



“Nature has blessed us with wealth untold” Is clearing our forest the best solution?

Forests have played a starring role in the history of Belize and continue to do so today. Belize has one of the highest levels of forest cover in Latin America, and indeed the world, and they hold a vast wealth: they contribute to the quality of our lives, protect us from natural disasters, support our economy, provide food and building materials and ensure the physical and mental wellbeing of the Belizean people.

From a bird's eye view, a clear divide can be seen along the Belize border in southern Peten. Very simply put, Belize has forest while, since the 1970's, Southern Peten has lost almost all of its forests. The main reason for this is that a small number of wealthy landowners control vast areas of cattle and oil palm production and have cleared the forests. The majority of campesinos (small scale farmers) are landless, forced further into the forest, and suffer from some of the highest rates of poverty in the region. Could the same scenario happen in Belize?

History has shown that the most common sequence of land clearing in Belize is the extraction of precious lumber species, followed by the slashing of the remaining forest in preparation for agriculture. The vegetation is burned, and the ash provides a thin layer of nutrients that support the growth of corn or beans. This ash will allow for around three years of good crops before the yield starts to decline. At this point fertilizers must be added to try to maintain a yield that can be profitable, this increases the cost of corn to a point where it is likely cheaper to buy it. The farmer then has to make a decision, he either abandons the land and goes on to clear the next parcel, or chooses a different kind of agriculture.

History tells us that conversion to cattle pasture is often the next step. Cows are introduced and only a handful of plant species remain. Soil is compacted and becomes unsuitable for anything to grow. Rivers are contaminated with cattle excrement and the water becomes unusable for any downstream communities. This scenario is happening, as you read this sentence, in several areas of Belize. It is likely to continue on in a similar direction as seen in Southern Peten.

How can Belize avoid this?

Whilst it is clear that Belizeans receive many 'free' services from forest there is also a need for people living close to forest to collect sustainable economic benefits. There are countless examples of communities across Latin America who do just this. Industries such as sustainable logging can be either privately owned or community owned and, if well managed,



can deliver excellent profits in the long term not only the short term. Also, as is currently being practiced by many farmers in Toledo, agroforestry can provide food for families and the local community while bringing in cash from crops such as cacao, honey, fruits and timber. Agroforestry is a type of farming that is focused on keeping soils healthy, through keeping trees and plants which produce fruits and vegetables throughout the year for both eating and for selling.

In summary, Belize depends on its forests. We can learn lessons from neighboring countries and regions that have lost their forests and in doing so, recognize the true value our forests. Belize can remain one of the most forested countries in the region, whilst deriving benefits which support one of the highest qualities of life in the region. This is an achievable goal that every Belizean can work towards, and we can simultaneously require our government and village leaders to manage our forests with common sense, and with a vision for our future, and our children's future.