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The Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW) helps communities speak out for clean air, clean water, and a healthy planet. We are a global alliance of attorneys, scientists and other advocates collaborating across borders to promote grassroots efforts to build a sustainable, just future.

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**Belize Trip Report**

**Grassroots Organizations Hold Promise**



By **Lauren Ice**

Belize is growing quickly. Its Mayan ruins, picturesque beaches, and proximity to the Mesoamerican reef attract tourists and long-term residents from around the world. This diverse population magnifies environmental and social issues facing local communities.

ELAW is strengthening Belize-based grassroots organizations, to nurture home grown efforts to protect the fragile beauty of this small island nation. I traveled to Belize in May to work one-one-one with staff at ELAW partner organizations. With ELAW's help, each group now has one full-time staff person, giving these organizations a strong community presence. I shared with them what I have learned managing ELAW's office in Eugene and was inspired by their work. The following is more about our partners and my visit.

**The Belize Institute of Environmental Law and Policy (BELPO)** was launched in 1995. Located in the capital city of Belmopan, BELPO helps citizens ensure that their nation's leaders are implementing and enforcing laws designed to protect communities and the environment. BELPO builds public awareness and helps people make their voices heard on environmental and public health issues. BELPO also aggregates and

evaluates Belize's existing and proposed legislation, and information about development projects, and makes this information accessible to the public.

There is a growing interest among Belize youth to get active in environmental protection. I worked with Amelita Knowles, BELPO's new Administrator, and showed her ways to use tech tools to engage the public and recruit young volunteers. Amelita is now working with her first group of volunteers. She is training them to give public presentations, distribute information, and be outspoken community leaders.

As tourism on the coast has risen, so has development. The **Placencia Citizens for Sustainable Development (PCSD)** and the **Ambergris Caye Citizens for Sustainable Development (ACCS)** have emerged in popular coastal towns to speak out against irresponsible development and offer sustainable alternatives.

Residents of Maya Beach, Seine Bight, and Placencia are all worried about rapid, unplanned, and unsustainable tourism development on the Placencia Peninsula. PCSD helped these communities get organized when a cruise operation announced plans to build a major port in their lagoon. The group was just a few hundred strong, but successful

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the potentially devastating project. Now, PCSD is exposing other irresponsible and illegal developments and working with local leaders to demand that only sustainable projects be approved. Their work is preserving mangrove forests and empowering communities.

PCSD's Adrian Vernon wears many hats. He was born and raised in Placencia and his knowledge of the ecosystem is unrivaled. He splits his time between the office and the field, where he monitors activity in the lagoon and plants mangrove seedlings. Adrian is respected by the local community and helps publish *Roots and Reef*, a widely read newspaper about local threats to the environment and community solutions. I helped Adrian strategize on effective ways to split his limited time. We worked on electronic communication tools and other time-saving techniques to reach and mobilize residents.

ACCSD in San Pedro serves as a community watchdog, monitoring new developments and reporting irresponsible behavior. They are developing a master development plan that includes ways for developers to better protect the local environment and be held accountable to local communities. ACCSD is also working to expand the protected area in the Hol Chan Marine Reserve and recruiting local volunteers to monitor the transforming coastline.

I worked with Coqui Rodriguez, ACCSD's Administrator, and showed her organizational tools to help her better communicate with the island community. ACCSD has many supporters and is working to mobilize that support into action. With ELAW's help, they plan to make their organization more visible with a new website and messaging with simple steps that concerned residents can take to protect their island against unsustainable development. ACCSD hopes to use electronic communication tools to establish a new community monitoring program that will put more eyes in the field and empower the community to defend valuable resources.

BELPO, PCSD, and ACCSD are all part of the Coalition to Save our National Heritage, a national alliance that is challenging offshore oil drilling.

During my visit, I learned that short-sighted developers fail to see what ELAW partners and community members see quite clearly: That without a healthy reef and rainforest, and without water resources for crops and recreation, tourism is impossible. Belizeans welcome tourism – they rely on tourism – but tourism does not have to be destructive.

I was inspired by the organizations I worked with

and how they are realizing practical alternatives. Many thanks to the Summit Foundation and the Oak Foundation for supporting ELAW's work in Belize.

For more information, please visit our partners' websites: Belize Institute of Environmental Law and Policy ([www.belpo.org](http://www.belpo.org)), Placencia Citizens for Sustainable Development ([www.saveourpeninsula.org/](http://www.saveourpeninsula.org/)), and Ambergris Caye Citizens for Sustainable Development ([sites.google.com/site/accsdbze](http://sites.google.com/site/accsdbze)).



*Lauren Ice began work as ELAW Office Manager in 2008. She recently left to pursue a law degree at the University of Oregon School of Law. Before ELAW, she conducted field studies at Kimana Group Ranch in southern Kenya and received a B.A in environmental studies from Austin College. She was an Organizer, Senior Field Manager, and Program Assistant at the Texas Campaign for the Environment.*

