

Testimony of Drs. Whitney A. Goodwin and Alejandro J. Figueroa
Before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee
on the Proposed Renewal of the Honduras-US Memorandum of Understanding

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Background:

We have worked in Honduras for a combined total of 38 years, beginning in the early 2000s and continuing through the present day. We have archaeological experience in over 10 departments in Honduras, including Colon, Copán, Francisco Morazán, Gracias a Dios, and La Paz. The majority of our recent research takes place in the area of Trujillo, where we completed fieldwork as recently as 2019 and are planning a field season in 2024. We also have undertaken archaeological sampling and public outreach work as recently as February of 2023 in western Honduras.

We are heavily invested and actively involved in the protection of the archaeological heritage of Honduras. We are founding members of the Honduran Anthropology Association. We work regularly with the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IHAH) and the Department of Anthropology at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) in training students, with the goal of strengthening capacity for archaeological research in the country over the long-term.

On behalf of ourselves and the Society for American Archaeology, we strongly approve of the proposed renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with Honduras. Our testimony will focus on the four determinations as outlined in the Cultural Property Implementation Act.

(A) that the cultural patrimony of the State Party is (still) in jeopardy from the pillage of archaeological or ethnological materials:

We have personally witnessed evidence of looting of archaeological sites in every area of the country in which we have worked. While this was typically opportunistic in the past, the threat of professional/organized looting has grown in recent years, particularly as it has occurred in conjunction with other illicit activities taking place in the most remote regions of the country—namely the Mosquitia. Additionally, although not aimed at the pillage of archaeological materials specifically, recent clearing for agricultural purposes (both personal and large-scale palm oil farms) and for development (particularly near larger towns like Trujillo) tend to use heavy machinery and can cause significant damage to unprotected sites in a small amount of time. As exploration of remote, sparsely populated areas (through legitimate but also more likely drug and illegal timber-related operations) and growth of urban sprawl continue, these impacts are likely

to occur at higher rates. This problem is exacerbated by the publication/media representation both nationally and internationally on the so-called Ciudad Blanca (National Geographic 2015). Casual looting is common and usually minimally impactful. Dedicated collectors, however, can and have acquired sizable collections over the years, with at least one major example of this type of looting in each of the regions in which we have worked. While generally these types of private collections are started with the good intentions of protecting and promoting local cultural heritage, without proper documentation, maintenance, and collaboration with professional archaeologists, these collections and the valuable information they contain are likely to be lost or to fall into the wrong hands. When the original collector dies, the items or collections are often inherited by individuals with no interest in keeping them and who instead look to sell them off to interested parties. Additionally, direct access to tourists in some areas (particularly near cruise ship terminals; see Figueroa et al. 2012) has increased the potential for casual looting to become profitable for the average Honduran citizen. Import restrictions in the United States, the main embarkation point of cruise ships in this region, are particularly useful in curtailing this problem.

B) that the State Party has taken measures to protect its cultural patrimony;

The government of Honduras has taken several steps to protect its cultural heritage. Despite its limited resources and the various adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IHAH has continued to collaborate with national and international organizations and researchers to maintain active research and documentation projects throughout the country, including our own. In July 2022 researchers were asked to present their results to the public at the first Conference of Archaeological Research in Honduras, held in Copán Ruinas and virtually over Zoom.

In the past few years the IHAH has also invested funds in renovating several of its archaeological parks and museums, including the museum and site at the Cuevas de Talgua in Olancho (MiAmbiente 2019) and the Center for Archaeological Research in Copán (CRIA). The IHAH also helped in the construction of the Ciudad Blanca Research Center in Olancho, which is both a museum and research center focused on protecting and preserving the cultural heritage that was excavated from the Ciudad Jaguar archaeological site in the Mosquitia (Pérez 2018).

Within the past 5—7 years, the IHAH has also worked to bolster its institutional stability by hiring students and recent graduates from the Anthropology Department at the UNAH in its various regional offices and in its research and conservation departments. UNAH faculty have also worked closely with the IHAH in ensuring that students are embedded in ongoing research projects across the country. During our involvement with the university, we have trained over 20 students, had multiple UNAH students complete internships and present research internationally, and advised three students as they completed their degrees. The UNAH and IHAH have both supported these efforts with permissions and funding.

The IHAH also supports in-country public education and outreach programs both internally and by researchers. The goal of these programs is to reach local and indigenous communities and increase public awareness of archaeological heritage. They have supplied space, resources, and personnel for these types of projects when we have hosted them. Associated events tend to reach a wide range of audiences of various ages but are often aimed at school-aged children. During

our fieldwork, UNAH students also participate in these events, strengthening the ties between the university, government agencies, and communities across the country.

(C) that the import restrictions in the existing MOU are still of substantial benefit in deterring pillage;

Import restrictions are a viable means of limiting the opportunities for organized looters to create structured networks to take advantage of the sale of Honduran cultural patrimony. Ensuring that these types of materials are kept out of the United States decreases the demand side of the equation, which helps deter any uptick in supply. Given that the United States is likely the largest market for these types of illicit materials, and that resources for patrolling export of these types of items is restricted by limited resources in-country, this is a particularly significant measure for protecting Honduran cultural patrimony.

(D) that the State Party allows for and supports the interchange of cultural property among nations for scientific, cultural, and educational purposes;

Honduran institutions have allowed for and generously supported the interchange of cultural property among nations. Export of archaeological materials for scientific research is encouraged and the process for obtaining research and export permits is clear and relatively simple compared to that of other countries in the region. Over the years we have personally exported hundreds of specimens to the US and to other countries for detailed/specialized analyses that are not available in-country with the explicit permission of the IHAH. Projects in the country include a wide range of researchers from other nations, including large numbers of scientists and students from the United States. In fact, the number of archaeologists in the United States who have been trained in Honduras is probably skewed heavily given the long-running nature of a number of field schools in the country—most notably the Kenyon Honduras program that ran from 1983 to 2022 and trained hundreds of US students. Both the IHAH and UNAH have signaled support for exchange of archaeological professionals as well—supporting applications for foreign researchers to train and teach in Honduras as well as for Honduran professors and students to attend scientific conferences and training programs in the United States. These types of collaborations increase the likelihood that cultural property exchanges will continue and grow in the coming years and that cultural property will continue to be protected and studied in ways that are in line with international scientific standards. As part of one of our upcoming projects, the UNAH has already pledged student involvement in all aspects of research and the IHAH has approved plans for us to bring US students on field projects in-country, as they have in the past. IHAH staff have also supported plans to create traveling exhibits (in-country and in the United States) with materials from our upcoming excavations as a unique way to promote cultural and cultural property exchange.

We thank the committee for its consideration, and stand ready to answer any questions it may have.

Sources

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