

Trouble in paradise: New initiative transforms tourism in Belize and its threat to the environment

Key findings

- 1. Consult all players from the outset.** Consulting and collaborating with communities, tourism operators and governments builds trust, facilitates effective communication and ensures buy-in – increasing the likelihood that adaptation policies will be adopted.
- 2. Mainstream adaptation across national policy.** Adaptation strategies need to be integrated within national policies, budgets and sectoral plans. In combination with sound development planning, this can deliver maximum returns on investments.
- 3. Understand the tourism sector's priorities.** The Government of Belize has tended to prioritise tourism revenue over climate action, without considering the tourism sector's own priorities. An accurate picture of business priorities is essential in securing private sector commitment to national sustainable development goals.
- 4. Tailor climate information to each stakeholder.** Policy-makers want concise briefings, not lengthy reports; communities want engaging, accessible information, not jargon and science-speak; the private sector responds to the language of business. Failure to tailor information can exclude certain groups and reduce their desire to participate.

Climate change threatens coastal ecosystems around the world. In Belize, this is impacting tourism and the livelihoods of many poor people who depend on this sector, as well as others such as fisheries. But better communication and inclusive policy-making are helping to safeguard jobs and protect the environment.

Belize's stunning beaches, coral reefs and mangroves attract divers and tourists from all over the world. Tourism is the country's second-largest industry, valued at just under US\$350 m a year, and is a key source of employment. But unsustainable tourism, alongside climate change, is threatening the natural beauty and ecosystems on which the industry depends.



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Schools of colourful fish on the coral reef in Hol Chan Marine Reserve.

CDKN's partner, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), found that 70% of Belize's tourism sector is vulnerable to climate change, from coastal erosion, coastal floods, biodiversity loss and coral die-off. WWF and its local partners developed and carried out a three-point plan to:

- identify the coastal tourist sites most at risk
- assess the relevant policies already in place
- propose adaptation strategies to address these problems.

Low-lying coastal areas were found to be the most vulnerable to climate change. These also tend to be the areas where large numbers of new tourism developments spring up, such as hotels and resorts.

Through multi-stakeholder participation and communications activities, including policy briefs, articles and a dedicated website, WWF and its partners sought to highlight the issues and influence government policy, stressing that alternatives to coastal tourism also need to be explored. For example, through the Natural Capital Project (www.naturalcapitalproject.org), a partnership among WWF, the Nature Conservancy, the University of Minnesota, USA, and Stanford University, USA, they created an online interactive map to highlight areas of vulnerability to policy-makers and tourism operators, and used business terminology to engage the private sector.

Supported by CDKN, WWF also worked with Belize's Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute, the Ministry of Tourism, the Belize Tourism Board, the University of Belize's Environmental Research Institute, and the Belize Tourism Industry Association (a private sector body).

Financial numbers make the case for action

A key success of the initiative was the Government of Belize's adoption of an integrated coastal zone management plan in February 2016. The Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute worked with the Natural Capital Project to design this new plan, which calculates the economic value of the services provided by marine resources.

Open-source software was used to project the impact of new zoning schemes on lobster fisheries, recreational areas and the habitats of protected species. The aim was to reduce at-risk areas by 20% while continuing to develop economic opportunities for local communities.

Adding up the financial contribution made by coastal ecosystems to key industries in Belize, such as fisheries and tourism, presented a clear-cut case for increasing coastal protection and offered a more sustainable solution. WWF is also advocating for reforms to draft laws for mangrove and aquatic resources, which will strengthen the overall legal framework for coastal protection.



Consulting and collaborating with communities, tourism operators and governments builds trust, facilitates effective communication and ensures buy-in.



A man builds wooden crab traps on the beach in Caye Caulker, Belize.

Credits:

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