

Placencia Belize: An Alternative to the Development of “Your Private Paradise”

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Abstract : This paper analyzes the local context and effects of tourism on Placencia in Belize to identify key environmental and social impacts. Placencia was a small sleepy coastal fishing village at risk of losing its local identity to tourism. In the last decade, tourism has driven an economic shift from fishing to tourism. The consequence of this shift has eroded local environmental resources and diluted local cultural heritage. A key example is Harvest Caye, an island converted from a natural manatee breeding ground to a stereotypical sandy beach and palm tree resort complex. The incoming cruise ship-gear development of Harvest Caye reflects the urban tourist vision of Placencia’s local landscape, which indicates a “neo-colonial” rule. Consequently, this vision causes environmental destruction, replacing local memories of abundant manatee-filled waters. The paper will explore environmental and cultural damage from uncontrolled development by focusing on how Placencia has been affected by unmanaged tourism. It will then propose solutions to create a medium between tourism and the local community. New developments in other Belizean cities, such as Belmopan and Belize City, are planned at the time of approval to be sensitive to their setting. While Placencia is fully built out, there are opportunities to plan in advance for the future while preserving local integrity. As a consequence of time, shepherding tourist development, defining tourist areas, and planning these areas with an eye towards natural disasters (such as hurricanes) can act as a tool to craft a future vision that helps preserve the local identity of Placencia. This research will consist of personal observations, case studies, and synthesis of other source materials. These sources provide guidance for creating a framework to understand the local environment and culture and plan around it to ultimately protect Placencia from becoming “Your Private Paradise” for the rich.

Keywords : Placencia, coastal development, coastal protection, tourism, zoning, coastal zoning, Caribbean, Belize, small island developing states

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