

Testimony of Dr. Eleanor M. King on the Proposed Renewal of Belize MOU

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Background: I am senior archaeologists who have worked in Belize off and on since 1981 and have been directing a project in Northwest Belize since 1996. I have not been back to Belize since 2016, as Covid-19 prevented field operations in the last two years when I might have gone. I have been keeping abreast of developments in the trafficking of cultural heritage, though, as I am a regular presenter at an annual Homeland Security Investigators' training workshop on the topic. I am also currently teaching a class on the trafficking of cultural heritage at Howard University that focuses on Africa, but in the context of wider international trends.

On behalf of myself and Society for American Archaeology, I strongly approve of the proposed renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with Belize for the protection of its archaeological heritage. My testimony will focus on the four determinations as outlined in the Cultural Property Implementation Act.

1. Is Belize's archaeological record still under threat from looting and pillaging?

Belize's archaeological record is unfortunately still under threat from looting, both casual and professional. Casual looting is the occasional theft, usually of small, portable objects, by tourists and Belizeans alike as they run across them. Professional looting is organized theft on a larger, sometimes mechanized scale. While casual looters may keep the items for themselves, they can also resell them—Belizeans to tourists, and tourists to others. Professional looters are deliberately out to make a profit from their theft.

Several circumstances make this an ongoing problem. First, Belize comprises some 22,810 square kilometers or 8,807 square miles of land (World Bank Group/Data 2021), much of it uninhabited by the relatively low population (currently estimated at 441,471; Statistical Institute of Belize 2022), which tends to concentrate in the cities. A large part of this terrain is rugged, rainforest covered, and hard to access. In this environment, it is not unusual for substantial prehispanic Maya and other sites to remain undiscovered. For example, the large site where I work in Northwest Belize, Maax Na, was only discovered in 1995. Project directors are aware that other large sites exist, so far unrecorded even by Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) technology, which, to date, has only covered a portion of this region. Based on the regular distribution of sites there, we can predict the general locations of these yet undiscovered sites but have not been able to groundtruth their exact whereabouts, due to their remoteness. Few sites that are discovered are untouched by looting; usually the main buildings have already been trenched, if not eviscerated, and often many of the smaller buildings as well.

Second, the Belizean Institute of Archaeology, which has made valiant efforts to combat and document looting, has a small number of employees relative to the amount of land and sites they are required to monitor, and many of them have their own research and museum responsibilities in addition to their job as site protectors. It is simply not possible to keep track of all the known sites in Belize all the time, let alone the undiscovered sites.

Third, the people of Belize, while not as badly off as some of their neighbors, are still not wealthy. The average hotel price for a tourist in Belize at a rainforest resort or in a city is as much as or more than an average Belizean makes in a month. The temptation to loot and sell artifacts to make ends meet can be strong.

Fourth, borders are porous, especially in the heavily forested areas of the country. Northwestern Belize where I work, for example, neighbors on remote areas of both Mexico and Guatemala to the north and west. The border with Mexico is the narrow Rio Azul, which is easily crossed with a small boat and is a regular route for both licit and illicit goods between the two countries. The border with Guatemala is simply a break in the tree line. It is not difficult to move objects from one country to another via those routes.

Fifth, according to law enforcement sources associated with the Homeland Security training I participate in, though Mexico has taken the lead in drug trafficking, Belize still serves as an important origin and transshipment point for drugs coming from the country itself or from South America, on their way to the U.S. Artifact looting and trafficking have long been strongly associated with the drug trade in this area, with valuable artifacts serving to make up the ballast in the planes used to ferry drugs from south to north. In Northwest Belize, in the remote rainforest preserve where Maax Na is located, we have run into trails that led to marijuana fields close to the Guatemalan border. It is unclear whether this practice is still going on in this area, but the drug trade in Belize does continue to present a threat to cultural heritage.

Most of the artifacts stolen from Belize continue to come into the United States, though some also go to Japan, Europe, and other parts of the world. Currently, online websites are showing prices for ancient Maya artifacts ranging from spindle whorls to painted vases purported to come from Belize (e.g., 1stDibs 2022).¹

2. Has Belize taken steps internally to protect its cultural resources, and is it fulfilling its commitments under the current MOU?

Belize has taken several steps to try to protect its cultural resources and, to my limited knowledge, appears to be fulfilling its commitments under the current agreement. Since at least the early 2000s, the country has worked on turning important sites into centers of tourism, building small local museums, and creating partnerships with local communities to sell craft items to tourists visiting the sites. In the community of Indian Church, near the site of Lamanai, which used to be a major marijuana-growing village in the 1980s, a local women's cooperative has created several stores on the site's grounds that have

benefited the village and forestalled the need to rely on the drug and associated antiquities trade. The effect of these very visible efforts has moved other communities to be interested in going after tourist dollars themselves. At the site of Colha, where I last worked in 2009, local villagers complained of the destruction of “their” site by road crews using mounds for fill and were interested in the possibility of establishing the site as a tourist attraction, pending the cooperation of the private owner. In Belize City and elsewhere public museums displaying excavated artifacts have helped highlight the importance of Belizean cultural heritage to citizens and visitors alike.

In 2013, at the time of the signing of the first MOU, Belize focused on creating a sense of cultural stewardship among Belizeans. The country launched a public awareness campaign highlighting the importance of Belizean cultural heritage through a series of anti-looting and anti-graffiti posters. This program continued after the MOU’s renewal in 2018 with a special Anti-Looting and Graffiti Poster Competition sponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America in October 2019. This virtual/hybrid competition, which was hosted in Belmopan, Belize, ran from October 1 to October 11 (Archaeological Institute of America 2019).

The government has also created other programming to reach a broad Belizean audience and get them interested in their cultural heritage and involved in protecting it. Since the late 1990s the National Institute of History and Culture (NICH) has sponsored a vigorous yearly archaeological and cultural symposium that is widely attended by the public as well as by scholars, including one earlier this month. The conference, while scholarly in content, is designed to appeal broadly to the public. The Institute’s most recent iteration can be viewed through a Facebook page that features daily, even hourly, postings with updates on events and presenters (National Institute of History and Culture 2022). Also highlighted on the page are Belizean students who have successfully completed degrees in heritage related fields and events that are widely open to all interested. NICH also uses television to get its message across. On December 6, 2021, the Institute of Archaeology participated in a half hour program on “Protecting Archaeological Objects & Sites” as part of a Channel 5 Belize show, *Open Your Eyes* (Channel 5 Belize 2021).

Programming from non-governmental sources has complemented protective actions taken by Belize, with tacit government approval. The pandemic has witnessed a rise in these efforts and the savvy use of digital platforms. An important new organization, the Heritage Education Network Belize (HENB), evolved online during 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 crisis. Its four co-founders include Sylvia Batty, who has worked for the Institute of Archaeology and NICH since 2012. HENB describes itself as a “...non-profit organization dedicated to innovative, holistic and sustainable ways to understand and safeguard culture and heritage” with a “focus on community engagement, research, advocacy, capacity building, development and education to empower local communities and stakeholders to participate in cultural dialogues to create and maintain sustainable lifeways through culture” (Heritage Education Network Belize 2021a).

Archaeological projects in Belize also sponsor community outreach events that highlight the importance of protecting cultural heritage. The Stann Creek Regional Archaeological

Project (SCRAP), a Canadian research effort directed by Institute of Archaeology permit holder Dr. Meaghan Peuramaki-Brown, offers a weekly “Reading Group.” The subject of discussion for Week 33, February 4th of this year, was Looting, specifically, the role of archaeologists in preventing it and/or in failing to report it. The discussion garnered participation from people in Belize, Canada, and the U.S. (SCRAP 2022). Ms. Sylvia Batty is a collaborator/consultant on this project, along with Mr. Joshua Arana of the Stann Creek House of Culture, an institution that is part of NICH, so Belizean governmental organizations are associated with this effort.

3. Are import restrictions still the best available method the U.S. can use to prevent the importation of stolen objects?

Import restrictions are not only the best available method to prevent importation of stolen objects, but they are also the only real ones available. Given the porous nature of Belize’s borders and the country’s restricted resources, it would be impossible to seal all exit points to the north, south, and west. In addition, the long coastline flanking Belize to the east cannot be effectively patrolled to prevent the escape of all crafts possibly laden with contraband, which can easily make it to nearby Caribbean islands and, from there, to other parts of the world. Import restrictions allow U.S. border personnel to stop suspect cargo coming in through the huge number of ports and methods of entry into our country (land, sea, air) and investigate its origins before releasing it. Without these restrictions, the process of stopping and researching a cargo’s legitimacy becomes exponentially more difficult.

4. Is Belize open to foreign scientists and researchers studying its cultural resources, and making exhibits of its archaeological materials available to foreign museums (international scientific exchange)?

Belize has long been very welcoming of foreign scientists and researchers. Indeed, several foreign scholars served as Commissioner of Archaeology during the early years of the Department of Archaeology, the predecessor of the current Institute, as Belize was building up the capacity of that institution. Many senior archaeologists like me “grew up with” the Belizean Department and Institute archaeologists, attending graduate school at the same time and working with them in the field. Projects of all kinds from the U.S., Canada, and other parts of the world regularly operate in Belize. One significant advantage the country offers to foreign scientists is the ability to conduct field schools and train the next cadre of archaeologists, something Mexico, for example, does not allow. Currently, the Institute restricts the number of permit holders to about 20, which is all their personnel can manage, but that is a substantial number of projects for this country. Belize has also been very generous in lending materials either for study or for exhibits abroad and Belizean archaeologists themselves regularly participate in the Society for American Archaeology meetings and other conferences north of the border or in other countries. They also collaborate closely with foreign projects in research and community outreach, as noted above for SCRAP. The flow of information from Belize is both open and generous.

Footnotes

¹ While it is unclear where in the Maya area the vases offered on this website originated, a Google query for an “ancient Belize Maya vase for sale” showed this artifact, whereas a more general query of “ancient Maya vase for sale” did not.

Sources

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