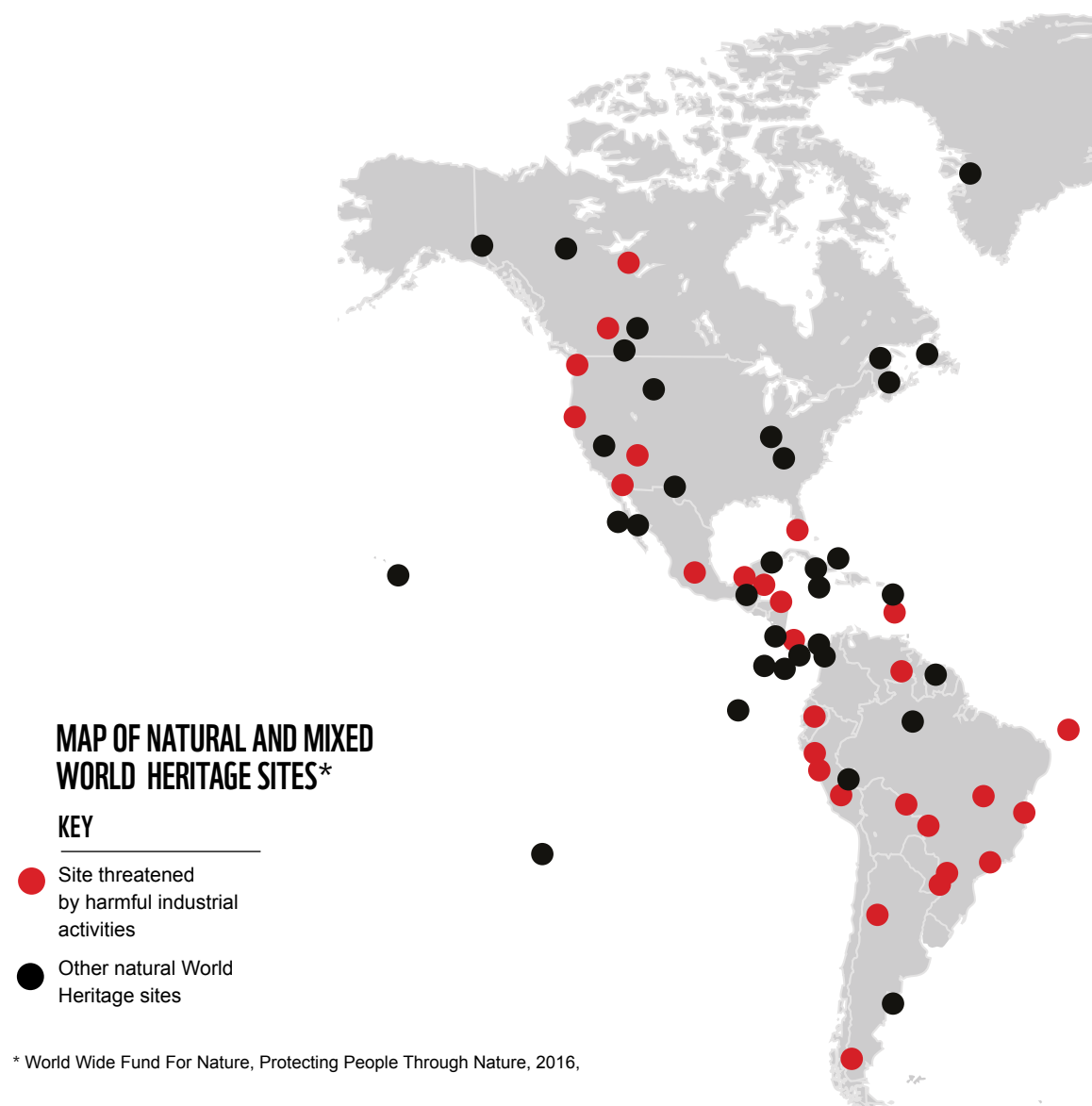
However, uncontrolled growth in coastal construction projects led to a loss of mangrove forests, and due to this and other threats such as the presence of invasive species in 2009 UNESCO placed the BBRRS-WHS on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Subsequently, oil exploration began to further threaten the site.

Removing these threats and protecting the reef for the benefit of current and future generations would become a nine-year journey which depended on collaboration and commitment from a wide range of stakeholders.

COLLABORATION LEADS TO CONSERVATION IN BELIZE

The first big step forward for sustainable conservation was the adoption of Belize's first Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan (ICZMP) in 2015. Signed into law in August 2016, the ICZMP established guidelines for the sustainable use of resources in and around Belize's livelihood-giving reef and coasts.⁷

In April 2016, working together with the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage, WWF launched a global campaign to highlight the need to protect BBRRS-WHS.⁸ The same year, the government of Belize authorized seismic testing for oil just 10 km away from the site. This provoked strong protests from civil society, local communities and international organizations including UNESCO and the IUCN, which led to the immediate cancelling of the testing. Ultimately, it was a turning point: thanks to a campaign led by local and international NGOs – which mobilized local communities and the tourism industry as well as gaining significant international attention – the government of Belize re-examined its relationship with and approach to reef protection.



* World Wide Fund For Nature, Protecting People Through Nature, 2016,

Positive transformation of reef management accelerated - in 2017 the government adopted an indefinite moratorium on offshore oil activities in all its waters,⁹ and in 2018, took steps to protect mangroves. Because of to these actions – which were also supported by civil society and donors – the BBRRS-WHS was removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger in June 2018. This momentum also led to the government of Belize introducing additional policies to strengthen the sustainable management of Belize marine resources, including policies on sustainable fisheries and phasing-out of single-use plastics.

By far the most powerful factor in this success has been the integrated collaboration of all the key stakeholders: the Belize government, international organizations (UNESCO, IUCN), donors, and civil society organizations (who also represented local communities).

Ultimately, well-managed conservation is essential for sustainable development, and World Heritage sites help to promote it. Healthy sites help to alleviate poverty, protect against natural disasters, and improve resistance to climate impacts. Cooperation between all stakeholders is essential to advance an integrated approach that supports social and economic development in balance with environmental protection.



1. CONFRONTING THE BARRIERS TO CONSERVATION

There are currently 241 natural and mixed World Heritage sites around the world, each considered to be iconic symbols of conservation.¹⁰ Unfortunately, half of these sites face significant threats to their Outstanding Universal Value, putting the livelihoods and the well-being of people who depend on them at risk.

The threats to sites are varied: some are caused by degradation due to conflicts or illegal trade such as wildlife poaching and illegal logging, while others are linked to unsustainable industries. To put this in perspective, despite the World Heritage Committee's long-held position that oil and gas exploration and extraction is incompatible with World Heritage status, oil and gas exploration concessions overlap with almost 20 per cent of natural World Heritage sites.¹¹ Unsustainable and illegal activities do no one any favours: the majority of logging in tropical rainforests in the World Heritage sites is illegal and costs governments billions of dollars in lost revenue each year; while illegal fishing can lead to marine population collapse, robbing local fishers of their livelihoods.¹²

A site is placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger when the World Heritage Committee judges that there's a serious risk it will lose its Outstanding Universal Value – the risk of impact to a site tends to be greater in the face of multiple threats.¹³ The List of World Heritage in Danger is a way to draw attention to World Heritage sites under severe threat, and to mobilize action to restore the sites to a healthy state of conservation.¹⁴ It can take years before a site is removed from the List: every site is unique, and each has its own challenges.

BARRIERS TO REMEDIATION

How exactly does a site get placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger? Initially, the World Heritage Committee – advised by the scientific body the IUCN and the World Heritage Center – makes the decision to put a site on the List during its annual session. At the same time, the Committee will recommend corrective measures to be implemented to address the threats to the Outstanding Universal Value. A Desired State of Conservation (DSOCR) for the site is then developed by the State Party in cooperation with the World Heritage Centre and the IUCN with clear indicators which have to be met for a site to be removed from the List. Indicators that are included in a DSOCR can vary – they might include the introduction of legislation to protect certain areas from overfishing, or the repopulation of an endangered species.

The DSOCR is then approved by the World Heritage Committee. Once this is finalized it's the government's responsibility to implement the corrective measures, with progress evaluated annually against the DSOCR.

Countries with limited financial means and a lack of expert knowledge can find it challenging to meet corrective measures, which means sites often remain on the list longer than governments would want.

“It often takes time for countries to establish conservation measures that allow a site to come off the List. It often involves ambitious requests that need implementation in challenging socio-economic contexts. A site can only come off when real progress is seen, and this can take a long time, for instance when conservation issues require new legislation to be adopted. Most of the time, site remain on the danger List for a

substantial period of time. We increasingly invest resources to help countries make the necessary decisions quicker, but these are the realities.” Fanny Douvère, Coordinator of the Marine Programme at the World Heritage Centre (UNESCO)¹⁵

Sadly, several natural sites – such as the sites in the Democratic Republic of Congo – have been on the List for a long time because of conflict: prolonged conflicts often lead to long-term degradation. The restoration of natural ecosystems is different to cultural sites, and usually takes longer – in a conflict zone this is particularly challenging.

Having a site on the List of World Heritage in Danger is often seen as a political issue by national governments. This can lead to delays as they may try to oppose the danger listing, rather than embracing it and engaging quickly in constructive dialogue and restorative action. However, the prospect of the List can also act as an early warning system: the World Heritage Committee raises concerns before a site is listed, drawing attention to threats that need to be addressed. This can help to catalyze State Parties to think about solutions, and mobilize the international community.

“It would be good if other countries understood that being on List of World Heritage in Danger is not a bad thing, but it’s a process that helps them to bring together different actors within the country, region and beyond, to address issues affecting a site. The IUCN and UNESCO are there to support wherever we can with technical advice, and to think of solutions. So if we can switch danger-listing into a more positive experience, it would help a lot,” Elena Osipova, Monitoring Officer World Heritage Programme, IUCN¹⁶

Some countries may struggle to act quickly due to a lack of resources. Currently the World Heritage Fund doesn’t have the means to provide enough financial support to help countries with sites that have been listed. The World Heritage Committee can call on donors to support the sites, but there are no official financial mechanisms. UNESCO and the IUCN also have limited human resources, so once a DSOCR is developed, outreach to local organizations, civil society and affected communities is essential.

Atlantic spadefish
(*Chaetodipterus faber*)
school with a diver. Barrier
Reef, Carrie Bow Caye,
Belize



© ANTHONY B. RATH / WWF

Sometimes governments may even propose that their own sites are listed to gain extra local, national and international support for their conservation efforts. The US, for example, proposed listing its Everglades National Park: the aim was to increase internal political and financial support for addressing the threats to its aquatic ecosystems including pollution, urban development and storm damage.¹⁷

Meanwhile in Thailand, when the threat of illegal logging pushed the Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex to the brink of being listed,¹⁸ a high-level regional dialogue brought international attention to the situation. This led to more resources being devoted to the problem in the field, and the site ultimately avoided being listed.

“We have seen on many occasion that the fact that danger-listing is being discussed triggered national and international actions to address the threats to the Outstanding Universal Value and they were solved. There are many different scenarios of why a site may be put on the danger List and they can be quite different. Each situation and solution is unique to the site,” Guy Debonnet, Chief of Unit of the Nature, Sustainable Tourism and Outreach Unit at the World Heritage Centre, UNESCO¹⁹

BELIZE

The Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System (BBRRS) was danger-listed in 2009 due to a number of threats, including unsustainable tourism development on many islands and cays that led to the loss of mangroves within the site and the presence of invasive species. The site was put under greater strain following its listing by the threat of oil extraction.

BBRRS comprises seven protected locations dispersed across 235 kilometres of the Belizean coast.²⁰ The site contains a variety of ecosystems including coral reefs, mangrove forests and sand cays. Coral reefs and mangrove forests provide vulnerable

Sting Ray seen while scuba diving at Shark and Ray, Hol Chan Marine Reserve. Ambergris caye, Belize, Central America.



© ANTONIO BUSIELLO/WWF-US

coastal populations with natural protection against storm surges, hurricanes and erosion by absorbing and dissipating the energy of incoming waves.

The site was being damaged by several activities at once, including unsustainable coastal construction that led to extensive mangrove clearance and marine dredging. The construction of a large cruise ship terminal at Harvest Cave resulted in damage to nearby coral reefs due to the dredging and dumping of rocks. The additional prospect of oil and gas activities began to threaten the site's fragile ecosystem after concessions were granted within the marine area – in fact, drilling for oil anywhere in Belize's interconnected waters would put the reef at risk.

Despite the site being put on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2009, it wasn't until 2016 that the issues threatening it began to be seriously addressed. Previously, progress had been limited due to obstacles that affect many sites. Chief among these was the absence of a DSOCR for the BBRRS until a field mission conducted by UNESCO and the IUCN in 2015, as well as limited human and financial resources at the World Heritage Committee and in Belize itself.

Political will was also lacking: the government didn't fully appreciate that the economic benefits of preserving the site outweighed those offered by destructive industries. Civil society took collective action to reverse this position and reactivated the Coalition to Save our Natural Heritage, a group led by WWF, Oceana Belize, Belize Audubon Society, Belize Institute for Environmental Law and Policy and the Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA). The coalition began as a watchdog, undertaking local and international advocacy for the preservation of the reef from oil exploration; then it progressed to working with the government to collect the data and information needed to implement its DSOCR.

Norwegian Cruise Line is destroying Harvest Cayes mangroves and developing a mega-tourism project. Harvest Caye, Placencia, Belize, Central America.

The main obstacle that needed to be dealt with in Belize was the initial lack of coordination between key stakeholders. It wasn't until all the parties came together – government, civil society, UNESCO and the IUCN – that momentum began to build and remedies were put in place to meet the DSOCR. In the next chapter we'll look in more detail at how the barriers were overcome.



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2. BELIZE DRIVERS FOR SUCCESS

The journey to meet the DSOCR in Belize has been a long one, but it has ultimately been successful. The government has worked with many stakeholders over several years to address the indicators in the correctional plan, dealing with the issues of development-driven loss of mangroves and the threat of oil exploration while rehabilitating the BBRRS-WHS and ensuring its sustainable development.

In this chapter we examine the key drivers of success in rehabilitating the reef, based on interviews with stakeholders including the IUCN, UNESCO, Oak Foundation, WWF, the BTIA and UNESCO in Belize.

IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

One of the biggest takeaways from the process around the protection of the BBRRS-WHS is that fully engaged collaboration from all the parties involved is necessary to move towards any meaningful corrective measures. Each stakeholder has a specific role to play in the process.

UNESCO and the IUCN can bring technical knowledge and gain political attention, while NGOs can represent the interests of local and international civil society as well as providing research and technical support. Donors are essential in funding further research and technical assistance to support the government in making informed decisions and plans.

Laughing Bird Caye National Park Aerial view of coral reef from 6,000 ft. Belize 1991



© ANTHONY B. RATH / WWF

“We have diplomatic connections, but not sufficient money or local knowledge. The donors have the money but not always the connections, and the NGOs have the knowledge but need our support at higher levels. The combination is perfect – but the reality is that we need to reinvent this combination every time for each site on the danger List.” Guy Debonnet, Chief of Unit of the Nature, Sustainable Tourism and Outreach Unit at the World Heritage Centre, UNESCO²¹

Building these relationships between the various parties can take time. Governments in particular are sometimes wary of engaging with civil society, as ministries can feel criticized when issues are highlighted. However, positive interactions and collaborations mean indicators for the corrective plans can be addressed much more quickly. Political commitment from the government across all relevant ministries is also essential to drive progress.

“Over time, we built greater trust and communication with the Ministries of Fisheries, Forestry and Sustainable Development, Petroleum and Natural Resources, which was essential for moving forward.” Nadia Bood, Mesoamerican Reef Scientist and Climate Change Officer, WWF field office in Belize²²

Through the ongoing dialogues between the parties, it became apparent that the Belize government was open to working together with civil society and other stakeholders to move things faster. Once all the necessary parties were aligned to create the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan (ICZMP), the government passed it into law and established guidelines for the sustainable use of coastal-marine resources in and around Belize’s coasts. This was then followed at the end of 2017 with the passing into law of the indefinite moratorium on offshore oil activities in all its waters, along with taking steps to protect mangroves in 2018.

“The Belize example shows that working on achieving the Desired State of Conservation can only be addressed collectively. From the early stages, you need to bring together all relevant actors - Ministries, research institutions, business, NGOs - all are necessary for the buy-in for the longer-term perspective,” Elena Osipova, Monitoring Officer World Heritage Programme, IUCN²³

Pany Arceo, local fisherman cleaning the daily caught, He lived all his life in Ambergris caye



STAKEHOLDER ROLES

One of the key drivers of the Belize case is the ability of all the stakeholders to fulfil their own missions, while engaging in collective action. Although each party has its own agenda and own views, they all come together to protect a location and its Outstanding Universal Value.

Governments have the task of protecting any sites in their territory. They have to meet the key indicators in any corrective plans, whether this is to pass new legislation, implement conservation plans, or build scenarios to protect sites and the communities that depend on them. This can be challenging when protecting a site competes with national economic plans, or when the future of a site depends on the policies of various different ministries. However in Belize, once all the ministries were aligned and the government entered into fruitful dialogue with other stakeholders, it was able to move ahead and take action to benefit the site and the country's long-term economic stability.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre ensures that the Outstanding Universal Value of a site is maintained. It engages with national governments, and raises political awareness of the need to protect a site. The organization has years of experience of partnering with governments to discuss solutions and potential implementation scenarios. Importantly, UNESCO plays a convening role bringing a wide variety of stakeholders together and helping broker solutions and different constituencies around the table to assist countries to make the change that is needed.

The IUCN supports countries by providing relevant expertise for specific challenges, and organizing missions or workshops to find solutions more quickly. It can also help convene political figures to push through corrective measures. In the case of Belize, the IUCN and UNESCO made a mission visit in 2015 when they met with the government and with the NGOs to discuss how best to meet the indicators and address outstanding actions. This helped to gain governmental commitment at the top level.

NGOs and civil society have the important role of collecting on-the-ground information while convening and speaking for affected stakeholders who

otherwise may not have a voice. In the campaign for the BBRRS-WHS, civil society – via the Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage – helped to elevate the discussion to the highest levels by initially pressuring the government from the outside. Additionally, an international campaign led by WWF helped spotlight the need to protect the second largest reef system in the world, and mobilized more than 450,000 people from around the world to show support. By the end of the process NGOs were active partners with the government in addressing the needs of conservation. Civil society played an essential role in gathering the data needed to survey the mangroves, as well as engaging with local communities.

Donors are needed in many cases to finance local organizations working on correctional plans, and the vital extra resources they provide can also help accelerate progress.

In Belize, such organizations as Oak Foundation, Belize Marine Fund, GEF-Belize Small Grants Programme, UNDP Belize and MARFUND have been investing in the essential projects which enabled the protection of the Belize Barrier Reef and the World Heritage site. These projects included support of the advocacy work of the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage and its individual members, analysis of mangroves coverage and land tenure analysis and survey, improvement of the management of the World Heritage site and fisheries, eradication of invasive species and many others.

Local business associations are also essential partner representatives. Many World Heritage sites make a considerable contribution to national economies through tourism, recreation and the export of resources; and more than 90 per cent of natural World Heritage sites provide jobs.²⁴ As such it's very important to ensure local businesses understand what it takes to protect and maintain a site, and include them in planning. In this instance the BTIA since its inception in 1985, focused on the sustainable development of the tourism industry in Belize, as it understood that it was in businesses' interests to protect the reef. The BTIA was also one of the founding members of the Coalition to Save our National Heritage and was critical in galvanizing grassroots support in the tourism sector.

GLOBAL CAMPAIGN LED BY WWF HELPED TO SHED A GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT ON THE NEED TO PROTECT THE SECOND LARGEST REEF SYSTEM IN THE WORLD AND MOBILISED MORE THAN 450,000 PEOPLE FROM AROUND THE WORLD TO SHOW SUPPORT.

KEY DRIVERS OF POSITIVE TRANSFORMATION IN BELIZE

Developing Desired State of Conservation

In 2007, UNESCO with the support of the IUCN introduced a new tool, the DSOCR. This allows parties to develop and align practical actions to improve a site's state of conservation. The DSOCR serves as the roadmap for the future, and its indicators and verification methods are used as the benchmarks against which to measure progress.

The development of a DSOCR between the World Heritage Centre and the government of Belize (following the mission carried out by UNESCO and the IUCN in 2015) was a pivotal moment. Although the government had been reporting annually to the World Heritage Centre before that, progress had been slow. The new plan enabled the government to engage more fully with civil society and other key stakeholders on the technical details behind the implementation of the agreed actions from the DSOCR, and provided greater clarity and transparency in the annual reviews of the progress.

Financing

Belize has limited financial resources, and addressing the corrective measures outlined in the DSOCR presented a challenge. The lack of resources may also have prevented the government taking measures sooner.

The World Heritage Fund also has limited resources, and has no systematic financial mechanisms to provide sufficient financial support for danger listings. However, in 2015 additional financial support became available to the World Heritage Centre thanks to engagement from the government and the private sector, and this allowed it to accelerate the work for the BBRRS.

By building a relationship with civil society organizations and enlisting them to fulfil particular requirements of the DSOCR, the government could effectively outsource certain projects to NGOs, including WWF. These included the collection of the data needed to create the integrated reef system plan, the land tenure analysis of the property, and the mapping of the mangroves on the site.

“It is critical to invest in research which gives better understanding of shifts in ecosystems and of new and emerging threats. But also, while Belize has made tremendous gains, it's important to sustain it in the future. Having local ownership and desire to safeguard the reef is important. Oak Foundation has invested to make sure human capital is there in perpetuity - to enable Belizeans to consider and decide what is right for them.” Imani Fairweather Morrison, Oak Foundation, Programme Officer – Environment Programme²⁵

Public mobilization, national pride in the reef

In Belize, the mobilization of civil society has been essential in pressuring the government to protect the BBRRS-WHS. This has been greatly supported by the Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage.

The coalition was formed in 2010 to help protect Belize's marine environment with the raising concerns about the oil exploration concessions issued by the government across the whole country's marine area. More than 30 different organizations came together, including community groups.²⁶ The coalition undertook many activities, including the People's Referendum on offshore oil exploration that was held in 2012 and taking the government to court – it won its case following a ruling that the distribution of the concessions with no public consultation was illegal.

In 2015, amid fears that the government permitted seismic research in the reef area the coalition was spurred into action again by a few key members – including

WWF, Oceana and BTIA. The coalition garnered local support by mobilizing coastal communities and explaining the damage this could do to the reef that they depended on; while WWF launched an international campaign to protect the reef. Facing uproar, the government cancelled the plans for the testing. This campaign also paved the way for the government to introduce the oil and gas moratorium across all Belizean waters.

“We were able to work an inside-outside strategy, where there was constructive dialogue with the government, but pressure from the outside, including public pressure. We now have a green development pathway moving forward. If we didn’t have the people power behind us, the backing of the Belizean public and international support to help us along the way, things would have taken longer.” Nadia Bood, Mesoamerican reef scientist and climate change officer, WWF field office in Belize²⁷

“WWF teamed up with Oceana and many other Belizean organizations to galvanise and bring grass roots and international pressure to bear, because the reef is a recognized global treasure. Plaudits to the government as well for having a listening ear” Imani Fairweather Morrison, Oak Foundation, Programme Officer – Environment Programme²⁸

Long-term economic security

In order to address the corrective measures outlined in the DSOCR, the government of Belize had to seriously look at the long-term economic effects of its policies in the BBRRS-WHS, and consider how to best manage the reef for the benefit of the local community, the country and the international community. Its first major step was in 2016 when it adopted a new integrated coastal management plan. The plan was formulated through stakeholder consultations, and created different scenarios with various socio-economic and environmental outcomes over the next few years. The government now has a road map for managing the area today and into the future.

“It takes a village to accomplish something like this. There’s nothing like bringing people together to achieve a purpose – but it requires a lot of commitment, resources and time.” John Burgos, Executive Director of the Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA)²⁹

To support the government, and demonstrate the economic benefits of the BBRRS-WHS, WWF undertook an economic evaluation of four of the seven marine protected areas (MPAs) that make it up. They were found to provide up to US\$19 million each year in economic benefits from tourism and recreation.³⁰

The government also had to come on board with the notion that an intact reef was more beneficial than the financial gains that oil and gas may have provided. It decided that healthy fisheries and tourism were worth more in the long run.

“The leadership in Belize has gone way beyond many other sites, and looked across the board at the reef’s potential by creating in-depth integrated plans and future scenarios. Belize is also very innovative in how it is working together with civil society, it is a young country with many challenges, but it is working together with many stakeholders, this is not what we see in a lot of places.” Fanny Douvere, Coordinator of the Marine Programme at the World Heritage Centre, UNESCO³¹

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The unsustainable development of the tourism and fishing industries, coupled with the threat of oil extraction, could have caused substantial and long-term damage to the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System World Heritage site (BBRRS-WHS). These activities jeopardized the site's Outstanding Universal Value and the social, economic and environmental benefits it provides. However, as this study demonstrates, avoiding these harmful activities in

favour of carefully-managed alternatives will secure a sustainable future for the BBRRS-WHS. Balancing conservation, sustainability and development in and around the BBRRS-WHS serves the long-term interests of those who depend on it for their livelihoods, while protecting and nurturing the site. The same is true for all World Heritage sites.

*“This treasure, that The Belize Barrier Reef System is, is not only for the Belize alone. That is why the World Heritage Committee designated it as a world treasure. We are cognisant of the wider world and that the gifts given to our individual countries are not only for the individual countries, they are for the world.”*³² Roosevelt Blades, Secretary General Ministry of Education National Commission for UNESCO

The application of five key principles can help decision-makers to achieve an appropriate and equitable balance for World Heritage sites. These principles have been distilled through lessons learned from sites that have successfully achieved sustainable development outcomes – they're also outlined in WWF's *Protecting People Through Nature* report.³³

1. Valuation. Governments should periodically assess the direct, indirect and non-use value of World Heritage sites. This value assessment should be used to inform decision-making, alongside a full assessment of the economic, environmental and social costs and benefits of all proposed activities in and around World Heritage sites. WWF and other NGOs helped the government of Belize with its assessment of the BBRRS-WHS through various on-the-ground studies, including the publication of the *Natural Heritage Natural Health*³⁴ report.

2. Investment decisions. When considering investment in activities that could affect World Heritage sites and the people that depend on them, decision-makers should assess investments over the long term, and value the needs of current and future generations fairly. In the case of Belize, the government chose the long-term value of sustainable tourism and fishing which are able to support the country in perpetuity over the short-term and finite financial gain of pursuing extractive industries near the site.

3. Governance. Stakeholders at local, regional, national and international level should be involved in the management of the sites. In particular, local communities and indigenous peoples who live in or around World Heritage sites and are affected by the use of their resources should be involved in the decision-making process. They should also receive a fair portion of the benefits generated by those resources. The Belize Coalition to Save our Heritage, which represents 30 organizations including local and community groups, has been notably active in making sure all interests are represented in government dialogues.

4. Policy-making. Policy-makers, including governments and site managers, should consult civil society groups, international non-governmental organizations and technical experts in the policy-making process; and decisions should be based on all available information and data. The resulting policies should be effective, comprehensive and free of loopholes that allow them to be circumvented. The process and outcome of the decisions should be made publicly available, and be communicated clearly to the World Heritage Committee and other relevant parties. In Belize, this principle was applied across all major policy measures: the Integrated Coastal Zone

Management Plan (ICZMP), the indefinite moratorium on offshore oil and gas activities, regulations to protect mangroves, and others.

5. Enforcement. Effective measures should be implemented to ensure that existing and future regulations are upheld by stakeholders and enforced by the appropriate bodies. The regulations that protect World Heritage sites from harmful activities should be enforced in full and without exception. The World Heritage Committee proactively ensured that Belize abides by these rules by placing the BBRRS-WHS on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2009, then subsequently working with the government to create a DSOCR. This has guided the government in taking corrective measures including passing the ICZMP into law, as well as adopting an indefinite moratorium on offshore oil activities in all its waters in 2017, and implementing measures to protect mangroves in 2018.

ENDNOTES

- 1 IUCN, <https://www.iucn.org/theme/world-heritage/about/world-heritage-convention>
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100%
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1.400

Species of flora and fauna
can be found at the Belize
Barrier Reef

17

Threatened species
live in Belize's
waters

190.000

People rely on
reef-related
income in Belize

15%

Of Belize's gross
domestic product
(GDP) comes
from the reef



Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and
to build a future in which people live in harmony with nature.

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