IDRC Doctoral Research Grant Final Narrative Report

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Introduction

The aim of my field research was to gain empirical and theoretical insights into the implementation, management, and outcomes of contemporay international conservation and ecotourism initiatives through a case study of the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor (MMMC) in the southern Toledo District of Belize, Central America. The MMMC is a conceptual conservation zone that was first conceived in the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{1} The motivation for naming this approximately one million-acre area the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor was to encourage a holistic ecosystem or “ridge to reef” conservation strategy in the area. In this respect, the MMMC conceptually connects the mountainous interior of the Toledo District (the Maya Mountains) with the coastal waters and reefs of the Gulf of Honduras. Essentially, the MMMC has involved the consolidation of a million-acre corridor of protected areas. In addition, conservation NGOs have been training local people to work as tourism guides and park rangers, and have been actively engaged in marketing ecotourism in the Toledo District as a means of gaining funds for conservation efforts. However, rather than being a unified protected area under the authority of a single management entity, the MMMC is comprised of a network of protected areas that are co-managed by the Government of Belize (through the Forest Department, Fisheries Department, and Archaeology Department), a number of locally-based non-governmental organizations,\textsuperscript{2} and funded primarily by international conservation organizations, financial institutions, and tourism revenues.

Within the context of the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor (MMMC) in southern Belize, my doctoral fieldwork ethnographically explored the complex relationship between conservation/ecotourism policies, the diverse practices constituting conservation/ecotourism projects, and the effects and outcomes these projects ultimately produce ‘on the ground’. In doing this, the following questions were addressed:

1. How are conservation/ecotourism policies and projects constituted by specific types of knowledge (e.g. conservation science, neo-liberal economics)? What are the problems to which conservation/ecotourism has been posed as a solution? How are diverse stakeholders conceptualized? How is ‘nature’ represented and understood? How does this body of knowledge and thought come to form a unique discursive regime?

2. How is the knowledge that constitutes conservation/ecotourism discourse translated into specific practices, programs, and management techniques? How are policies formulated in one location linked to activities and places far distant in time and space? What are the practices that make this possible? How is this process facilitated and/or limited by conservation/ecotourism discourse itself?


\textsuperscript{2} NGOs involved in protected area management in Toledo District include the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE), the Toledo Association for Sustainable Tourism and Empowerment (TASTE), the Belize Audubon Society (BAS), the Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE), the Ya’axché’ Conservation Trust (YCT), the Rio Blanco Maya Association (RBMA), the Aguacaliente Management Team (AMT), and the Sarstoon-Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM).
3. What are the social effects of conservation/ecotourism projects on the ground? How are diverse individuals and groups impacted? How do diverse stakeholders view and relate to the project and its objectives? How does conservation/ecotourism discourse work to produce certain forms of individual and collective identity and action? (E.g. How are ecotourism ‘stakeholders’ produced?)

The Study Area

As noted above, the aim of my field research was to examine the MMMC in southern Belize. However, in order to make my research project feasible, my fieldwork focused on the planning, implementation, and management of one specific protected area in the region, the Sarstoon-Temash National Park (STNP). The STNP was created in 1994 and is 41,898 acres, the second largest National Park in Belize. The STNP was created to protect the watersheds of the Sarstoon and Temash Rivers as they flow from the interior of country to the coast, and contains the oldest and largest area of red mangrove forest vegetation in Belize, as well as extensive wetlands and an outstanding diversity of bird species, amphibians, fish and reptiles. In addition, there are five indigenous communities located close to the border of the Sarstoon-Temash National Park that have traditionally used, interacted and depended upon the natural resources located within it; the four inland Q’eqchi’ Mayan villages of Midway, Conejo, Sunday Wood and Crique Sarco, and the coastal Garifuna community of Barranco. These communities had a total population of 986 at the time of the 2000 census.
Methodology: Successes and Problems Encountered in the Field

Data for this research project was collected over a 12 month period from April 2006-March 2007 (see calendar of activities below for more detail). My data gathering approach was based upon an increasing trend in anthropological research to utilize multi-sited research designs, which allow researchers in the field to explore linkages and connections between different settings (Fairhead and Leach 2003). Ethnographic research, and indeed, the discipline of anthropology, has been predicated upon the notion of gaining an intimate knowledge of everyday practices and activities in particular local settings. With multi-sited ethnography, however, the goal of gaining an intimate knowledge of one particular field site is replaced by the objective of exploring the links and interactions between social actors and practices in a number of settings. While this approach is conceptually appealing and appropriate given the complexity of the networks involved in the planning and implementation of contemporary conservation and development initiatives like the STNP, I found that it had the primary disadvantage of making it more difficult to build trust and rapport with research participants. This was primarily due to the fact that as a researcher moving between sites, the constant contact needed to instill familiarity and trust was continually interrupted, and as a result, took longer to establish. Overall, I felt that my approach worked very well in terms of facilitating an analysis of the links between actors involved with SATIIM and the STNP at the expense of gaining an in-depth understanding of any one particular location.

Another issue encountered in the field was the perception by research participants of my position and role as a researcher. This was primarily due to the complex relationship between SATIIM and villagers in the STNP buffer communities, particularly given the events which occurred during my period of field research (which will be discussed in more depth below). In this sense, while SATIIM is a community-based organization that was formed by members of the five villages buffering the STNP, many community members continue to resist the STNP and do not support the work of SATIIM. Thus, in order to work effectively in the buffer villages it was important to ensure villagers that their confidentiality and anonymity would be protected. This, however, proved difficult as I maintained a good working relationship with SATIIM staff, and at least for a time, it was perceived that I worked for SATIIM. After spending significant amounts of time in the STNP buffer communities, however, I believe that this perception was removed, and overall, I do not feel that this had a negative effect on the data collected, as I developed good relationships with SATIIM, as well as villagers in STNP buffer communities that both supported SATIIM and the STNP and those that did not.

Perhaps the greatest problem I encountered in the field was something which is common to many research projects; the occurrence of an unexpected event just as I was commencing my fieldwork in April 2006. In early November 2005, SATIIM was notified by the Forest Department that an American oil company, US Capital Energy, was requesting the formality of an access permit to enter the STNP to conduct seismic testing. Despite strong protestations, in April 2006 (when I commenced my fieldwork) SATIIM was informed by the Forest Department that they had granted US Capital Energy the access permit requested. By late April, US Capital Energy had set up their headquarters in the district capital, Punta Gorda, and was preparing to carry out seismic testing inside the STNP. In May 2006, however, with support from international
partners, SATIIM launched a Supreme Court case challenging the government’s decision to allow seismic testing inside the park on the grounds that it violated the National Parks Act. Later that month, the oil company successfully rallied approximately one hundred people from the five indigenous communities buffering the park to stage a protest in Punta Gorda against SATIIM and in support of oil exploration. The villagers charged SATIIM with denying much needed jobs and economic development to the very people the organization was supposed to be helping. Overall, the situation had the effect of dividing the STNP buffer communities between those supporting SATIIM and those supporting the government and US Capital Energy.

Over the course of my fieldwork, the issue of oil exploration in the STNP dominated the work of SATIIM, and as a result, took much of their energy away from park management and the promotion of alternative livelihood programs like ecotourism. While I continued to focus my research on issues of protected area management and the promotion of ecotourism, I expanded my work to examine the conflict that had emerged between US Capital Energy, SATIIM, the government, and the STNP buffer communities. In the end, rather than detracting from my work, I believe that the situation provided a unique opportunity to explore the complex relationship of indigenous peoples to contemporary global processes of conservation and development.

In terms of the actual research process, upon commencing fieldwork in April 2006, my first activity was the collection and review of documents related to the STNP and SATIIM. This was done during the first 2 months of fieldwork and provided me with an understanding of the history of the STNP, SATIIM, and the indigenous communities buffering the park. Important documents reviewed included the STNP co-management agreement, STNP management plan, various project proposals and reports, STNP ranger reports (2004-2006), socio-economic assessments of the STNP buffer communities, and SATIIM’s study of traditional ecological knowledge and resource use of the STNP buffer communities. While many documents were collected and reviewed at SATIIM’s office in Punta Gorda, I complemented this with archival research in the national capital, Belmopan, where I collected more general information on the history of the Toledo District, and specifically, development and conservation initiatives in the region.

In addition to the review of documents and secondary sources, my primary research activity was participant-observation. This involved participating in and observing the daily activities of SATIIM staff members as they worked with indigenous communities, government departments, and international organizations, to manage the STNP. Specific attention was paid to how SATIIM strategically networked and collaborated with organizations at the national and international level in order to promote the interests of the organization and the rights of indigenous communities around the STNP. This work was ongoing throughout the entire period of my field research, and was carried out primarily in SATIIM’s office in the district capital, Punta Gorda, as well as in the buffer communities around the STNP, and various other locations around the country (see calendar of activities for greater detail). Other sites of participant-observation included the buffer communities around the STNP where I spent approximately seven months immersing myself in the daily life of the villages. This work helped me to appreciate and understand the way of life of the STNP buffer communities, village economics and social structure, as well as the relationship of the communities to
SATIIM, the STNP, and their surrounding environment. Another site of participant-observation included a tour guide training course in Punta Gorda. This course was attended by local community members from villages throughout the Toledo District. Attending this course provided me with insights into the way tour guides are trained to interpret Belize’s natural environment, culture, and history.

I also conducted 75 in-depth qualitative interviews with SATIIM staff members, STNP buffer community members, as well as technical experts who were working for NGOs and government agencies in the areas of conservation and development. Interviews lasted from 30-90 minutes, were open-ended and focused on a variety of topics including traditional ecological knowledge, natural resource use, environmental threats, government-NGO-community relations, protected area management, SATIIM, and the STNP. These interviews provided valuable qualitative data for this project, particularly in terms of the relationship between conservation science, park management, and the traditional ecological knowledge, worldview, and way of life of the indigenous community members buffering the STNP.

Another aspect of my fieldwork was the collection of quantitative survey data. In this respect, a household survey was implemented with a total of 80 households in 2 of the STNP buffer communities in order to gather quantitative data on village kinship, economics, and social networks, and natural resource use, as well as information on villagers’ perceptions of development, SATIIM, and the STNP. A short survey was also conducted with 30 technical experts working for NGOs and government agencies in the areas of conservation and development. This survey provided data on experts’ perceptions of environmental threats, factors contributing to poverty, and the shifting agricultural system employed by the majority of Maya villagers, in the Toledo District.

Preliminary Results and Analysis

The following sections are meant to provide a very preliminary description of the findings and analysis of my fieldwork to date. This section begins with a description of the ecological and social setting where my fieldwork was conducted, and moves on to describe some of the findings of my specific case study of the STNP and SATIIM. The following section outlines a very preliminary analysis and discussion of some of the primary findings.

The social setting

For a country of only 8,857 square miles, Belize has an uncommonly large number of protected areas, 94 at last count. Indeed, terrestrial protected areas cover 42.2% of Belize’s entire land mass, and consequently, the country has earned an international reputation for conservation and as an eco-tourism destination. As nature-based tourism became a global growth industry in the 1990s, and with international finance to support conservation abounding, it is no coincidence that Belize made a significant effort to strengthen its conservation credentials, and safeguard its natural resources. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of parks in Belize were created in the mid-to late 1990s, in the wake of 1992’s Rio de Janeiro conference, when serious amounts of finance were pledged for global conservation and sustainable development. The southern Toledo District possesses the greatest concentration of protected areas in Belize, and
contains some of the most intact and bio-diverse forests in the western hemisphere. The importance to which Toledo’s forests are regarded is manifested in the number of conservation initiatives throughout the district like the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the Selva Maya [the Maya Forest], and the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor, and by the amount of land (715,000 acres) that has been placed under protected status.

But while Toledo is blessed with an abundance of natural riches, it is also commonly referred to as the “forgotten district”. In this respect, southern Belize is characterized by geographic isolation and economic under-development and is home to a largely rural and indigenous population, which includes two distinct Maya ethnic groups – the Q’eqchi’ Maya and the Mopan Maya – that comprise 66% of the population residing in the district. Despite their numbers, the Maya are marginalized socially and economically, a reality reflected by the fact that most Maya families in Toledo live in remote rural villages and survive on about $600 US per year. Moreover, Belize’s 2002 National Development Report indicated that while 33.5% of the national population was considered poor, in Toledo, where the majority of the population is Maya, this figure was more than double that at 79%.

The Maya’s livelihood strategies are dominated largely by a system of shifting agriculture (slash and burn, known as milpa), primarily used for the production of corn. In addition to this extensive agricultural system, the Maya have traditionally conducted a range of other resource use activities within loosely defined areas of communal forest. These include hunting, fishing, and the gathering of forest products such as palm heart, tree vines, and plants for consumption, building and medicinal purposes. Maya communities generally maintain a common forest reserve of palm trees to provide thatching for house roofs, while cultivating permanent tree crops such as fruits, cacao and coffee. This diversified system has enabled the Mayans to remain self-sufficient, despite being the most materially disadvantaged ethnic group in Belize. In many respects, Toledo's historical isolation from the centres of state power and development has facilitated the persistence of strong Mayan identity, language, and communal land use and livelihood practices.

Of note, however, is the fact that a lack of legal recognition in Belize for Mayan systems of communal land tenure and resource use has left their lands, resources and communities extremely vulnerable to the pressures of land privatization, fragmentation and encroachment. Indigenous communities in southern Belize are by and large located upon national lands or reservations. During the colonial period the British established 10 Indian Reservations within Toledo, totalling 77,000 hectares. Currently, sixteen Maya communities, representing 51% of the Toledo Maya population, reside within reservations. At least twenty villages lay outside reservation boundaries (TMCC and TAA 1997). The 1992 Belize National Lands Act, which replaced the Crown Lands Act after national independence in 1981, does not recognize these reservations, and according to Belize law, the Maya do not have legal rights even to the land within the reservations (TMCC and TAA 1997). While the Government of Belize passively allows indigenous communities to occupy national lands, it provides them with no legal security. As a result, villages are gradually penned into smaller and smaller areas, as the surrounding landscape is continuously parcelled off and fragmented. Particular examples of this over the last 15 years include the government granting of at least seventeen concessions for logging on lands totaling 480,000 acres in Toledo, a 1997 Government-issued-permit to a
foreign oil and gas exploration company to explore for oil on almost 750,000 acres of land in the District (an area which includes the STNP), and the creation of vast areas of parks and protected areas.

In response, in 1982, the Maya began to advocate for recognition of their rights over lands and natural resources, citing their longstanding and historical occupation of the land as justification for their claims. This advocacy around the issue of Maya land rights would later come to known as the Maya Movement. The Government, however, balked at the Maya demands for land tenure and natural resource rights. Garnering support from national and international NGOs, research institutions, and attorneys, Maya leaders continued to advocate at national and international levels. On November 29, 1996, Maya leaders initiated an action in the Supreme Court of Belize that challenged the granting of logging concessions. In the lawsuit, the Maya asserted rights over lands and resources that are included in the concessions and sought to have these concessions enjoined and declared in violation of Maya rights. However, although a brief procedural hearing was held before a Chief Justice in 1997, the case was adjourned indefinitely at the request of the Attorney General’s office and remains unheard to this day.

Simultaneously, grassroots actions targeted the land issue at the community level. With assistance from the Department of Geography, University of California – Berkeley, as well as the Indian Law Resource Centre (ILRC) in Washington D.C., Maya leaders undertook an extensive Maya Community Mapping Project. From this a set of hand drawn but detailed maps depicting the lands used by the Maya communities was produced by community members and published as the Maya Atlas in 1997. These maps later provided the basis of a petition submitted by Maya leaders on behalf of 37 Maya communities to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on August 10, 1998, in an effort to compel the Government to recognize indigenous land rights and to challenge the legality of logging and oil concessions in the Toledo District.

Despite these successes, the Maya Movement struggled to sustain itself in the late 1990s. This was primarily due to the emergence of tensions between Mopan and Q’eqchi’ Maya leaders, which proved critical in reducing the cohesion of the Maya Movement and advocacy for Maya land rights. Most devastating, however, was the mysterious death of the charismatic Maya activist Julian Cho, in December 1998. Many believed he was killed because of his opposition to land privatization and logging, and as a result, enthusiasm for Maya advocacy was replaced by an underlying sense of unease and fear. While the Maya Movement struggled to sustain itself, new opportunities provided by increasing levels of international funding for conservation and development activities in southern Belize led many Mayan leaders to subtly refocus their energies by taking positions within conservation organizations. With land rights being of low priority in these fields, and seen as too politically contentious, the Maya Movement appeared to take a back seat to conservation, which provided a means of income to Mayan leaders, and promised to provide direct benefits to communities in need of alternative livelihoods.

On October 24, 2003, the IAHCHR determined that the Government of Belize had violated the Mayas’ human rights by not recognizing their ownership of communal lands and resources. This decision, made public in early 2004, should have represented the victorious culmination of several decades of struggle, but unfortunately represented a muted achievement, occurring as it did against a backdrop of dislocation and loss of momentum within the Mayan Movement. This new context prevented Maya communities
and leaders from effectively capitalizing upon this otherwise significant accomplishment. To date this conflict remains unresolved despite the ratification of several tentative agreements concerning resource use and indigenous rights by Maya leaders and the Government of Belize. It is within this context that the Sarstoon-Temash National park and the work of SATIIM must be analyzed.

Research Results

When the Government of Belize (GOB) established the STNP in 1994, it did so without any prior consultation with the five indigenous communities located in the area. In fact, the communities did not even learn about the creation of the park until three years later, at a meeting in 1997. When the communities were finally informed about the existence of the park, their first reaction was to resist it since they saw it as a direct threat to their livelihood interests. However, at a stakeholder meeting between community representatives in 1997, facilitated by environmental, governmental and international and indigenous organizations, community members eventually came to the conclusion that their interests might be better served by working with, rather than against the STNP. The indigenous communities’ decision to fight for inclusion within the STNP’s management structure was groundbreaking given that there was no successful national example of indigenous-governmental partnership in protected area management to draw upon. However, with the encouragement of external technical experts, the communities agreed to take on the challenge of working with government in the management of the STNP.

Following the initial stakeholder meeting in 1997, the five communities around the STNP formed a steering committee with the goal of establishing a community-based organization to co-manage the STNP. By June of 1998, they had secured political support of all relevant government ministries for their proposal to become official co-managers of the STNP, and had registered as a non-governmental organization, the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM), with the five communities represented on the board of directors, as well as the Government of Belize Forest Department, Kekchi Council of Belize, National Garifuna Council and the Toledo Alcaldes Association. It nevertheless took several more years of advocacy effort before the Government of Belize finally signed a co-management agreement with SATIIM.

Lobbying support from the Ecologic Development Fund, a US-based conservation NGO partnered with SATIIM, and the World Bank, with whom SATIIM was developing a Global Environmental Facility (GEF) project for enhancing the STNP’s management, proved useful in eventually persuading the Government.

In April 2003, an agreement was signed which laid out the structure for co-management between the community-based organization, SATIIM, and the national government represented by the Forest Department. Later that year, SATIIM embarked upon a 3-year World Bank project funded through the Global Environment Facility (GEF) entitled the Community Managed Sarstoon Temash Conservation Project (COMSTEC), with the operational goal of reducing land degradation and conserving globally significant biodiversity resources in the Sarstoon Temash National Park (STNP) and its buffer zones. Expected outcomes of the project included:

- Environmentally sound agricultural productivity improvements and small income generating activities (e.g. ecotourism) introduced consistent with
protection of STNP, with agricultural encroachment into the Park by communities significantly reduced.

- Community self-organization strengthened.
- Biodiversity assessed by communities, status and trends monitored.
- Resource management plan for the STNP and buffer zones developed.
- National Park Regulations and the Management Plan implemented and enforced.

Under the COMSTEC project which ran from 2003 to 2005, the focus of SATIIM’s work was on turning a paper park into a reality on the ground. This involved the demarcation of the STNP’s boundaries and the production of a number of social and ecological studies of the park and its buffer zone in order to develop a policy and plan to guide the management of the park. To this end, a variety of technical consultants – geographers, social scientists and regional planners, and biologists – were hired to work along with local indigenous experts, or para-biologists, from the STNP’s buffer communities. Local participation was intended to help incorporate traditional ecological knowledge into the research process from the outset and to engender a sense of indigenous participation in and control over the project. Through this process a number of studies were completed which documented the ecology of the STNP, including a rapid ecological assessment (Meerman et al 2003), a hydrology study (Morgan 2003), and a geological and soil assessment (Holland 2003), as well as a socio-economic analysis (Cayetano, Frutos & Karper 2003) and a study of traditional ecological knowledge and natural resource use (Grandia 2004) in the buffer communities. Together, these studies helped SATIIM draft a park use policy and zoning plan (landi Consultants 2003) which sought to incorporate a combination of indigenous and scientific knowledge systems in the management of the STNP.

One of the major outcomes of this policy and planning process was the development of a national park zoning system that was unique for Belize, which not only allowed for standard conservation and low-impact recreational activities (e.g. ecotourism), but also proposed a multiple use zone where continued traditional extraction of specific resources could be allowed. An indigenous zone which contained a spiritual mountain and cave system that communities frequented to perform ritual ceremonies was also demarcated, from where medicinal plants could also be extracted. By getting community members to accept not to hunt or log in the park, and practice only limited fishing, SATIIM was able to secure community access to important natural resources and spiritual sites within the STNP, and committed to promoting sustainable livelihoods alternatives like ecotourism, and organic agricultural production in the STNP buffer zone.

However, despite these compromises and agreements forged at the local level between SATIIM and the STNP buffer communities, the zoning plan faced strong resistance from the Forest Department and was rejected when it was presented to them for review in early 2005, specifically because of the proposed indigenous extraction system. In the Forest Department’s opinion, any type of extraction from a National Park, however culturally justified or well-managed, simply contravened the laws of Belize. In this respect, the National Parks System Act, states that Parks can only be entered for the purposes of recreation, education or scientific research, with visitors prohibited from disturbing the fauna and flora, or damaging, collecting or destroying plants. What
SATIIM was therefore proposing constituted a radical, and in Government’s view, illegal departure from national parks legislation. With the Forest Department refusing to endorse the plan, it therefore appeared that the management of the STNP by an indigenous NGO was not in any significant way assisting local communities to safeguard even a compromised version of their traditional livelihood systems. It also appeared that despite indigenous communities’ participation in the process of data collection which had informed the management recommendations, their input was nevertheless not being allowed to alter the standard conservation-oriented management framework for protected areas in Belize. This rejection threatened to undermine any sense of ownership or engagement in the process which involvement in research and management had initially generated.

Faced with the opposition of the Forest Department’s technical staff, who were insisting that the plan fit national legal standards, the Executive Director of SATIIM, who was also a recognized leader in the struggle for indigenous land rights, went directly to the top echelons of Government for support. The Government, embroiled in a parallel indigenous land rights negotiation headed by the same individual, encompassing the entire region of the District, believed that by conceding the indigenous and multiple use zones request, negotiations with Maya leaders on the land rights issue might indirectly be improved. As such, the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, using his extensive power of discretion over protected areas, overturned the Forest Department’s decision, and gave his support to the management plan and zoning scheme. On June 22nd 2005, what was billed as a “controversial and unprecedented management plan” for the STNP was signed, providing the first instance of extraction of forest resources being allowed within the boundaries of a national park. This important precedent was presented as a major step towards sustainable management of the STNP, and in reconciling the needs of indigenous peoples and conservation in southern Belize.

Another important aspect of SATIIM’s policy and planning process was the identification of indigenous land rights as “a high agenda item” (landi Consultants 2003: 36). To this end, a major initiative undertaken by SATIIM in 2005, and funded by Conservation International, was the use of GIS technology to map the STNP buffer communities in an effort to upgrade the hand-drawn maps produced in 1997 for the Maya Atlas. Since 1997 it had become clear that when the individual community maps from the Maya Atlas were transferred to a single comprehensive District map, a complex array of overlaps existed between village boundaries. SATIIM’s mapping work sought to eliminate these overlaps by working with the buffer communities to negotiate and map their village boundaries. The intention was that these maps, like the Maya Atlas before, would be used to legally secure communal land rights for the Maya communities from the government.

In late 2005, the government agreed to support a pilot project by SATIIM in the STNP buffer community of Conejo Creek, to produce a village map which reconciled its boundaries through negotiations with neighboring communities. However, when the map and the associated boundary agreements were presented to the Minister of Natural Resources in May 2006, SATIIM received no response. Consequently, on April 3, 2007, the community of Conejo Creek filed a Supreme Court claim against the government for their failure to grant the Mayas ownership of their traditional lands as enshrined under the constitution of Belize. Following the initiation of legal proceedings, over 500 indigenous
men, women and children from the STNP buffer zone demonstrated through the streets of Belize. Legal proceedings have begun in the Supreme Court and the case will be heard starting June 18th, 2007.

Another aspect of SATIIM’s work has been their efforts to strengthen local support for conservation through outreach, education, and the promotion of alternative livelihoods. With financial support from the World Bank’s Indigenous People’s Fund, for example, SATIIM’s Outreach Officer has been working with school children in the buffer communities to educate them on topics such as the STNP, protected area regulations, ecosystems, watersheds, and endangered species. However, in addition to promoting environmental science and national park regulations, the Outreach Officer has been teaching school children about the traditional uses of the parks resources, including the use of sacred sites for spiritual ceremonies. Through this project many children in the buffer communities have been taken to sacred sites inside the STNP, and also to ancient Maya cities around Belize in an effort to foster a strong Maya identity and a better understanding of Maya history.

At the same time, SATIIM has been working to provide the buffer villages with tangible economic incentives to conserve park resources. With support from the Oak Foundation, SATIIM has been developing profitable alternatives to shifting agriculture on the lands adjacent to the park and along its waterways, including the promotion of organic cacao production and ecotourism. Cacao is native to the region and grows under the rainforest canopy. It is also the key ingredient in chocolate and Green and Blacks, a company based in the U.K. which produces Maya Gold chocolate, has signed a fair trade agreement with Maya farmers through which they receive above the world price for the cacao their cacao. Moreover, in order to reduce dependency on agricultural production and export crops, SATIIM has initiated efforts to develop and promote the STNP and its buffer communities as an ecotourism attraction. Over the course of my fieldwork, SATIIM, with funding from the Oak Foundation, developed camping sites in the STNP buffer communities, purchased kayaks that tourists could rent to travel the rivers of the STNP, and started to produce brochures advertising the ecological and cultural attractions of the area. Local tour operators were also taken on a tour of the STNP and buffer communities in order to familiarize them with the area so that they could incorporate it into their tours.

However, while SATIIM has achieved significant results since its inception in 1997, it has also faced challenges that have seriously put into question how involvement in protected management can truly support the interests of indigenous communities in the context of Belize. A major issue is the continued extraction of the STNP’s natural resources by Guatemalans, which SATIIM’s community-based park rangers are largely unable to prevent. With the Sarstoon River representing the southern border between Guatemala and Belize, a border which continues to be contested by Guatemala, patrolling is difficult to implement both because of the terrain, resource constraints and political sensitivity. Belize has remained severely hampered in its desire to stem the influx of Guatemalans into the country who are extracting all variety of resources the length of the border, since almost every time it does so, an international dispute with Guatemala ensues. Given its inability to place Belize Defense Force soldiers the length of the border, and in particular, its concern not to inflame Guatemalan sentiments by arresting trespassers to Belize, the incursions have been essentially allowed to continue with impunity. Thus, communities surrounding the STNP are prevented by SATIIM rangers from extracting timber or hunting wild game, while knowing full well that rosewood,
orchids, deer and other resources are being collected on a regular basis by Guatemalans. As such resentment towards the protected area regulations, and to SATIIM for attempting to enforce them, has grown, particularly since the promised economic benefits of alternative livelihoods like ecotourism have been slow to materialize.

Complicating matters, in early November 2005, SATIIM was notified by the Forest Department that an American oil company, US Capital Energy, was requesting an access permit to enter the STNP to conduct seismic testing under the terms of a Production Sharing Agreement dated January 24th, 2004. Despite strong protestations from SATIIM, the Forest Department granted US Capital Energy the access permit requested and by late April 2006, the company had set up operations in the District capital and was preparing to carry out seismic testing inside the STNP starting May 4th, 2006. Ironically, just a few months earlier, in October 2005, the STNP had been declared a Ramsar site (no.1562), a designation recognizing wetlands of international significance.

In response, SATIIM mounted a multifaceted advocacy campaign that involved raising awareness of the oil exploration issue through public outreach and education, coalition building, legal action (including the filing of a judicial review in the Supreme Court), policy research and analysis, mobilizing local supporters, lobbying Government ministers, generating international political, technical and financial support and preparing to monitor and mitigate activities in the STNP if oil exploration goes ahead. Funding for these activities came from a variety of international organizations, including IUCN, the Summit Foundation, Green Grants, Conservation International and the Oak Foundation.

Overall, SATIIM’s advocacy campaign was remarkably successful, particularly given the significant power imbalance between a small community-based indigenous organization and an international oil company working with government. However, on Thursday June 8, 2006, the Supreme Court of Belize agreed to a full judicial review of the case SATIIM vs. Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment and placed an injunction on US Capital Energy’s oil exploration activities in the STNP, pending a full trial hearing on the substantive legal issues brought before the Court. The trial reviewed the legality of the government’s issuing of the oil exploration permit in a protected area. On Wednesday September 27, 2006, the Supreme Court ruled that the permission issued to US Capital Energy to enter the national park to conduct seismic surveys was illegal because an environmental impact assessment (EIA) was not done beforehand, and this violated Belize’s Environmental Protection Act. The company was ordered to do an EIA for seismic testing before a permit could be issued. Yet while SATIIM celebrated this victory, what they were seeking was a stronger judgment, one that would have found oil exploration – including seismic testing- to be illegal in national parks. This would have ensured that national parks remain completely off limits for oil exploration in Belize. Instead, for the time being, national parks remain fair game.

Perhaps most importantly, however, is that SATIIM’s success in blocking oil exploration came at a high cost. When the oil company realized that SATIIM was serious about taking the Government to court over this issue, and had the resources to do so, they went on the offensive against SATIIM and began a concerted campaign in the

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3 In 1998 the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment issued an oil exploration license to a U.S. corporation, A&B Energy Limited, for lands that encompassed the entirety of the Toledo District’s terrestrial and coastal area, including the STNP and other national protected areas. By 2004, this concession had been acquired by US Capital Energy.
communities and the national media to discredit SATIIM. Villagers from the STNP buffer communities were organized by US Capital Energy to carry out a protest march at the SATIIM office, and to go on national television and radio denouncing SATIIM and its leadership. One of SATIIM’s elected Board Members, resigned from the SATIIM Board and began working for the oil company, and many community leaders have sided with the company, saying they prefer short term employment to the conservation of SATIIM the STNP. This has significantly undermined community support for the conservation of the STNP built up over the last nine years, and has divided the members of the STNP buffer communities over the issues of conservation and development.

**Preliminary Analysis**

Natural resource management projects like the MMMC can be seen as examples of the spread of neoliberal forms of global governance, since ecosystems and natural resources are now subject to global forms of power and control signified by a shift in power away from national governments to a situation where diverse networks of actors influence and participate in environmental policy, planning, and management. This process of decentralizing control away from states toward other actors is tied to a global discourse about the need to devolve management of protected areas to local communities as a means of achieving more effective and efficient management of natural resources. Through this approach the previously dominant role of the state has been displaced by complex networks that cut across national boundaries and include international donors, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, private sector actors, and local community groups amongst others. This devolution of control has not only occurred at the policy and planning level, but at the levels of funding, management and implementation as well. As government’s role in funding and managing conservation has decreased, contemporary conservation projects have had to become largely self-financing through the promotion and development of market-based economic activities like tourism, and more specifically ecotourism.

A number of studies have described and evaluated the effects of community-based conservation and ecotourism in a wide range of field settings. Much of this work has highlighted successes and failures of these projects. Unfortunately, however, understanding the relationship between conservation and ecotourism policy and practice has been hampered by the dominance in the literature of two opposing views. In this regard, one line of inquiry has examined the effectiveness of local participation in conservation as a means of encouraging environmental values and practices, and a more efficient and effective management of natural resources (Alexander 2000; Agrawal 2005). Agrawal, for example, argues that the participation of local people in conservation helps to create “environmental subjects” – people who care about the environment and support conservation. The discourse of this literature is consistently technical and managerial. While community-based conservation and ecotourism is scrutinized from this perspective, the purpose is to enable it to perform better and to establish guidelines and “best practices” for achieving success.

On the other hand, scholars have critiqued participatory conservation efforts for attempting to engage local people in their own oppression and domination. This research argues that conservation works to expand state control over remote rural areas, restricting local access to land and natural resources and imposing specific, and western, ways of
perceiving and relating to nature on diverse populations around the world. According to this line of thought, local people must resist conservation policies and projects in order to defend their autonomy, diverse knowledge systems, and traditional livelihoods (Neumann 1998; Escobar 1998; Bryant 2002; Duffy 2005). This literature, however, has been constrained by its reliance on theoretical models of domination and resistance. Power in these studies is understood as a zero-sum game between adversaries. In this sense, the promotion of ecotourism is understood as being tied to the interests of powerful social actors (e.g. states, NGOs and elites) that seek to impose ecotourism on relatively powerless and disadvantaged local actors. Within this framework, agency is only accorded to people in local communities in instances when they actively resist conservation and ecotourism (cf. Sutherland 1998; Belsky 1999; Johnson 1998; Duffy 2005). As a result, we know very little about the circumstances in which local actors may choose to participate in ecotourism, let alone how they may understand or rationalize such decisions.

My fieldwork in southern Belize reveals that neither of the above approaches adequately captures the complex nature of contemporary conservation and ecotourism projects like the MMMC in southern Belize, and specifically the case of the STNP and SATIIM. Indeed, what my fieldwork in southern Belize has found, perhaps more than anything else, is the complexity of power relations between communities, NGOs, government departments, and international organizations. In this sense, it has found that the work of SATIIM can not be seen as an a-political project that has been working to protect the natural resources of STNP, but nor can it be seen as a straight forward case of domination and/or resistance, particularly in relation to the buffer communities it works with. For example, the decision of STNP buffer communities to take on the challenge of managing the park through forming the community-based conservation organization, SATIIM, could be seen as an extension of governmental power over remote rural areas and communities. SATIIM has clearly assisted the Government of Belize in enforcing its protected area legislation in relation to the STNP through monitoring and surveillance activities in the park and its buffer zone. In this sense, SATIIM’s conservation work has had the overall effect of restricting access to natural resources within the STNP, particularly for members of the STNP buffer communities.

At the same time, however, the work of SATIIM makes it clear that the management of the STNP has not been simple case of implementing a standardized form of conservation which marginalizes rural communities. As described above, SATIIM has advanced a particular form of conservation which has attempted to incorporate and defend the interests of the STNP buffer communities. Examples of this include the participation of community members and the consequent incorporation of local knowledge and interests in the formulation of SATIIM’s controversial park use policy and zoning plan. Moreover, of particular importance has been the continuation of the goals of the Maya Movement – indigenous communal land rights – into the work of SATIIM. This is an excellent example of what Havemann (in O’Malley, 1996: 314, emphasis in original) dubs “the indigenization of social control.” O’Malley (1996: 323) uses the recent history of Aboriginal self-determination in Australia to show how indigenous communities have inscribed “quite alien elements” into neo-liberal management schemes as they have sought to assert their own forms of indigenous governance. According to O’Malley, the existence of indigenous forms of governance
“within the subjugating regime” is important precisely because this provides sites “for the operation of counter-discourses and subordinated knowledges” (O’Malley 1996: 323). Similarly, Michel de Certeau, has highlighted the devious, dispersed and subversive “consumer practices” which are “not manifest through [their] own products, but rather through [their] ways of using the products imposed by dominant economic order” (de Certeau 1984: xiii). In other words, while communities may consent to dominant policy models like conservation and ecotourism, they may make of them something quite different (like Maya communities using SATIIM to continue the aims of the Maya Movement). What is of importance then is less the relationship between dominance and resistance, and more that between public and hidden ‘transcripts’ (Scott 1990); between the privilege of dominant policy models and the scattered practices occurring below (de Certeau 1984: 48).

In conclusion, what this preliminary analysis has attempted to demonstrate is that conservation and ecotourism policies and plans like the MMMC in southern Belize encounter processes, activities and actors that have a long history. Consequently, the complexities of the local and global contexts in which these projects operate must be considered extremely important, and mean that policy implementation is far from being a simple process. Instead, global environmental governance is rendered extremely complex and problematic once specific actors at the global, regional, national and local levels attempt to come together to implement it. From the following discussion it is clear that the challenges faced by conservation projects like the MMMC go beyond any simple clash between national sovereignty and transnational networks. Rather, the multiple activities that challenge, change, and limit global environmental governance occur for different reasons, are carried out in different ways, and challenge in different ways, but their cumulative effect is that they prevent the simple implementation of a standardized form of international conservation project.
Works Cited


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The following section provides a more detailed breakdown of information of some of the activities listed in the calendar of activities above. It specifically outlines meetings, public forums, and conferences attended as part of my participant-observation research with SATIIM.

**Participant observation with SATIIM (Punta Gorda)**

- **May 13th 2006** - Attended a forum hosted by SATIIM in Punta Gorda with the Toledo Alcalde Association (TAA) and the Toledo Village Council Association (TVCA) at which SATIIM informed the members of the TAA and TVCA about oil exploration in the STNP and buffer communities.
- **June 14, 2006** – Participated in a meeting with protected area management organizations, government, business and civil society organizations to discuss the oil exploration issue and the implications in protected areas. This event was hosted by the Association of protected Area Management Organizations (APAMO) in Punta Gorda.
- **June 23, 2006** – Attended a NGO/tourism sector forum dealing with the implications of oil development for the tourism sector in Toledo District.
- **June 28, 2006** – Attended a public forum hosted by SATIIM in Punta Gorda with guest speakers from Spanish Lookout, Belmopan and SATIIM’s legal team. There were approximately 150 members of the public in attendance for this 3 hour meeting.
- **July 14, 2006** – Attended at meeting hosted by SATIIM with Toledo’s Alcaldes Association (TAA) and Toledo Village Council Association (TVCA) in Punta Gorda which was covered by national media.
- **August 2, 2006** – Attended a meeting hosted by US Capital Energy for teachers throughout the Toledo District. Purpose of the meeting was to present the oil company’s position on oil exploration in protected areas to the teachers so they could pass along information to their students.
- **October 18, 2006** – Attended a meeting hosted by SATIIM with community leaders from the five STNP buffer villages to discuss and explain the Supreme Court decision, the impending Environmental Impact Assessment process and SATIIM’s benefit sharing proposals.
- **November 29, 2006** – Attended a meeting hosted by SATIIM with the newly elected and outgoing village Alcaldes to discuss benefit sharing proposals to negotiate for compensation if oil exploration goes ahead on indigenous lands.
- **January 18, 2007** – Attended a Bi-National Fisheries Forum hosted by SATIIM
- **January 27, 2007** – Attended the Toledo Village Life Day in Punta Gorda Town. This event celebrated village life throughout the Toledo District and included many cultural events, displays, and dances. SATIIM had a booth at the event outlining their work in the STNP and buffer communities.

**Participant observation with SATIIM (Belmopan/Belize City)**

- **May 15, 2006** – Travelled with SATIIM and a large delegation of community members from STNP buffer villages to Belmopan to present the village map of Conejo Creek to the Minister of Natural Resources, and to Belize City to participate in a press conference announcing the filing of a lawsuit challenging the government’s decision to allow oil exploration inside the STNP. The press conference received national media
coverage and was attended by a number of other conservation and community based organizations.

- June 5, 2006 – Travelled with two bus loads of STNP buffer community members to Belize City for the first hearing of the legal case in the Supreme Court.
- June 8, 2006 – Traveled with SATIIM board members and STNP buffer community members to Belize City for the Supreme Court judgment.
- September 27, 2006 – Traveled with SATIIM and over fifty STNP buffer community members and community leaders to Belize City to witness the final hearing of SATIIM’s judicial review in the Supreme Court and participate in a national press conference.

**Participant observation with SATIIM (Cayo District, Belize)**

- August 3-4 2006 – Participated in a national forum on Indigenous People and Protected Areas hosted by Conservation International.
- February 2, 2007 – Traveled with SATIIM and over fifty people from the STNP buffer communities and members of SATIIM’s Board of Directors and staff to Spanish Lookout in the Cayo District of western Belize to meet with the chair of the Spanish Lookout Petroleum Board, representatives for Belize Natural Energy (an oil company in western Belize), and to visit the active oil fields in the Spanish Lookout community. Purpose of the trip was to educate members of the STNP buffer communities on the impacts of oil development.

**Participant observation with SATIIM (STNP Buffer Communities)**

- June 20-23, 2006 – Attended a “Unity Tour” planned by SATIIM intended to unify the buffer communities on the issue of oil exploration in the STNP by learning from individuals and organizations that have faced similar struggles. As part of this tour SATIIM hosted two community activists from Costa Rica who have been involved in the campaign to stop oil exploration on the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica, as well as environmental activists from the Cayo District of western Belize who had campaigned against the Challillo Dam. Two meetings were held in STNP buffer villages, Thursday June 22 and Friday June 23 respectively.
- October 23, 24, 25, 26, and 27, 2006 – Attended community meetings held by SATIIM in each of the five villages buffering the STNP, explaining the Supreme Court decision and discussing the upcoming environmental impact assessment (EIA) process to be carried out by the oil company.