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Belize: Coastline Faces Irreversible Damage

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Coastal erosion could seriously threaten Belize's tourism and capture-fishing industries, warns Audubon, the country's largest environmental organization. Tourism is Belize's biggest earner of foreign exchange, contributing 30% of the country's GDP. However, Audubon's Environmental Agenda for Belize 2008-2013, a five-year environmental analysis, says the industry's future is at risk. Nearly 700 sq km of land in Belize was identified as vulnerable to erosion and damage from waves, which comprises about 3% of all land in Belize and more than 85% of land within one kilometer of the coast. The organization warns that Belize should prepare itself for "the inevitable collapse of its coastal resources and further economic loss and crisis" if remedial action is not taken. This isn't scaremongering 60% of Belize's tourism is based around marine activities, and without the pristine environment that industry would fall. The Belize Barrier Reef, the longest in the Western Hemisphere, shelters most of the windward coast of Belize. About two-thirds of the mainland coast is protected by coral reefs, as well as the windward coast of most cayes. The degree of protection provided by a reef varies with reef type, depth, and distance from shore, as well as with coastal context: the elevation and slope of the shore, the geologic origin of the area, and the wave energy along the coast. Emergent reefs, such as the barrier reef, can mitigate more than three-quarters of wave-energy development, and visitation pressure on reefs have important implications for coral-reef health, and therefore for the future attractiveness of Belize as a destination. In 2008, reef- and mangrove-associated tourists spent an estimated US$150 million to US$196 million on accommodations, reef recreation, and other expenses. Glover's Reef Marine Reserve, an atoll system enclosing more than 800 patch reefs, is especially popular with divers and hosts a world-renowned research facility. In 1996, it was designated a World Heritage site, and guests visit from the mainland or come for a week at a time to kayak, snorkel, and dive from one of the five resorts inside the reserve. The World Resources Institute (WRI) estimates that between on-site resorts and day-trip visitors, reef-related tourism in Glover's alone contributes between US$3.8 million and US $5.6 million a year to the Belizean economy. But this vital source of income for the local population could be in serious danger as divers already complain that they are disappointed with the quality of the diving experience there. Fishing industry in jeopardy Fishing is an important cultural tradition, as well as a safety net and livelihood for many coastal Belizeans. With fish products being Belize's second-largest industry, the WRI estimates annual economic benefits from reef- and mangrove-dependent fisheries at between US$14 million and US$16 million. Coral reefs and mangroves are highly interconnected habitats, physically supporting each other and providing a habitat for many species. For example, mangroves filter sediment and pollutants from coastal runoff, supporting the clean water favored by corals. Many species important to fishing and tourism rely upon mangrove habitat for part of their life cycle approximately US$60 million to US$78 million of Belize's tourism revenue per year stems from the presence of healthy mangroves. Reefs and mangroves also protect coastal properties from erosion and wave-induced damage, providing an estimated US$231 million to US$347 million in avoided damages per year. Despite their importance, these benefits are frequently overlooked or underappreciated in coastal investment and policy decisions. In 2004, funding of Belize's Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute (CZMAI) was drastically cut, and the result is, says the Agenda, the loss of many mangrove swamps, which could result...
in the loss of the coastline's sustainability in five years if it is not managed, dealing another blow to tourism. Commercial fishing is at risk from overfishing, which would also affect sport-fishing tourism. A downturn in the sugar industry led workers to transfer to fishing instead. The report recommends limiting the number of fishing licenses given out. Sanctions are insufficient Visiting boats damage the reef with anchors, and pollution drains into the sea. Much of the problem is the result of the trend for high-density developments, where breaches of the law are "bypassed or overlooked by the government." The number of annual cruise tourists alone is double Belize's population. Audubon says the problem is not a lack of legislation but rather that legislation remains stuck in the draft stage. It is formulated and then quietly forgotten about, rendering it useless to respond to legal challenges from the aggressive developers that it was drafted to counter. Environmentalists call for harsher penalties for noncompliance with environmental regulations, citing fines of US$1,000 as inadequate deterrents to large multinationals. Audubon is also critical of the many Belizean laws that have a clause giving ministers overriding powers to amend or make exceptions at their discretion, easily rendering them null and void. An example is the Environmental Protection Act, which governments have tried to water down. A major obstacle to environmental considerations is Belize's need for foreign exchange, which makes its politicians less likely to rebuff large development projects with scant regard for environmental protection. After its debt was restructured in 2007, the Belize economy stabilized but it is far from robust. The environment has consistently been overlooked for the "greater good" of social and economic development, but this short-termism has brought the country to its present ecologically fragile state. Communities not taken into account Audubon says there is an "environment of indifference for public participation in decision making in government," with the impression that officials feel that it just slows things down and interferes with their work. They also cite the problem of "guided" consultation where, if the government is obliged to do a consultation, ministers just pay lip service to the process and screen out participants whom they perceive as opposed to a scheme. "The people who are going to be affected by these decisions, whether it's an individual or a community, have to have a voice," emphasizes Tanya Williams-Thompson, one of the report's editors. Many of the major tourism developments are foreign owned and direct tourist dollars away from smaller Belizean-owned developments in the community. Audubon recommends that all new major tourist endeavors consider the benefit to community tourist projects.