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Belize’s Booming Tourism Industry Strains Country’s Precarious Wastewater-Management Facilities

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San Pedro, a town on the southern part of the island of Ambergris Caye, in the Belize District, used to be a sleepy fishing village until word of its natural beauty got around and it became one of the most popular tourist destinations of the Caribbean, widely recommended in most travel guides as an ideal location for scuba diving.

This transformation has come hand in hand with a change in the population of the town, and today, according to official figures, San Pedro has a population of about 13,381, the second-largest town in the Belize District and the largest in the Belize Rural South constituency.

However, this inevitably means that the dynamics of the island’s environment have also been altered as Ambergris Caye has increasingly suffered the effects of pollution from a number of sources: the oily trail left behind by boats and cruise ships, domestic sewage originating from toilets, sinks, and other domestic sources, solid waste, agrochemicals, and industrial effluents.

Given that some, but not all, of San Pedro’s residences are equipped with septic tanks, untreated sewage is dumped into the sea on a daily basis, releasing large amounts of nitrates and phosphates into the island’s ecosystem and killing coral as well as other plants and animals.

An industry without chimneys?

San Pedro’s increasing popularity as a holiday destination, its demographic boom, and the environmental problems it has entailed are a microcosm that reflects the wider impact of tourism on Belize’s ecosystem and challenges the assumption that tourism is "an industry without chimneys."

The Belizean government has designated tourism as its second development priority after agriculture, and in 2012 tourist arrivals totaled 917,869, while tourism revenue exceeded US$1.3 billion (NotiCen, Feb. 4, 2010). Tourism currently accounts for 25% of all jobs and more than 20% of the country’s GDP.

Statistics published by the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) show that the Caribbean, which hosts 25 million holidaymakers each year, is the world’s most dependent region on tourism as a source of jobs and revenue. Tourism currently accounts for 12% of all jobs, 13% of the region’s GDP, and 22.3% of total investment.

However, with little being done to protect the environment, Belize’s main tourist attractions such as the Barrier Reef (the second-largest in the world), its 450 offshore cayes (islands), waters for windsurfing, swimming, and snorkeling, and numerous rivers and wildlife reserves have increasingly come under threat from pollution.

The Caribbean, on the whole, faces a similar predicament. "Tourism is an important driver of today’s economy. However, close to 80% of municipal wastewater generated is discharged to the receiving water bodies and recent studies show that very high quantities of fecal matter can be
found in the coasts. Poor wastewater management could cost the Caribbean US$200 million-US$300 million a year in tourism revenue," says Donna May Sakura-Lemessy, deputy director at the Trinidad-based Institute of Marine Affairs.

**Wastewater management must be a priority**

The UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) has painted a dismal picture of Belize’s current sewage-treatment facilities. Belize City’s wastewater flows into two facultative lagoons in the southern part of the city where it undergoes a 10-day treatment process. Although the chambers have suffered from corrosion and weed growth, UNEP deems their condition to be acceptable, with a biological oxygen-removal rate of about 80%-85%.

The city of Belmopan is a completely different story. Treatment involves sedimentation tanks only, not all the meters and pumps are working, and the plant is considered "a potential health hazard" as the effluent is discharged into the Belize River. The plant’s oxygen demand removal rate barely reaches 5%.

"The water sector in general, throughout the region, suffers from a lack of investment, and wastewater, in particular, is of low priority," says Denise Forrest, the project coordinator for the Global Environmental Facility Caribbean Region Fund for Wastewater Management Project (GEF CRew).

To tackle the problem, in 2011, the GEF launched CRew, which aims to inject much needed funding into the region’s ailing wastewater sector. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the UNEP act as co-implementing agencies for the project.

The Project Coordination Group, responsible for its overall management, is based in Jamaica, and Pilot Executing Agencies (PEA) have been set up in Jamaica, Belize, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago.

As part of this program, the Belize Wastewater Revolving Fund has received US$5 million to repair the Belmopan wastewater-management plant and build a new plant in the Placencia Peninsula, in southeastern Belize. "Money is lent to the utility company so that it has a source of payment and can pay back into the fund. The payback will come from tariffs," explains Forrest.

Like San Pedro, Placencia, a narrow, 24 km strip of land between the Caribbean Sea and the Placencia Lagoon, has become a major tourist attraction, with development projects clustered around Placencia Village, Seine Bight, and Maya Beach, which are experiencing an annual population growth of 9%. With new hotels, resorts, and condominiums being built each year, the need for effective wastewater management has become even more pressing.

Although these projects are a step in the right direction, Forrest emphasizes that more needs to be done in reforming legislation and making environmental sustainability a priority. "CRew offers the opportunity to change the storyline regarding the region’s wastewater management. We’ve brought water to our communities, but we’ve forgotten that we’ve got wastewater as a result of water," she says.

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