

Belize is a Forest Super-Power, report says, but deforestation is increasing

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In a study published by CATHALAC (Spanish acronym for Humid Tropics Water Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean, based in Panama), Belize has been placed as number 1 country in the Central American region in terms of forest cover. By 2010, 65% of the Jewel was covered by forests, contrasting with countries like El Salvador, where forest cover was 11% (see table 1).

These forests provide Belizeans with clean water, flood prevention to protect villages, towns and the city, sediment retention to protect coral reefs and the fishing industry, rain generation and carbon storage to help us adapt and mitigate climate change, and also attract many tourists each year that come to admire its wildlife and swim in its rivers.

However, according to this report, every year between 1980 and 2010 approximately 25,000 acres of forests were cleared in Belize. According to another study produced by Belizean expert Emil Cherrington, in 2013, 33,000 acres of forest were lost in the Jewel, and in 2014 that number rose to 36,000 acres, which shows an increase in the deforestation rate in Belize. By 2014, forest cover in Belize was reduced to 60% (see map 1).

Unsustainable agricultural developments are the main cause of deforestation. For many years, Belize has seen, and is still seeing, the growth of large scale sugar cane, corn, citrus and banana plantations, which require large amounts of agro-chemicals that damage the soil in the long term, and pollute rivers and coastal zones. On a smaller scale, the use of fire by farmers to clear the land has caused many escaped fires that have burned thousands of acres of forest, and have also put people's farms, houses and lives at risk.

Belizeans don't have to go too far to see what the long term effects of these practices are. Guatemala and Honduras have seen how the use of fire by small scale farmers have caused much deforestation, especially in hilly areas where fires can easily escape and cause a lot of damage.

These two countries have also seen how large scale land holdings on flat areas owned by wealthy foreign companies have cleared tens of thousands of acres of forests to develop large cattle ranching areas and African oil palm plantations. These two practices, as they have been developed in Guatemala and Honduras, contribute to extreme soil degradation, due to the compaction caused by cattle and the heavy amount of agro-chemicals used in African oil palm plantations. After 25 years of these 2 practices, soils are left so degraded that nothing will grow on them. What is more, cattle ranching and African oil palm on such a large scale only bring wealth to the owners of the land whilst local communities are rewarded with low pay for very hard labour. In the future, as climate change brings higher temperatures and less rain to Belize (according to predictions by the International Panel on Climate Change), Belize will need its forests to generate rain fall and protect us from extreme weather events.

Belize must find ways grow its own food and bring in much needed cash from exported agricultural products. But this does not mean we have to clear our forests. There are many agricultural techniques that can generate food and support the local and national economy without damaging the

soil and without clearing more forest. Among them is cacao based agroforestry, where cacao trees are grown in the shade of fruit and timber trees, contributing to soil conservation, carbon storage and watershed protection. **In addition, the organic chocolate category experienced 20% growth in 2011, and industry experts estimate the bean-to-bar sector has been experiencing some of the fastest growth at 75-100% year-over year (pers. Com. Maya Mountain Cacao). The Toledo Cacao Growers Association is currently exporting approximately 85 MT of fermented and dried cacao beans per year, compared to at least 600 metric ton demand from European, Asian and North American markets.** Belize produces very high quality cacao that is much sought after on the global market. High value niche markets such as cacao represent a sustainable development strategy for Belize.

A sustainable way of growing other crops like corn, bananas and pineapples is Inga Alley Cropping. Inga trees (also known as bri-bri, of the leguminous family) are grown in rows and pruned every year. Corn, pineapples and bananas can be planted in between the rows every year after the pruning of the trees. This keeps the soil moist and rich in nutrients due to the amount of Inga leaves that accumulate on the ground, which helps maintain a productive land and conserve soil from erosion.

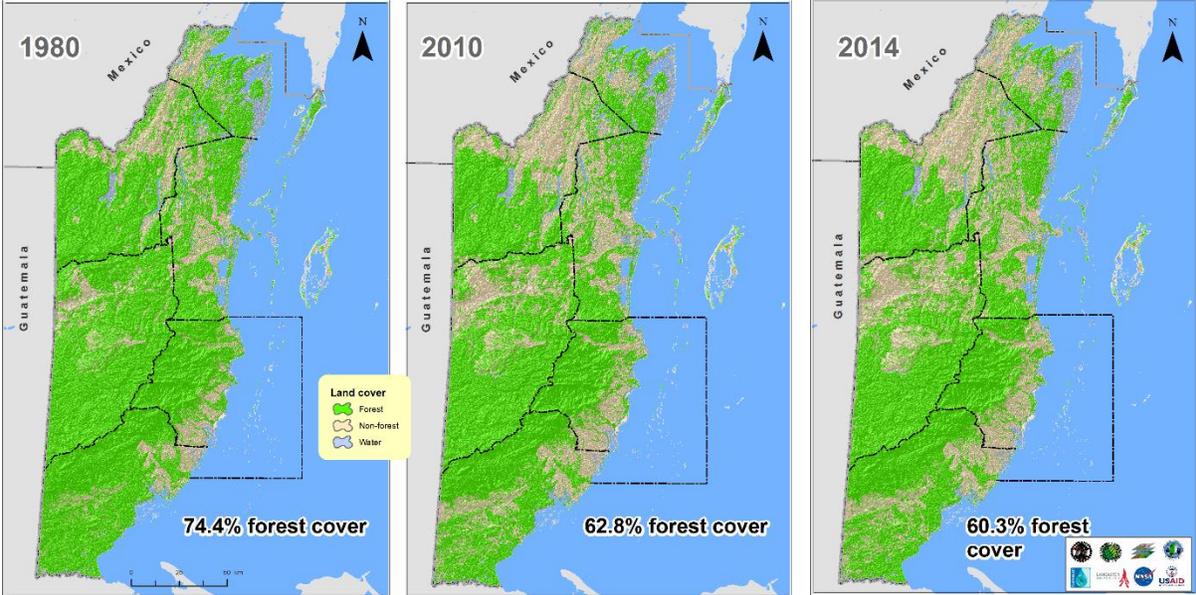
Belize's future could be one of drought, hunger and poverty. We only need to cross the border to see what could happen. Predictions generated by CATHALAC and the University of Belize show that Belize's forest cover could be down to 47% by 2040. But this doesn't have to be the case. Farmers, NGO's and civil institutions can do their share to stop deforestation in Belize by promoting sustainable agricultural practices and preventing escaped fires. For instance, the Ya'axché Conservation Trust organizes a yearly bicycle race to raise awareness against the use of agricultural fires ('Race against fire', San Pedro Columbia, Toledo, Saturday April 4th, 2015). But it will also require action by the Government of Belize to promote sustainable agriculture and stop industries like the African oil palm and large scale cattle ranching from coming to Belize. We all have a responsibility to ensure our children have the same economic, cultural and environmental benefits from the forest that we are enjoying now.

Table 1

| | % Forest Cover 2010 | % Forest Cover 1980 |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Belize | 65.4 | 85.3 |
| 2. Costa Rica | 56.4 | 82.9 |
| 3. Honduras | 46.9 | 76.1 |
| 4. Panama | 46.8 | 74.1 |
| 5. Nicaragua | 40.2 | 70.7 |
| 6. Dominican Republic | 33.0 | 38.0 |
| 7. Guatemala | 32.0 | 70.1 |
| 8. El Salvador | 11.4 | 32.0 |

Source CATHALAC, 2013 (non-published data)

Map 1



Source Emil Cherrington, 2014