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Exploring Environmental Justice in the Maya Forest Corridor: A Case Study on the Relationship Between Communities and Conservation in Central Belize.

SUMMARY REPORT

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we wish to extend our gratitude towards the community members of Gracie Rock, Mahogany Heights, Rancho Dolores and Flowers Bank for their invaluable contributions to this thesis. They welcomed us into their lives and homes and shared their experiences while remaining open and accommodating to our presence. We are extremely thankful to Miss Raquel Vega of Mahogany Heights who supported us, not only throughout our fieldwork, but also after we parted away. A special thank you must go to the Miller Family of Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary that provided us with guidance and assistance, both in joyful and stressful times. We also thank members of the MFC coalition who allowed us to be active participants in workshops, discussions and personal conversations and contributed with valuable insights into this complex journey for the protection of wildlife in Belize.

Executive Summary

Embedded within the wider context of biodiversity in Mesoamerica, the Maya Forest Corridor (MFC) aims at maintaining biological connectivity between the trilateral Selva Maya that extends over Belize, Guatemala and Mexico and the Mayan Mountain Massif of Central Belize. The Selva Maya, is the second-largest tropical rainforest in Latin America after the Amazon, holding over 20 different ecosystems, over 400 bird species, and 70 mammals (Re:wild, n.d). In order to protect biodiversity, the MFC adopted the corridor model, a widely recognised strategy among scholars and practitioners because it offers a flexible solution to complex dynamics of human-nature relations. Because of its flexibility, corridors seemingly are able to combine private, public, local, national and international interests because they operate at multiple temporal and spatial scales. What appears to be a win-win situation, however, often brings about tensions because corridors affect the socio-economic and political landscapes of the region they are implemented in (Grandia 2007). As such, corridors, although seemingly promising in their reconciling ambitions, are not free from tensions between communities and conservation, and warrant critical examination.

The master's dissertation explored the dynamics between local communities and conservation that took place in the form of the MFC in Central Belize. The initiative gained momentum in 2018 when a coalition of actors came together to buy a piece of land threatened by habitat conversion for large-scale agriculture (Green, 2021; TNC, 2021b; Re:wild, n.d; Rainforest Trust, 2021). Motivated by the ideal "to protect, in perpetuity for the people and the Government of Belize", international and local conservation organisations secured 12 thousand critical ha of land (CNN, 2022). However, within the corridor landscape the MFC coalition identified 13 local communities that rely on the forested area for their livelihoods, through activities such as fishing, hunting, collecting forest products and farming (UB ERI & WCS, 2021). Whereas the MFC has received appraisal by international media and the conservation community for crafting an innovative strategy that negotiates a variety of interests, we investigate why and for whom nature is being protected in the context of the MFC.

Through the application of environmental justice lenses, we politicised the creation of a conservation space in the MFC and pluralised it by bringing forward the multiple realities of local communities that live in and around the area (Massarella et al, 2021). We believe that the role of critical social science is especially important to consider in this context, as there has been limited research on any social implications of the MFC. With this aim, we set out to answer the following Research Question:

What are the dynamics involved in shaping the relationship between local communities and conservation in the MFC in Central Belize?

The strategy adopted to conduct our research was a qualitative case study of members of four rural creol communities in relation to the creation of the MFC, namely Gracie Rock, Mahogany Heights, Flowers Bank and Rancho Dolores. By applying concepts of distribution, recognition and representation from an environmental justice perspective, we analysed the primary and secondary data gathered during a two-month long fieldwork in Belize between November 2021 and January 2022. The primary data collection consisted of 30 semi-structured interviews with local community members and MFC coalition members, participant observation of online and physical workshops about the MFC planning and strategy-making, 2 transect walks in Gracie Rock and Flowers Bank, informal chats, and field observations. The gathered data was triangulated and analysed through an iterative thematic analysis and discourse analysis that allowed us to critically investigate issues of justice in conservation.

Part I of the analysis: Pluralising human-nature relations

In the first part of our analysis, we pluralised human-nature relations by introducing different ways that local community members relate to their natural environment. This is due to the fact that the MFC coalition attempted to understand local realities mainly through a MFC Feasibility study in the form of a household survey (UB ERI & WCS, 2021). From our research, it emerged that the survey was built on intrinsic values to nature where human activities were a priori categorised as “extractivist” and “anthropogenic”. Such a view was part of a broader discourse where instrumentalisation of nature for livelihood strategies dominated the understanding of human-nature relations. However, our data showed how the natural environment is more than a mere provider of resources because it carries meanings and values that go beyond economic benefits. Our findings showed that community members’ relations to “the bush” and “the river” were part of holistic worldviews where humans and nature are non-separable, non-substitutable and reciprocal (Matijssen et al., 2020). Hence, the first dynamic to emerge addressed issues of epistemic injustice where a dominant understanding of nature based on biocentric views did not create the space for relational values to be recognised by the MFC coalition.

Part II of the analysis: exploring processes of decision-making

The second part of the analysis explored processes of decision-making that enabled the creation of a conservation space in the context of the MFC. Our findings showed that issues of representation occurred during online workshops where decisions were made even though participation from local community members was limited. Our data showed that the MFC as a site of bordering enabled the concentration of power on a specific area through the creation of boundaries that strengthened the authority of the coalition

as the main body of decision-making. Such a role was then solidified with the purchase of “The Property” where the MFCT obtained the legal rights to manage nature in a way that solidifies biocentric views of nature where activities that are considered extractive are denied. Moreover, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion were investigated by looking at how problems were framed during the MFC CAP. Our findings showed that through the use of “corridor compatibility” and “compliance”, political boundaries are drawn so that communities must comply with a set of rules that have been previously decided upon biocentric views on nature. This framed community members as part of the problem rather than the solution through the use of expert knowledge as a justification for strict nature protection. Ultimately, the second identified dynamic is the creation of a conservation space with limited participation from members of local communities that is enabled through processes of boundary making, property making and frame-setting.

Part III of the analysis: exploring discursive practices

The final part of the analysis showed how certain discursive practices by the MFC coalition created issues of misrecognition for rural creole communities of Gracie Rock, Rancho Dolores, Flowers Bank and Mahogany Heights. From our data, it emerged that the branding strategy for the MFC involved the use of the ancient Mayans who used to inhabit the area. This strategy overlooked the local realities of rural creole people that have lived in the Belize River Valley for generations. In addition, local agency is further with a specific emphasis on a regional transboundary scale that is bound in evidence-based science and justified through the importance of connectivity for wildlife species. As a transboundary project, the MFC gained media attention for its international cooperation and NGOs partnerships where a narrative of success was reproduced and directed towards a selected community that privileges the values and symbol behind the MFC branding strategy. The MFC coalition indeed catered to an interpretive international community that serves as both the audience and potential new alleyways for donorship. The third dynamic identified by this research is the invisibility of rural creole communities created by the MFC branding strategy that is mutually constituted by the imagery of ancient Mayans, highlights of transboundary partnership and the success of prosperous wildlife across regional scales.

Conclusion of Executive Summary

In conclusion, we recognised the efforts of the MFC coalition to navigate a complex situation that is motivated by the protection of wildlife which is increasingly threatened by a number of factors. However, we found that an examination of the social impacts of the creation of the MFC was needed in order to provide a nuanced and detailed picture of the situation at hand. With our research we aimed to contribute to the success of the MFC by critically investigating the tensions between members of Gracie Rock, Rancho Dolores, Flowers Bank and Mahogany Heights and the creation of the MFC. By shedding light on some of the social issues that take place, we wished to enter the space between the social and the natural sciences so as to provide an open arena for a constructive conversation to take place.

Recommendation for Further Action

Including relational values in planning and policy: Going forward we recommend the MFC coalition to move beyond an understanding that local communities benefit from the area only in economic terms. We suggest the inclusion of plural understandings of human-nature relations by incorporating relational values in planning and policy. For this reason, we recommend qualitative research to be conducted in the area that can complement the MFC household survey data.

Alternative ways of communication and participation: Moving forward, we recommend removing any online format due to the fact that lack of technology among community members precludes access to these and excludes them from partaking in the planning sessions. We acknowledge that the covid-19 pandemic significantly circumscribed traditional work procedures, and that meeting online was, and to some extent still remains, the most appropriate option to ensure all participants safety. However, this form of communication renders limited participation. As such, it should move away from the current one-way-flow of communication and initiate a more participatory approach. We suggest that the MFC coalition draws inspiration from the previous CBC CAP processes that were characterised by participatory group planning sessions, once it is again safe to do so.

Redrawing political boundaries: This step involves a move away from framing people as part of the problem without further investigations. Perhaps best exemplified by the debate on hunting, we suggest that the MFC coalition engage in extensive inquiry of who hunts, how much and for what purposes. We are aware that a thorough inquiry of these matters has been proposed by the MFC coalition as a next step. We encourage this inquiry and recommend that further funding should be directed towards safeguarding a more thorough understanding of the levels of threats so that appropriate solutions can be applied to different cases of threats.

Increasing Interdisciplinarity: Integrating social science into the MFC is a necessary step to navigate the complex human-nature dynamics at play. We acknowledge the MFC feasibility study (2021) as a first step in a process of identifying social impacts of the corridor. However, we believe it is imperative to continuously critically engage social science methods and inquiries in tandem with natural science methods in order to fully capture the complexities of human-nature dynamics. As such, we recommend directing resources towards employment of students or professionals that can further critically assess the social impact of the MFC implementation.

MFC Branding Strategy: We suggest that branding strategies of the MFC should be revised to include a more participatory narrative, in order to avoid reproducing feelings of invisibility and move away from a donor-driven strategy based on a partial reflection of reality. This is important because the MFC coalition runs the risk of losing trust and buy-in from local communities, if their presence in the area is not acknowledged by the larger discourse or if they are not involved in MFC interventions. We suggest that the long-term branding strategy integrates local perspectives into the narrative around the MFC by strengthening already existing local partnerships.



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