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Misrepresenting Communities: The Politics of Community-Based Rural Ecotourism in Gales Point Manatee, Belize¹

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ABSTRACT While the celebration of community in conservation provides legitimization to contest centrist and coercive protected area management strategies, representations of community in resource management writings and in particular strategies such as ecotourism, are often based on simplistic images and generic models that ignore politics. Based on research in a community-based rural ecotourism project in Gales Point Manatee, Belize, from 1992-1998, the paper provides concrete examples of how the politics of class, gender, and patronage inequities limit the co-management of ecotourism associations, equitable distribution of ecotourism income, and support for conservation regulations across the community. Attention to multiple interests and identities within the rural community and their relationships to external actors, political institutions, and national policies are critical to understanding the challenges facing community-based conservation in Belize and demonstrated the relevance of such attention elsewhere.

Introduction

Concern over the injustice and inefficacy of center-imposed natural resource conservation and development has led many to championing community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and community-based conservation (CBC) (Western and Wright 1994).² But while scientists, policy planners, and international conservation organizations increasingly support CBNRM and CBC, and there are instances of very successful programs (Getz et al. 1999), some warn that conservation and development may be compatible only under certain conditions (Kramer et al., 1997; Wells 1994). The implications of placing community at the center of resource management and development depend largely on the concepts and practices underlying specific strategies, and the interests those strategies actually serve (Agrawal 1997; Brosius et al. 1998; Li 1996). This paper critically examines the images of community contained

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the very helpful assistance of Chuck Geisler, Stephen Siebert, Patrick West, Charles Zerner and three anonymous reviewers. In particular, the author wants to thank O. Nigel Bolland for introducing me to Belize as a member of his undergraduate field study group some twenty years ago.

² For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms "community-based conservation," "community based natural resource management" and "community conservation" interchangeably.

in, and the actual outcomes of, a popular community-based conservation strategy—rural ecotourism. Revealing the ambiguities in environmental discourses and the realities of what is actually happening on the ground are critical to how the movement is viewed from those on the periphery as well as from the center (Lynch 1996).

Brosius et al. (1998:159–60) recently asked: “What kinds of images of community are being produced in CBNRM projects, programs, and policies? To what extent are these images of communities, cultures and resource management practices essentialized, timeless, and homogenous? To what extent might such instances of the “invention of community” have positive or problematic consequences—and for whom?” To begin to answer these questions and avoid “view-from-nowhere” criticism and model-building (or model-bashing) they suggest that “What is particularly needed is discussion of critical case histories examining the development, applications, and consequences of community-based natural resource management projects . . . Only through the explication of specific histories and political dynamics can we begin to address the problems and prospects of community-based resource management” (Brosius et al. 1998:159).

In this paper I examine a community-based, rural ecotourism project in Gales Point Manatee, Belize. Nature travel, or ecotourism, has been a shining light of the community-based conservation movement (Western and Wright 1994), and Belize is one of the most visited ecotourist destinations (Mahler and Wotkyns 1991). Community-based ecotourism in Gales Point Manatee has been featured in promotional videos, brochures, and international documentaries and touted in articles and books as evidence of a “revolution in rural thinking” that has made community-management of ecotourism an effective “tool for conservation and development” (Horwich and Lyon 1998). I review the literature on community in conservation, both generally and in Belize, and examines rural ecotourism policy and practice in Gales Point Manatee. By drawing attention to intra-community class, gender, and patronage inequities, the analysis identifies limitations in the assumptions underlying the project and contradictions and severe limitations in the operation of introduced community management institutions, the production and distribution of ecotourism income, and generation of support for environmental regulations. The study also reveals how residents differentially resist and transform rural ecotourism in Gales Point. The conclusion suggests that attention to multiple interests and identities within rural communities and their relationships to broader actors and institutions is critical in meeting the formidable challenges facing community-based conservation efforts in Belize and elsewhere.

Community in conservation and natural resource management

Many factors—more than can be acknowledged here—led to the positioning of community at the center of discussions of conservation and protected area management. Scholars protested that narrow conceptions of nature and an American bias toward wilderness preservation inappropriately dominated international conservation efforts (Guha 1989). With little or no local input, parks were designated, and lines were drawn on maps without attention to historic property claims, displaced resident cultures, long-standing resource management regimes, or opportunities for integrating conservation into development (Brandon and Wells 1992; West and Brechin 1991). State governments, supported by transnational organizations, coerced conservation by criminalizing customary livelihood activities and property rights and legitimized violence and repression (Peluso 1993). As new studies revealed the extent of human influence on ecological systems, specifically in creating biodiversity, attention was redirected to learning how indigenous populations have managed their landscapes over time, and how incentives, rather than penalties, might better link environmental conservation to economic development (McNeely 1994). Importantly, the proliferation of studies on common managed resource systems highlighted the pivotal role of community and local social institutions in natural resource management (Berkes 1989). Advocates claim that community-based natural resource management is preferable to state or corporate control because residents have more vested interest in the long-term condition of resources, a more intimate knowledge of local ecological processes and practices, and can more effectively and equitably manage resources through local institutions and ethics (Korten 1986; Lynch and Talbot 1995; Western and Wright 1994).

Recent reviews of the community in conservation caution that the analysis of community has been uncritical and based on historically limited views. Agrawal (1997:36) suggests that the literature reveals a widespread preoccupation with a “mythic community:” small, homogeneous groups using locally evolved norms to live with nature harmoniously, managing resources sustainably and equitably.” This conception of community relies on the idea of unity in sameness (e.g., shared geography, identity, and experience) rather than of unity based on difference, competition, and resistance (Whitt and Slack 1994). “Conservationist imaginings” of community lack dynamic historical understanding of particular communities, and instead tend to bounce between two ideal types: innocent primitive societies in pristine ecosystems (the ecologically noble community) or backward, traditional communities despoiling na-

ture in order to respond to the intrusion of the market and state (Agrawal 1997). Slater (1996) suggests that binary views (especially typical of characterizations of tropical rainforest peoples and places) represent a new "Edenic" narrative, or Garden of Eden story: either rural people and places are in the state of original innocence and harmony with nature or exist after the fall. The celebration of community in conservation, and of an "enchanted" community at that, also builds on current dissatisfaction with theories of progress and centrally-planned development. Writers in the North and South have turned to rural people and communities to envision a new phase in development around shared concerns for place, devolution of power, and revival of democratic institutions and civic activism (Agrawal 1997; Etzioni 1996; Kemmis 1990). But, as DuPuis and Vandergeest (1996) warn, idealizations of rural community and depictions of rurality often ignore the social history of residents—a history frequently filled with exploitation, marginalization, division, and conflict.

The mythic image of community in conservation provides an appealing alternative to state-centric, market- and private property-oriented prescriptions for conservation, opening up space for policy shifts and new program directions (Li 1996). While compelling, CBC/CBNRM as a generic solution to generic problems also carries many risks. As Li (n.d.:2) observes, "detailed studies of the effects of laws and policies on particular places always indicate that local realities are more complex than the policy model suggest, and often highlight the problems of patronage, class and gender inequities." If the World Bank were to make the prior existence of community-based resource management regimes a precondition for rural development, it would privilege certain types of indigenous or tribal groups while excluding many of the world's poorest and most dispossessed people, including migrants and newly formed or differentially-organized communities (Li 1996). Accepting one characterization over another may determine who speaks for a community. Gendered impacts may also be submerged by a community focus (Leach 1991; Li 1996). Community-based approaches founded on idealized images may prompt backlashes, and can disguise, conceal, eclipse, and erase critical interests, processes, and causal links within communities and between communities and other social formations (Agrawal 1997). Finally, community management can have the effect of intensifying state control (which some may desire while others resist) and denying people the space to change, to privatize property, and to invent alternate resource management regimes, should such activities be in their own interest.

The concerns raised here draw from many theoretical approaches that pay close attention to the cultural construction of meaning situated within material contexts of multiple interests and

struggles. While space limitations preclude a full theoretical discussion, I want to situate this study in the framework of political ecology, especially a “new” political ecology prodded by debates with gender theory, cultural studies, poststructuralism, and postmodernism (Bryant and Bailey 1997; Leach 1991; Peet and Watts 1996).³ While political ecology has yet to suggest a mature “theory,” it has been associated with an emphasis on particular methodologies, variables, and social processes, and can be briefly summarized as concerned with the politics of environmental change and viewing the “environment as politicized”—over time and across multiple spatial scales. Early political ecologists combined behavioral and symbolic interactionist approaches with a broadly and variably defined Marxian-inspired political economy in order to view social and environmental change in specified regions conjuncturally, historically, and from a “bottoms up” perspective (Blaikie 1987). That is, they attempted to pay attention to both material and symbolic realms of social action and to examine their interactions with each other and physical places and processes. While informed by dependency and world systems theories, these early political ecologists gave serious attention to questions of human agency, the politics of culture, the spatial dimensions of land use, and the particular ecological processes and conditions that shape and are shaped by social forces.

More recent discussions of political ecology emphasize political analyses, environmental justice, and “engagements within and between political economy, the power-knowledge field, and critical approaches to ecological science itself” (Peet and Watts 1996:13). Political ecologists continue to situate analyses within the context of human action and political struggles constrained by social and cultural orders (i.e., earlier structural-determinist models) and ecological processes, but they are redirecting attention to the creative and strategic ways different people interpret and deploy understandings of nature and environmental categories as resources for reproducing, challenging, and changing social systems. Thus, for the purposes of this study, a political ecological orientation suggests viewing community as a political arena, grounded in a particular history and constituted through multiple scales and networks of social relations entailing contexts of unequal power. The approach pushes us to ask whose understandings of community, environment, and conservation shape the design, practice, negotiations, and outcomes of community conservation projects, and for whose benefit?

³As noted, my discussion here of political ecology and its concerns and challenges is quite limited. I make reference to it merely to suggest the theoretical and methodological approaches that inform this project and my thinking. For more detailed discussions of political ecology see Peet and Watts (1996) and Bryant and Bailey (1997).

Study methods

The study is based on the author's analysis of project planning documents, promotional literature and ethnographic field data gathered during six visits to Gales Point Manatee, Belize, from 1992 to 1998. The methods are largely qualitative, interpretive, and aimed at understanding the rural ecotourism project as experienced by differentially placed people in the Gales Point social structure and influenced by the broader historical process of Belizean national development. In Gales Point, data were collected by the author with the assistance of American and Belizean students.⁴

During each visit, we conducted participant observation while we were guests in "bed and breakfasts" (B&Bs are discussed below). Our position as both "ecotourist" and "researcher" afforded multiple opportunities for conversations and observation of the everyday activities of B&B operators. Each year we re-interviewed B&B operators using similar questions on income generating activities and inviting reflections on their involvement in ecotourism over the previous year. We also held key informant interviews each year with village council members, farmers, fishers, hunters, forest product collectors, youths, religious leaders, and ecotourists. In 1994, we conducted a random household survey of 48 percent of the full-time resident Gales Point Manatee households (n=37; 77 permanent households) to ascertain village patterns with regard to income generating activities and levels, conservation attitudes and practices, and involvement in the rural ecotourism project. Belizean and American students were paired to conduct both the household survey and key informant interviews, with each team consisting of one physical science major and one social science major, one male and the other female, whenever possible. In addition, the author interviewed some of the original planners of the project and key Belizean governmental officials and drew upon considerable material compiled for teaching seminars on Belize conservation and development.⁵

⁴ The students were participants in a seminar and field course on Belize Conservation and Development co-taught by the author. These courses comprised one component of a larger five year collaborative project between the University College of Belize and The University of Montana. The field practicum in Gales Point was designed to critically examine the community-based rural ecotourism effort, and for students to learn field research methods in the process.

⁵ As noted in the text, students and I collected the field data. Students were trained in participant observer and interviewing methods before arriving in Belize. For key informant interviews, students were assisted by a set of guiding questions and procedures for probing. To maximize consistency, students were instructed to record direct quotations as much as possible. A standard questionnaire prepared by the author was used in conducting annual interviews with the B&B operators. Students were encouraged to build relationships with their B&B hostesses and others they interviewed to foster a dialogic and reflexive mode of inquiry. In 1994, a for-

Reimagining tourism: the rise of community-based rural ecotourism in Belize

In the years immediately following Belize's transformation from a British colony to an independent nation (Belize was granted its independence in 1981), tourism was condemned as "whorism" (Munt and Higinio 1993, Shoman 1994). The industry was seen as elite-controlled and was thought to reinforce patterns of international inequality, exploitation, and dependency, and contribute to environmental degradation (Britton 1981; Perez 1973/74). The image of tourism shifted in the late 1980s, especially during the Peoples' United Party (PUP) administration from 1989–1993, which supported "new tourism," defined as respecting and restoring nature, preserving and valuing local culture, and building sustainable development (Pattullo 1996). Belizean capitalists also supported tourism development as part of economic restructuring and growth in the service sector. New marketing strategies were developed to appeal to the international tourist interested in a more "authentic," "individualized," and "natural" tropical experience (Phillips 1994).

Succinctly, there has been a market shift from the traditional mass packaged holidays, typically described as the "sun, sea, sand and sex." More flexibly packaged—individually oriented—tourisms are now of increasing significance, catering for a more "authentic" experience and characteristically, environmentally and culturally sensitive (Munt and Higinio 1993:61).

In the 1980s, tourism in Belize was reinvented as "ecotourism." Ecotourism is defined as small-scale, up-market tourism in which visitors respect and express interest in local natural history and culture and where a local tourist economy builds support for environmental conservation (Boo 1990; Brandon 1996; Lindbergh et al. 1996). Compared with mass or "old" tourism, ecotourism is touted as providing better sectoral linkages, reducing "leakages" of benefits out of the country, creating local employment, and fostering sustainable development. It provides a "last resort" for small, debt-ridden, and ecologically degraded Caribbean countries (Pattullo 1996). Ecotourism is being constructed as a generic strategy based on the following assumptions: 1) there are few alternative or supplementary sources of income available to poor rural inhabitants,

mal questionnaire was prepared by the author and used to conduct the random household survey. The author interpreted all of these data and was also able to increase validity and reliability by repeating questions over the course of the six year study, and receiving feedback on my interpretation from various informants. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and concern to maintain openness between researchers and residents, none of the interviews were tape recorded.

2) existing sources of income are not sacrificed because ecotourism complements rather than replaces historic work activities, 3) residents can earn benefits with relatively low levels of investment, so little is lost if tourism doesn't generate the expected levels of benefits, and 4) inadequate environmental protection undermines tourism development and economic development prospects across the landscape (Lindbergh and Hawkins 1993).

Ecotourism in Belize was reimagined and restructured in the early 1990s. With the aid of foreign and national NGOs, international tourists to Belize have been directed inland for a nature- and culture-based experience involving hiking in tropical forests, viewing wildlife, visiting archeological ruins, and staying in "traditional" Creole, Garifuna and Mayan villages. "Community-based ecotourism" is being marketed to adventuresome traveler tourists, such as student groups, backpackers, and researchers; people thought to be willing to live in rustic conditions "closer" to natural- and cultural attractions and, thus, able to contribute to the local economy rather than to foreign and city tour operators. In essence, community-based ecotourism aims to give rural residents access to the lucrative tourism industry, and thereby tie local livelihoods to a rationale for sustaining wildlife and habitats as tourist attractions (Horwich et al. 1993).

Importantly, only a handful of studies critically examine the underlying assumptions about "nature," "community," and "development" underlying the community-based approach to rural ecotourism in Belize or ask in whose interest they are deployed (Belsky in press; Johnson 1998; Munt and Higinio 1993; Pattullo 1996; Phillips 1994). Even fewer provide any long-term assessment of the approach as it has been put in practice in specific places. Evaluations of Belizean ecotourism more typically calculate economic costs and benefits averaged across communities, based largely on secondary data and statistics (Boo 1990; Lindbergh and Enriquez 1994; Lindbergh et al. 1996; Woods et al. 1992), or they determine the motivations and desires of tourists (Palacio 1997). Research on community based ecotourism in Belize has yet to "challenge the earlier, more homogenous notions of community [and] contribute to a broader concern with how communities are actually constructed, and with the manner in which group identities and traditions are invented and authenticated, in part as a result of deliberate attempts to engage the interest of tourists or otherwise appeal to the imaginations of outsiders (Chambers 1997:5)."

Creating community-based ecotourism in Gales Point Manatee

The village of Gales Point Manatee is located on a narrow peninsula extending into the Southern Lagoon, a four hour boat ride

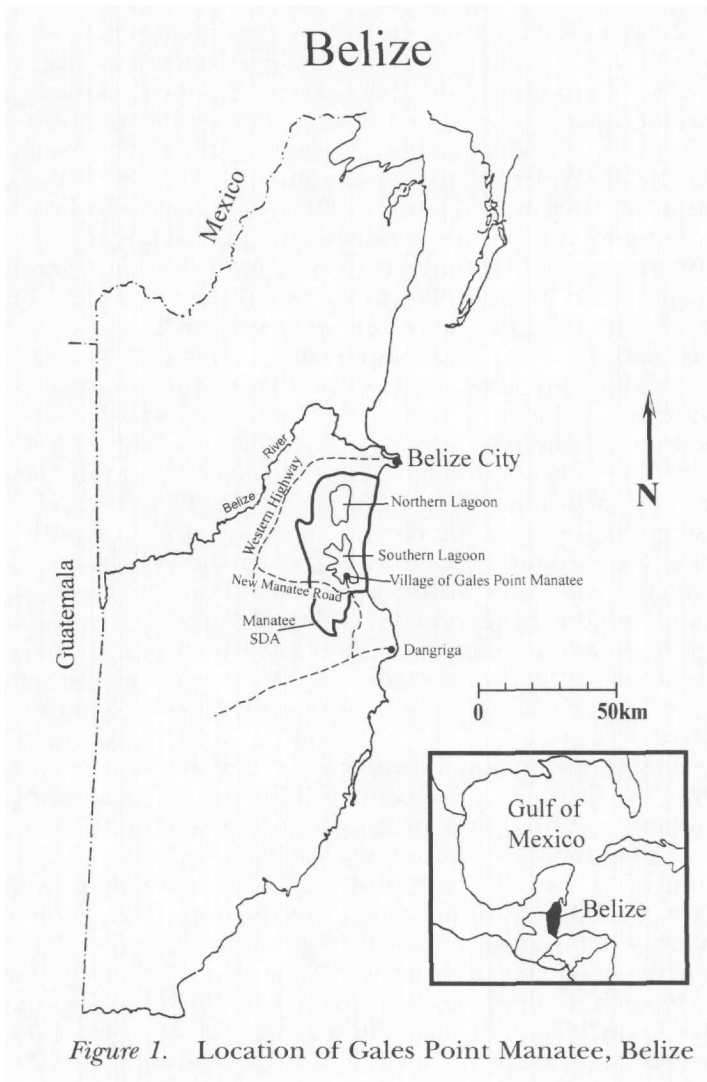


Figure 1. Location of Gales Point Manatee, Belize

from Belize City, the nation's largest city [see Figure 1].⁶ In the early part of the century the peninsula was a nameless refuge for shipwrecked sailors and escaped slaves. After the world depression, Creoles (the descendants of European colonists and African slaves)

⁶ Due to space limitations, a more complete history of rural and environmental change in Gales Point could not be included here. For this discussion see Belsky (in press).

came to the peninsula seeking employment in the American owned lumber mill, which produced timber and dyes for the English colonial powers, and to hunt, fish, gather forest products, and cultivate small swidden farms. Another forest product sold on the world market, chicle, provided many people with their livelihood (Shoman 1994). While the local economy thrived in the 1950s, the devastation of Hurricane Hattie in 1961 depressed the economy terribly, bringing the closure of the logging mill. While the only access to Belize City and beyond was by river until the construction of the Manatee Road in the 1990s, ties between the village and Belize City have been close. Residents migrated seasonally to Belize City or the United States to seek employment, and wealthy residents from Belize City purchased land in Gales Point and constructed vacation homes. In the early 1990s, the community was described as "a skewed mix of children and their grandparents, with only a portion of the 20–45 aged population in the village due to the lack of economic opportunities" (GPPC Management Plan 1992:1). This sketch suggests the dynamic change, mobility, and integration in national and international circuits that characterize labor in Gales Point and the inaccuracy of viewing Gales Point as static, traditional, and remote from broader political and economic forces. The high degree of periodic migration in and out of the village, as well as seasonal residence, also underscores the spatial and temporal complexity of defining who constitutes the "local" community at any given time.

In the 1980s, international travelers and biologists began visiting and exhibiting interest in protecting wildlife in the estuaries, karst hills, lowland savanna, and broadleaf forests surrounding Gales Point Manatee. Biologists have been particularly interested in the protection of Hawksbill turtle and Caribbean manatees, both of which are considered vulnerable to extinction. The rural ecotourism project began, in February 1991, with a proposal to the Government of Belize drafted by American wildlife biologist, Robert Horwich, to designate approximately 170,000 acres, including Gales Point Manatee village, as a biosphere reserve. Horwich and his associates mapped, zoned, and suggested regulation of human use across the proposed territory and proposed that the reserve be declared the "*Manatee Special Development Area*" (MSDA)—a designation schema common in Belize. The MSDA was declared in December 1991.

In Gales Point, the project founders sought to apply a refined model of the "Community Baboon Sanctuary," which they had created in another (Creole) area in Belize (Horwich and Lyon 1990). As in the earlier effort, they developed ecotourism to raise local income and create an incentive for residents to support "sustainable" land use and preservation of critical wildlife. But where the tourist

attraction in the earlier project centered squarely on howler monkeys, Gales Point would market a “community lifestyle” fostering social goals including “local empowerment building and keep(ing) the cultural unity and integrity of the village intact” (Horwich et al. 1993:163). They would promote participatory-action research and activities to foster conservation awareness and practices. They would hire local persons to assist in research efforts to transfer information and technology to the local community. That the emphasis was on “transferring” information and technology, rather than on “exchanging” or “building on” existing customs and institutions, is telling and may be contrary to the meaning of CBNRM/CBC. The consultative group that conceived and implemented the project was called the “Manatee Advisory Team.” The team was composed of Peace Corps volunteers, a landscape architect on a Fulbright Scholarship, a seasonal U.S. Forest Service biologist, and Horwich—all Americans. No rural sociologist or anthropologist served on this committee. While the project was based in a community, no attention was directed at developing an historical understanding of cultural and environmental change in Gales Point or determining how property rights and other local social institutions had been organized, managed, or disrupted over time.

Beyond conservationist imaginings: the politics of class, gender and patronage in rural ecotourism

The community-based rural ecotourism project began in Gales Point Manatee in 1992. The expatriot Manatee Advisory Team set up four organizations and their operating procedures. Membership lists indicate that forty-one individuals joined these organizations: fourteen in the farmers’ association, seven in the craft association, and ten each in the B&B and tour guiding groups (GPPC 1992). These associations were to be guided by an umbrella organization described by the project founders as a “cooperative” and composed of community leaders. It is instructive that “cooperatives” do not resemble any local form of community management institution. Furthermore, the project founders were apparently unaware of the tumultuous history of cooperatives in Belizean development during the 1970s (Moberg 1992; Shoman 1994). Rather than confirming the project founders’ representation of broad grassroots support “with over 50 percent of the adult community getting involved in at least one of the cooperative’s programs” (Horwich and Lyon 1998:352), our investigation found that membership (if not active participation) was concentrated among at best ten households, and a handful of individuals. Many individuals were members of more than one association, and members of the B&B and tourguiding associations were frequently part of the same household. For example, Hortense Welch chaired the B&B association from 1992–1997

while her son, Kevin Andrewin, chaired the tour guide association. On the few occasions when the project employed local residents, it was consistently Kevin or his father, Moses Andrewin, who were hired.

By 1994, only the B&B and tourguiding associations remained active. The farmers' association fell apart when distribution of seeds and advice ceased. The goal of supplying B&Bs with fresh food from the farmers' association was not met. Members of the Craft Association benefitted from training in plaiting baskets and intermittent sales, but marketing problems and conflicts over the construction of a craft center reduced interest in both weaving and the association (Belsky and Siebert 1998). Potential members were also put off by a membership fee of U.S. \$5.00, to establish a revolving credit fund for members.

Our 1994 household survey found that over the first two years of the ecotourism project (1992–1994), B&B operators reported average annual earnings of approximately U.S. \$510, and tourguide operators U.S. \$557. According to our survey, average income in Gales Point from 1992–1994 was approximately U.S. \$436. Five households (14 percent) identified ecotourism (either B&Bs or tour guiding) as their major source of income, and five others (14 percent), as their most important secondary source. Seventy-two percent of households answered that ecotourism did not provide them with either a primary or secondary source of income. Most households rely on wage labor (30 percent) and hunting and selling bushmeat (27 percent) as their most important source of income; 16 percent rely on remittances from abroad, eight percent on selling fish, and three percent on selling farm goods. Hence, while all households relied on a variety of activities for income, 28 percent had rural ecotourism as a primary or secondary source compared to 72 percent who were dependent on wage labor, hunting/selling bushmeat, remittances, or selling agricultural products.

Entry costs were one reason that ecotourism income was limited. A tourguide needed access to a boat, preferably a motorboat with a powerful engine, and fuel. Operators had to be licensed, and boats outfitted with life jackets. Offering B&B services required an extra bedroom or the ability to temporarily displace a family member. Bedrooms were required to have specified furniture: such as beds with sheets, mosquito nets, and fans. Over time, cooking and bathroom facilities had to meet sanitation standards. Loans were available to purchase or upgrade these items, but given initial entry costs, households starting ecotourism businesses could not be among the "poorest of the poor."

By 1996, the ecotourism associations were fraught with problems and conflicts. Association chairs reported to us that they felt "burnt out" and complained that members did not regularly attend meetings, pay association dues, or consistently make themselves available

to entertain guests. Members charged that chairs based tourist assignments on favoritism. In response, project planners set up rotation schedules to facilitate equitable access to tourists. Association chairs maintained a list of service providers and assigned guests to B&Bs and guides in turn. But from the beginning, providers complained that the chairs favored their own relatives, that schedules did not reward quality service, and that visitors did not follow rules requesting them to make home stay and tourguiding arrangements with association chairs. Aggressive ecotourism providers in the village (including those who did not join associations) appropriated business on their own. Consequently, despite the underlying philosophy that ecotourism should be available to anyone, entry costs and access to ecotourists was skewed.

Additionally, differential costs and benefits accrue to households and individuals based on unequal economic resources, multiple identities, and competing employment demands. Given the limited employment in Gales Point, the opportunity to earn income through rural ecotourism was highly desired, especially by women. B&Bs enabled women with the requisite resources to market traditional female domestic skills. Importantly, because normal domestic activities could be continued while providing services for foreign guests, B&Bs were not viewed in the community as “work,” and women maintained control over B&B income. A young woman who lives with her husband and their four young children said she began a B&B “because it can be done while I keep the house and watch the little ones, and don’t put out my man.” An older woman with three teenagers said she joined “because it based on skills I know and it’s a way to make a dollar where I say where to put it.” Her aim was to earn money not only to meet daily needs, but also “to help the children go to school in Belize City and [husband] don’t always agree to it being spent that way.” The potential for intra-household conflicts was lessened because of the opportunity for both (i.e., women as B&Bs providers and men as tourguides) to earn income through complementary, rather than competing, activities.

Over time, however, men and women of households with different resources, faced challenges to participating in rural ecotourism. All were affected by declines in the number of ecotourists coming to the village after 1994. Annual interviews with B&B providers revealed that income from B&Bs declined during 1995–1997 by approximately 25 percent.⁷ A variety of factors contributed to the decline. Inter-community competition for a fixed number of ecotourists and the decision, made outside the village, to relocate students from Vermont-based Students in International Training to

⁷ Only one B&B operator reported in 1998 that ecotourism was the household’s primary source of income. This is because she receives payment for meals and ground rent from one of the original project planners who vacations annually in Gales Point for six months at a time.

another village that had taken up community-based ecotourism were important. Promotion and advertising to attract customers ceased after the Manatee Advisory Team left, and brochures were no longer distributed in Belize City. Finally, reliable water taxi service stopped when residents with boats were unwilling to risk the trip to Belize City should there be no paying customers.

Reductions in ecotourism income created hardships. Loans had been provided to B&B operators to install septic tanks and indoor plumbing, and these loans had to be paid back with interest. In addition, the 1996 enactment of a nation-wide value added tax (VAT) of 15 percent on consumer items raised commodity prices, including the cost of food. The association responded by increasing the price for one night's lodging and three meals from U.S. \$15.00 to \$20.00 per person. But many women still complained, "even with the raise it don't bring much profit to providing cooked meals." Because of design choices and installation mistakes, few of the (flush) toilets work properly. One B&B operator explained, "I have to get [husband and son] to hunt gibbon to sell in Belize City to raise the loan money"—an unintended and ironic outcome of the wildlife conservation project.

By 1998 other unforeseen demands arose. Annual interviews with B&B providers found that half had become employed by one of three upscale ecotourist facilities now operating in the area. With new hosting experience, as well as debts to be paid, Gales Point B&B operators took advantage of the demand for local cooks and housekeepers. Significantly, male partners/husbands and sons who worked as tourguides in the resorts provided the initial contact for and transportation to jobs for their wives and mothers. Once again, it was the households with access to boats and labor that benefitted from new opportunities in rural ecotourism.

Maintaining a B&B while working outside the home has created additional tensions. B&B operators who have other employment are frequently unavailable to receive guests, and acknowledged that their work schedules leave them with insufficient time and labor to adequately clean and cook for guests. Many have begun substituting cold sack lunches using tinned foods for the usual freshly cooked noontime meal.⁸ Such labor conflicts are better handled by B&B operators with female support networks. On two occasions in 1998, a daughter and elderly mother provided B&B services while the official B&B hostess was absent. However, the daughter expressed resentment at her increased workload. The generic eco-

⁸ In addition to time and labor conflicts, the seasonal availability of fresh foods, new restrictions on game hunting, and Belize's historic dependence and cultural value for imported foods reduced the occasions for ecotourists to be served "local cuisine" and otherwise experience authentic "Creole" culture. See Belsky (in press) for additional examples of the contradictions between community-based ecotourism discourse and practice in Gales Point.

tourism model does not specify how gender, class, and age—and the intersection among them—affect labor allocation and risks in rural ecotourism; or how these risks shift over time as new opportunities and liabilities arise.

The embeddedness of community conservation in international and national politics also affects the calculus of costs and benefits in community-based ecotourism. Support for the Gales Point Community Ecotourism project provided Belizean government leaders with a means to demonstrate commitment to community based conservation and forge connections for accessing international grant monies. For example, the Belizean Minister of the Environment and Attorney General, Glen Godfrey, demonstrated his support for projects and the concept of CBNRM/CBC at the Rio Earth Summit (Godfrey 1990). At the national level, party loyalty explains why particular administrations backed the Gales Point rural ecotourism project. Gales Point has historically been known as a “PUP” village, that is, its citizens routinely support the Peoples United Political party, rather than the other leading national political party, the “UDP” (United Democratic Party). Government patronage in the form of development aid has been important, historically, in mobilizing factional and individual access to the resources by which politicians control the rural electorate (Moberg 1992). Thus Glen Godfrey took personal responsibility for arranging the Manatee Special Development Area and raising money to build a hotel in Gales Point Manatee. Godfrey hoped that the hotel would attract higher paying-ecotourists to Gales Point Manatee, increase local employment and revenue for the community project, and provide a site where hosting and other tourist skills could be demonstrated (GPPC 1992). However, when the UDP assumed power in 1993, financial support for the Manatee Cooperative Hotel evaporated, and the hotel remains unfinished.

The end of national support for the Gales Point project, both politically and financially, took its toll on the local village. Facing mounting local inequities and political struggles, management of both the village council and the Gales Point Progressive Cooperative faltered. In 1997 Walter Goff resigned from his positions as chairman of both entities. For a few months, the council was led by Kevin Andrewin, the president of the tourguide association and son of Hortense Welch. Both he and his mother had switched their political party affiliation to the UDP. Active participation in community managed associations continued to slide: few people attended meetings, paid dues, or took responsibility for marketing. Some residents blamed the close affiliation of the community and its leaders with the PUP for the decline in ecotourism. Hortense Welch observed,

Politics is bringing us down, the whole village. It's going down because of politics. Too many are concerned with

who gets the credit. We now getting very few tourists coming to stay. A man or a woman now or then. The village is not progressing well at all. Now we get smart and don't wear our politics out in public as much.

Another resident suggested a more cynical explanation, "Either way it seems, we poor people not going to get anything for the village or for ourselves anymore."

The absence of attention to politics at multiple levels has, as some observers warned, enabled the appropriation of "community conservation" by local elites. In 1997, a World Bank GEF (Global Environmental Facility) grant of approximately U.S. \$40,000 was awarded to the Gales Point Progressive Cooperative to strengthen the cooperative's community participation and to map, zone, and erect signage for the Manatee Reserve (GEF Planning grant application 1997). The project contact person is Cecil Bailey, a native of Gales Point Manatee who recently returned to Belize after living for twenty years in the States and is current resident of the nearby village of Ladyville, and his wife, Philippa, is the principal officer for the grant. Cecil successfully campaigned to become secretary of the Gales Point Progressive Cooperative and chairman of the village council. From interviews with B&B operators and others we learned that Bailey was initially supported in hopes that he could reinvigorate the ecotourism trade and raise external grants for the community through his extra-local contacts. However, we also heard widespread dismay over the allocation of the grant money once it was received. None has gone to defray debts or pay costs of encouraging broader participation in ecotourism. Only one local person was hired in the manatee-monitoring project in the local elementary school.⁹ Most offensive to community members, however, was the allocation of money to "beautification" projects that paid residents to clean their own yards, build a community latrine, and in the words of one resident, "turn Gales Point into what Cecil thinks we should look like." Not eager to promote any aesthetic designed to capture the tourist gaze, a young (angry) resident insisted,

I going to let the garbage pile up on the beach. This is what we do with garbage in Gales Point. Maybe if the tourists don't like it, they won't come. And they will leave Gales Point to us.

Refusing to pick up his garbage is this man's way of talking back to foreign and local elite-led tourism and the intrusion of conser-

⁹In addition to his current work with the Manatee monitoring project, Kevin Andrewin was hired to assist earlier wildlife and Hawksbill Turtle Nest protection and research projects (a 1995 GEF grant). He is the best, if not only, example of hiring local residents for participatory research and training.

vation regulations and aesthetics that do not bring him any significant benefit.

Rural ecotourism practice and conservation regulations: resistance and transformation

Rural ecotourism providers in Gales Point are reinterpreting, resisting, and transforming the practice and its presumed links to environmental conservation in ways unimagined by project founders. The transformation is occurring as some residents attempt to avoid costs associated with both ecotourism and conservation, while others seek new opportunities for personal gain. Intra-community differences and conflict have mounted between those who can access and benefit from rural ecotourism, and those who cannot. Not surprisingly, support for rules and regulations regarding hunting licenses, hunting seasons, and prohibitions on hunting turtles and manatees is strongly linked to personal benefits from ecotourism. Households earning income from either B&Bs or tour guiding (or, especially, both) are more sympathetic to hunting and boating regulations than those whose interests are not tied to rural ecotourism. They have discovered the bridge envisioned in the CBC discourse regarding the complementarity of livelihood security and environmental conservation. "I hunt less because of tourism" suggested a tour guide whose wife is a B&B provider, "I used to hunt more but now I don't fool with it as much because staying out at night makes me too tired to guide tourists during the day." But at best, such links have been developed in ten households (and only five have ecotourism as the primary income source). For the rest of the community, bush meat continues—even among B&B households—as a cheap source of food and cash needed to pay debts. Seventy-two percent of households questioned during the 1994 random household survey said they hunt armadillo, deer, and gibbon as before, especially the latter, which they thought reproduced quickly and was present in large numbers.¹⁰ At that time, approximately half (38 respondents) said they would not collect turtle shells and eggs and would respect speed limits for tourboats near manatee feeding grounds. They were willing to observe speed limits despite the fact that residents removed water markers from manatee feeding grounds and water trails established by the American consultants. Rather than signifying resistance to speed limits or to manatee conservation, residents reported that they removed markers because

¹⁰ It is still unclear to me as to whether the project planners ever intended to include gibbon in new hunting regulations. A sign constructed near the primary store in Gales Point specifies hunting regulations and does not identify this species but does limit hunting of deer, turtle and armadillo. However, during our last visit in 1998, we saw cages on four private residences containing 2–3 live armadillo awaiting butchering and sale.

they could give boaters from Belize City (including those from large cruise ships on day trips) the location of manatee feeding grounds or the route from Belize City through the mangroves to Gales Point. Without the markers, they reasoned, visitors would purchase the services of local Gales Point guides.¹¹

Again politics affected the outcome of rural ecotourism practice. While residents expressed group unity when confronted with inter-community competition, they also turned against each other as rural ecotourism encouraged intra-class differences. A few examples are illustrative. Electricity charges in Gales Point Manatee are not calculated on usage, but on a flat fee that each household must pay. During our stay in 1993, there were no lights or pumped water available (the community water pump requires electricity to operate) because non B&B households refused to pay their bills. Some community members simply lacked sufficient cash to pay, but others admitted to being unwilling to subsidize the B&Bs. They argued that B&B homes consume more energy because they have refrigerators, and tourists use lights, fans, and other electrical appliances unsparingly. One villager told a student, "we don't like to pay for others' advantage, especially when they better off than us in the beginning." Another resident turned his resentment towards the students: "Is one of those mother-f—kers staying at your house" he yelled as a student carried her bags into the assigned B&B, "enjoy the dark." Another example of resistance involved the unwillingness of community members to carry phone messages from clients to ecotourism association chairs and/or providers. The one public phone is located near the tip of the peninsula and messages need to be transmitted physically. But as a community member told us, "we not getting anything from it, why should we cross the village to carry their message."

The most visible and violent example of intra-community conflict and resistance over ecotourism involved the community craft center. During the early stage of the project, a part-time Gales Point resident named Miss Iris (she lives half the year in Los Angeles) led an effort to build a community craft center to facilitate marketing of local handicrafts and "to celebrate Creole culture." But repeated calls for community volunteers to help build the center yielded few hands. Eventually wages were paid to construct the building, but

¹¹ In Belsky (in press) I juxtapose residents' reasons for removing the markers with the explanation provided by one of the project planners. Instead of recognizing the act as a means to minimize competition between Gales Point tourboat operators and others, the foreign consultant only identified culture and personal characteristics, especially the inability of the Gales Point community to cooperate or to embrace ecological values, as reasons for their unwillingness to abide by their recommended conservation regulations or practices.

within a year it was burned down.¹² One resident told me it was burned by a disgruntled Gales Point Manatee resident who disapproved of both the building design and materials and the image presented of the community. He said the craft center was destroyed because "someone didn't like that it make us seem like we still living in the bush." Ironically, resistance was strong against both a "bush native" orientation and the effort of Cecil Bailey to paint a clean, "modernist" image of Gales Point.

While project planners remained ignorant of the politics and obstacles involved in building bridges between conservation and development, residents did not and, over the course of the research, were increasingly forthright in sharing their concerns with researchers. They contested the dominant narrative that blamed their culture and poverty rather than foreigners and national development policies for causing environmental change in and around Gales Point. Of particular concern was the formation of two commercial, foreign-owned operations since the 1970s, when, the Belizean government sold land on which Gales Point farmers cultivated small farms to an American couple to develop a large citrus plantation called "White Ridge Farm." Few Gales Point farmers held formal land title, and while many held lease holding agreements (a long term process for purchasing land that confers some proprietary benefits), the Belizean government maintained the right to rescind such rights if "improvements," such as planting tree crops, are not made (Shoman 1994), and the large national debt and IMF (International Monetary Fund) imposed structural adjustment mandates compelled the Belizean government to promote export production over support for small-scale farming, food crops, rural livelihood security, and environmental protection (Moberg 1992; Shoman 1994). The government did offer Gales Point farmers other land, but these lands were infertile and located far from the village. Residents repeatedly complained that no one from the community received access to lands made available by the construction of the new Manatee road, despite promises from politicians aligned with both political parties. Agricultural land-holdings in Belize have become increasingly concentrated, as have those of those of its Latin American neighbors (King et al. 1993).

¹² In the village of Maya Center located adjacent to the Cockscomb Jaguar Preserve, the handicraft center was also burnt to the ground as a result of intra-community conflict. We interviewed residents in this displaced Mayan community as part of the UM-Belize field course and learned that some residents felt the handicrafts of one community faction were more attractively displayed than others by workers in the craft center. They also resented the class formation occurring as benefits from tourism flowed to only a few families who were also united by religious affiliation. State appropriation of common farmland and declining livelihood security were exacerbating intra-community rivalries.

The second enterprise residents call attention to in discussions of environmental change in Gales Point is the former Manatee Fishing Lodge. State support for generation of hard currency via ecotourism led the government to back the sale of the tip of the Gales Point peninsula to another American to develop a world-class commercial fishing resort. From the 1980s to the early 1990s, the Manatee Fishing Lodge catered to high paying fishermen from America and elsewhere. Armed with the latest fishing gear, the sport fishermen competed with local people for the catch in the nearby lagoons and coastal waters. While local fishermen fished with rods from small non-motorized dories and adhered to local ethics that limited catch to home consumption or what could be sold that day, sport fishermen were not restricted by any resource ethic and used fiberglass motor boats, which greatly expanded their catch and range. By the early 1990s, scientists, tourists, and residents alike spoke of drastic reductions of catch, and in 1994, the Manatee Fishing Lodge changed owners and officially dropped "fishing" from its name. Project texts never mention the presence of foreign, sport fishermen. Only overfishing and unwise use of gill nets by local fishermen (nets provided by American consultants) are singled out by project planners as degrading fishing grounds. Such is the political economy of blame.

Lastly, residents also resent the expectation that they must make material sacrifices for environmental conservation while the state and larger, commercial entrepreneurs remain exempt from environmental responsibilities and insensitive to the welfare of residents. Many people told us that government officials rarely enforce laws, and after instructing locals not to hunt, they will buy, or confiscate, valuable sea turtle meat and shells for their own use. Dredging operations in the Sibun River occur without regard for riparian regulations. In 1996 our group observed logging trucks emerging from the forested headwaters of the Sibun, which drains into the lagoon complex comprising the Manatee Special Development Area. The driver of the truck informed us he had a permit from the government to clear-cut parcels for a flat fee of U.S. \$15,000—without any prior inventory or environmental impact assessment, as required by law. Cleared land readied for conversion (most likely to citrus) fetches the government a higher price than forested land. In addition to downstream environmental impacts, logging reduces access to forest and bush resources utilized by Gales Point residents. Conversion of forest or bush to export-cash crop places more pressure on existing resources and fuels resentment when scarce resources flow predominantly to international, national, and local elites. The state has also failed to respond to concerns by one of the project's advisers that Gales Point's drinking water was being contaminated by increased sedimentation and petrochemical

runoff from White Ridge citrus farms. Taking it all in, a Gales Point resident pointedly asked me,

We don't have land to farm in Gales Point, we never going to get ahead. Food is so expensive and now the government won't let us hunt anymore. What are our kids going to eat? Why should we respect the government and its rules for hunting when they are cutting in the reserve?

An elderly man listening nodded and added, "this place is beginning to look a lot like the days of slavery."

Individual residents are responding to the difficulties and inequities of rural ecotourism and Belizean development by crafting their own approach to ecotourism. A lesson many said they learned from the ecotourism project is that both residents and foreign guests desire privacy and prefer that guests eat and sleep in rooms detached or secluded from the host families. Since 1996, four B&B operators have begun construction of separate guest cabins and rooms on their private property for use by overnight guests, and two have begun small restaurants. Others say they will follow suit as their resources permit. All said they will not work with community associations once their own businesses are working. They have no answer when asked how they will decide about siting and construction of facilities, and future beach erosion, waste disposal, boat moorage, and the impact of motorboats on wildlife.

Concluding reflections

As suggested in the literature, essentialized and simplistic images of community often combine with generic programs to inform community in conservation thinking and practice. This study provides numerous examples that, together, show that attention was never devoted to analyzing community, or how community history, institutions, and social processes might affect outcomes on the ground. The conservationist imaginings of the Gales Point community did not acknowledge differences within the community, how these differences could affect ecotourism and use of natural resources, local politics, strategies for pursuing multiple interests within and beyond the local community, or the complexity of layered alliances that extend across numerous levels of politics. Gales Point was perceived homogeneously and ahistorically as an entity wantonly despoiling nature because of material and cultural deprivations; foreign tourists and consultants with "good" conservation values and surplus income could demonstrate for residents how maintaining the landscape and wildlife for the benefit of ecotourists is in their interests.

The evidence reveals contradictions between the idealized image and reality of Gales Point and the fragility of connections among

community institutions, rural ecotourism, and environmental conservation practice. One of the early Belizean consultants to the project, Dolores Godfrey, former Executive Director of the Belize Audubon Society, offered the following observation:

The whole community ecotourism thing is very funny. It's as if Gales Point has become this make-believe thing or image. But it's a shaky image, like a house of cards that if you blow will fall over . . . The original idea was that tourists would convey a conservation ethic to B&B providers and guides, and in that way people in Gales Point would be too self-conscious and stop doing things which hurt the environment. But there was too much pressure from the outside to stop collecting turtle eggs as an example; it was as if they were always making a religious confession. I had hoped that the project would bring money to the community, not salvation.

Over the course of six years, income from ecotourism, predominantly from B&Bs and tourguiding, was too sporadic, insufficient, and concentrated among a few households and individuals to make much difference in village livelihood security, or change conservation attitudes and behaviors. On the contrary, ecotourism brought unanticipated consequences: it exacerbated intra-community differences and inter-community and state rivalries, produced a violent backlash against conservation, and instigated a privatized approach to tourism development with unknown social and ecological impacts. To be fair, ecotourism provided supplementary income for a few households in which the hoped-for links between income and conservation practice were established. However, the households that benefitted are now pursuing a privatized approach to tourism development.

These findings and the questions that underlie them have relevance both elsewhere in Belize and around the world given that the founders have applied their definitions of community and model of integrating conservation and development through rural ecotourism in five projects across Belize and in China, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and India (Community Conservation Consultants Update 1998).

We do not argue that CBNRM or CBC should be abandoned. On the contrary, there is much to support in the effort to build a meaningful role for community in natural resource management, especially in places where community institutions and a history of local resource management exist and can persist with state and non-governmental assistance. In these cases, CBNRM/CBC may provide a viable alternative to coercive, centrist, and habitat-fragmenting protected area management. The lesson from this analysis

is that one must move beyond simplified and essentialized images of community and standardized programs that presume, rather than empirically demonstrate, links to social institutional capacity for environmental management. Scholars, planners, international conservation organizations, and funders need to be aware of the political and economic contests in which rural people, communities, and they themselves operate. The current emphasis on seeking “common ground” and “civility” in resolving natural resource conflicts is no excuse to avoid examining the politics under which “problems” are defined and “solutions” devised. In accordance with the assumptions of political ecology, a focus on politics and political contestation is essential to understanding and implementing CBNRM and CBC projects, and to determining when and where they are appropriate. Unless opportunities for appropriation are understood and guarded against, the success thus far of CBNRM/CBC in eliciting and legitimizing a paradigm shift in protected area management will erode.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest whether social and ecological goals can be better served in CBNRM/CBC projects that go beyond “imagined communities.” I have argued elsewhere (Belsky and Siebert 1998; Wilson and Belsky 1999) that it may be preferable to work toward enhancing strategies that build on rural residents’ proprietary concerns, livelihood security, and ongoing economic activities—not only in official state or environmental NGO designated conservation buffer zones, biological corridors, or “critical” habitats, but across working landscapes. An emphasis on politics acknowledges that rural communities are up against many countervailing forces in the current era of “market triumphalism,” debt-relief restructuring, and development practices that offer rural peoples economic trajectories and projects that focus not on the most commercial enterprises, but on products that are unvalued and marginal in the broader market economy (Dove 1993). Indeed, political support for community-based rural ecotourism may be forthcoming because it does not—initially at least—compete with upscale, ecotourist resorts and lodges, but in fact, subsidizes them by providing a local, skilled workforce.

I end with the question, “why should rural sociologists be concerned with misrepresentations of community in conservation?” Community has been a central concept and concern of rural sociologists, and many of the central images presented here are not new. What is new is the reconstruction of community in conservation and development paradigms and projects, which are constituted by those with the power to dominate the production of meaning and the material context of our lives. Critical rural and environmental sociologists are not taking a lead in that reconstruction. Though not exempt from misrepresenting others (or our-

selves), we could inform some of the processes I have examined here. Rural and environmental sociologists rather than conservation biologists should be leading, and debating the outcomes of, these efforts, shortcomings and all.

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