



Understand Belize

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Can the booming travel industry preserve the country's precious natural resources and generate the income to alleviate its social ills?

HISTORY 254

Belize is only three decades old, yet its history is rich with ancient civilizations, piracy, slavery and intercultural mixing.

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The experts shed some light on the mystery of ancient Maya practices and beliefs.

THE PEOPLE OF BELIZE 271

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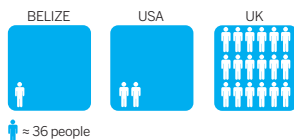
Wildlife-watchers, bird nerds and floral freaks will be amazed by the vast biodiversity found in little Belize.

LAND & ENVIRONMENT 288

Like every country in the world, Belize struggles to balance the demands of economic development with the conservation of the earth.



population per sq mile



Belize Today

According to the most basic benchmarks, Belize is flourishing, with compulsory primary education, a relatively stable democracy, a thriving tourism industry and an economy that is plugging along. Unfortunately, many people in Belize have not seen the benefits of these positive developments.

» Area: 8867 sq miles

» Protected area: 4062 sq miles

» Population: 333,200

» Annual visitors: 1,040,000

» Bird species: 570

» Coral species: 110

» Native orchid species: 304

Tourism

Belize attracts more than one million annual visitors who are eager to climb a Maya temple, spot a toucan, snorkel the reef and otherwise partake of paradise. Tourism is the country's top source of employment and investment. The irony is that it is also the country's biggest environmental threat.

Belize does not yet have the infrastructure to support the massive numbers of tourists that arrive, especially by way of cruise ships. It does not have the resources to truly protect its sanctuaries and reserves and their inhabitants or to put sensible checks on coastal developments. According to sources such as Tropical Conservation Science, as much as 80% of coastal land has already been sold to foreign interests with the intention of building condos and resorts.

It's never easy to maintain the delicate balance between preserving natural resources and cashing in on economic opportunity. Most Belizeans are proud of their natural heritage and recognize that the goals of environmental conservation and economic prosperity are not mutually exclusive. But how to pursue those goals is the subject of much debate.

Persistence of Poverty

Economic prosperity remains elusive for most people. A few entrepreneurs have made big money, and a small middle class survives from business, tourism and other professions. But many more Belizeans live

Top Films

Mosquito Coast (1986) Harrison Ford and River Phoenix star as members of an American family in search of a simpler life in Central America.

Apocalypto (2006) Mel Gibson's visually arresting – if not historically accurate – Mayan thriller.

Top Books

Beka Lamb (Zee Edgell) A heart-wrenching novel about a girl's coming-of-age amid political upheaval.

The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw (Bruce Barcott) An unflinchingly honest account of Sharon Matola's fight against

the construction of the Chalillo Dam on the Macal River.

Jaguar (Alan Rabinowitz) A first-person account of two years living among the Maya and the jaguars.