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Cruise Ships Could Wreck Belize’s Coastline, Say Environmentalists

by Louisa Reynolds
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The decision by the administration of Belize's Prime Minister Dean Barrow to allow a subsidiary of Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) to invest US$50 million in the construction of a cruise port on Harvest Caye, a 75-hectare island 5 km southwest of Placencia Village, has outraged environmentalists and other civil-society groups who have argued that the government has made a U-turn and turned its back on its sustainable-tourism policy, which rejects mass cruise-ship tourism.

The plan, announced in July 2013, would give NCL 25 years of cruise-port exclusivity for more than half the country’s navigable coastline as well as generous tax concessions and permission to employ non-Belizeans for 25% of its work force. The government also agreed to give back to NCL US$4 of every US$7 paid in passenger head tax.

As part of the approval process for NCL’s proposed cruise port, the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the National Environment Appraisal Committee (NEAC) held a public consultation on the environmental-impact assessment (EIA) submitted by NCL to the Belizean authorities.

More than 300 people attended the consultation, making it the largest EIA consultation in the history of southern Belize. During the event, people voted overwhelmingly against the EIA and voiced a number of concerns, mostly regarding environmental pollution, and pointed out what they believed to be incorrect information regarding water, dredging, flora and fauna, air pollution, the amount of garbage that would be generated if the project goes ahead, and socioeconomic impacts (NotiCen, Feb. 4, 2010, and Feb. 20, 2014).

Civil-society groups argue that the Cabinet approved the government’s memorandum of understanding (MOU) with NCL without consulting local residents, the tourism industry, or environmental groups and didn’t disclose it to the public until after it had been signed during a closed press conference where the government ensured that no dissenting voices would be heard. Although the MOU is not legally binding, it paves the way for a detailed binding contract between the two parties.

The Belizean government attempted to push forward a similar project in 2004, when the government planned to build a US$50 million docking port in the Port of Loyola area in Belize City. The unpublicized signing of a contract agreeing to this port by the Belizean government was leaked to the public, leading to strong protests from the ecotourism and overnight-tourism sectors. In the end, however, these plans were scrapped because of a dispute about land rights.

Belize’s cruise-ship boom

Belize has experienced a cruise-ship boom since the country opened the Belize Tourism Village early in 2002, a terminal in Belize City specifically built to cater to cruise tourists. The Belize Tourism Board says that 640,734 cruise ships visited Belize in 2012, a figure that increased to 677,350 in 2013, and that number is expected to increase by 34% in 2014. Twenty-one cruise lines travel to Belize,
including well-known companies such as Cunard, Carnival, and Royal Caribbean. Tourism remains Belize’s largest earner of foreign exchange.

In early 2000, the Belize Tourism Board (BTB) released the Belize Cruise Tourism Policy, recommending a daily visitation limit of 3,000 cruise passengers. This capacity was quickly exceeded, and the revised Belize Cruise Tourism Policy adjusted the daily visitation limit to 8,000 passengers. Once again, this capacity was surpassed, making it necessary to rethink the country’s cruise-tourism policy.

Belize’s cruise-ship boom mirrors the growth of the global tourism industry as a whole. Cruising is growing in popularity, and the worldwide cruise-ship industry has averaged 8.4% growth per year during the past two decades. Since 1970, the number of people taking a cruise has increased by more than 1,000%. In North America alone, the increase has been fivefold—from 1.4 million to almost 7 million.

However, Oceana, a nonprofit advocacy organization (NGO) dedicated to protecting the world’s oceans, says that each day a cruise ship with 3,000 passengers generates as much as 30,000 gallons of sewage, 255,000 gallons of dirty water from showers, sinks, laundries, and dishwashers, 7,000 gallons of oily bilge water, and smokestack and exhaust emissions equivalent to 12,000 cars. "Cruise ships are needlessly dumping vast amounts of raw sewage and other harmful wastes into some of the most pristine parts of our oceans every day," says Oceana.

After being heavily fined in the late 1990s, the cruise industry developed environmental policies to treat wastewater, says Oceana. However, these systems are actually on very few ships, and, even if cruise liners claim to keep logs of the pollution they generate and their sewage-treatment activities, in practice, no one is overseeing the industry and ensuring compliance, claims the NGO.

In the case of Belize’s burgeoning cruise-ship industry, Oceana’s findings have been echoed by researcher Amy Diedrich of the Department of Marine Affairs at the University of Rhode Island, author of a study entitled "Cruise ship tourism in Belize: The implications of developing cruise ship tourism in an ecotourism destination."

Dietrich’s study covered six coastal communities: Belize City, Placencia, Punta Gorda, San Pedro on Ambergris Caye, Caye Caulker, and Hopkins. Based on extensive surveys with overnight-tourism providers, cruise-ship tourists, local residents, and other actors, the study concludes that cruise tourists have less interest in conserving the marine environment than overnight tourists and that cruise-ship owners are considered less concerned about environmental protection than hotel owners.

"The potential rapid increase of cruise tourism ... necessitates immediate and thorough attention to understanding the potential implications from environmental and socio-economic perspectives and also in terms of how it might affect the current overnight tourism market," concludes Dietrich.