Research Proposal

The Relationship Between
Bladen Branch Nature Reserve
and Nearby Communities

Submitted by:

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Introduction

Protected Areas are an important part of worldwide efforts to conserve biodiversity. Unfortunately, while the benefits of Protected Areas accrue globally, their costs are often borne by the communities near them. People living in remote rural areas are often those who can least afford to bear this cost. Consequently, many Protected Areas are threatened by human activities. Encroachment, logging and poaching by local people are major threats to Protected Areas around the world.

Recent efforts to address these problems have focused on "linking" Protected Areas and local development (Wells et al. 1992). One approach to this has been the introduction of Integrated Conservation Development Projects (ICDPs) (Wells et al. 1992). Integrated Conservation Development Projects "attempt to ensure the conservation of biological diversity by reconciling the management of protected areas with the social and economic needs of local people" (Wells et al. 1992).

Bladen Branch Nature Reserve was established in southern Belize in 1990 (Mahler and Wotkyns 1993). It protects a unique area characterized by subtropical wet forest and subtropical lower montane wet forest (Hartshorn et al., 1984). The area has been relatively undisturbed by humans, and supports a high diversity of both plants and animals (Healy and Newman 1989).

Bladen Branch has been protected thus far because it is relatively inaccessible and few people live in the area. Impacts due to human encroachment are occurring however (Salas, personal communication), and are likely to become more significant as the population in the area increases. In order to minimize human impacts on Bladen Branch an evaluation of nearby communities and their potential impact on the reserve must be conducted.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the social, economic and political relationship between Bladen Branch Nature Reserve and the communities near it. Evaluations will be in the following areas of enquiry:

1. The communities near Bladen Branch.
2. The management of Bladen Branch.
3. Ecotourism opportunities at Bladen Branch.
Research Methods

Much of the research conducted in this study will be qualitative in nature. There will be several components to this research project. An appraisal of the communities near Bladen Branch will be conducted. The appraisal will focus on two main areas on enquiry:

1. The general socio-economic status of the communities.
2. The level of awareness of Bladen Branch Nature Reserve.

The community appraisal will be carried out primarily through interviews with residents, chosen at random, as well as with influential members of the community. Group meetings in which participants discuss these issues may also be observed.

A brief evaluation of the management of Bladen Branch Nature Reserve will also take place. Management structure, objectives and practices will be examined in order to better understand the situation at Bladen.

The economic, social and environmental impacts of existing and potential ecotourism at Bladen Branch Nature Reserve will be also evaluated. The impacts of the research station adjacent to Bladen Branch will be appraised. An examination of other existing ecotourism as well as opportunities for future ecotourism at Bladen Branch, will be conducted.

The information collected will be used to make recommendations on potential connections or "linkages" that can be made between Bladen Branch and nearby communities.
Literature Cited


