

The BRASS / El Pilar Program

BRASS / El Pilar - Management History

MANAGING THE CONTIGUOUS PARKS AT EL PILAR, BELIZE AND GUATEMALA

INTRODUCTION:

Beneath the lush canopy of the Maya forest, the Maya Center of El Pilar prospered for 1,500 years, reaching its zenith around the year 900. Over the course of centuries, since as early as 250 B.C., the flourishing center gradually grew to become the primary administrative center in the Belize River area, replete with sweeping plazas and temples.

As the Maya at El Pilar evolved, so did the forest that sustained them. To meet the needs of their growing population, Maya households cultivated the forest's abundance of plant life that is suited for human use. Indeed, current research shows that today up to 90% of the forest's botanicals are useful to humans. Cultivating these resources, the ancient Maya supported a population that exceeded today's figures. Studies reveal that the population density 11 centuries ago, during the Maya Classic Period, was from three to nine-times the region's current level. Today, the Maya forest stands as an enduring monument to the resourcefulness of the Maya.

While it withstood millennia of Maya occupation, today the Maya forest is at risk. Contemporary agricultural strategies, population movements, and human development schemes that lack environmental consideration now threaten the rich, biodiverse forest that the Maya cultivated a millennium ago. Today, the Maya forest is ranked second of 25 resources at risk by Population International (2000). Contemporary lines cut the landscape. New roads slice through the forest, paving the way for human migration into wilderness frontier, and political boundaries overlay ancient monuments. The forest around El Pilar stretches before the eye unbroken, yet the international border between Belize and Guatemala invisibly divides El Pilar's monuments between the two nations.

Furthermore, the ancient Maya monuments themselves are at risk without formal protection – threatened by looters and destructive methods of exposure. In order to formally protect the natural and cultural resources at El Pilar, a path of conservation was embarked upon nearly ten years ago. The El Pilar Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna in Belize and the protected Monumento Cultural El Pilar in Guatemala were established to protect the shared resources at El Pilar. Along with research and education on ancient Maya land-use, the innovative, cross-border, participatory management planning process designed by the El Pilar Program promises to build a lasting and effective base for the conservation of the Maya Forest.

TOWARDS FORMAL PROTECTION

In 1992, Anabel Ford, an archaeologist from the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) began meeting with government officials in Belize to spread her vision for the Maya forest: a protected reserve at the little-known Maya center of El Pilar. Ford had a history at the site. She had made her first visit to El Pilar with John Morris and Jaime Awe of the Belize Department of Archaeology (DoA) in 1982. By that time, the site had already been officially recorded in the DoA. But, El Pilar's true size remained unknown - and promised to be significant. As director of UCSB's BRASS project (Belize River Archaeological Settlement Survey), Ford was interested in investigating Maya settlement patterns. Ford incorporated the El Pilar site into the BRASS project and began the initial survey and map of the site in 1984. During the following years, visits to El Pilar became more frequent as work at the site gained momentum. In 1992, Cayo Area Representative Daniel Silva, along with Department of Archaeology, contracted a team of local workers under the direction of Ford to clear El Pilar's main plazas, opening them to the view of the general public for the first time. With the full support of the Belize Government, Ford planned a full-scale investigation at El Pilar during the 1993 field season. The BRASS/El Pilar Program was set in motion.

During these initial years of investigation at El Pilar, it had become apparent that the site needed formal protection. In Belize, lands were periodically cleared of high bush for farming and in Guatemala trees were being illegally logged. Furthermore, the DoA could do little to stop looters without establishing full-time surveillance at the site. Numerous illegal excavations had damaged the ancient monuments at El Pilar, threatening their structural integrity. As a protective measure, the BRASS/El Pilar program provided funds for a local caretaker, Teo Williams, at the site in 1992.

Meanwhile, proposals for reserve boundaries had been submitted and circulated within Belize Ministries. Two sets of boundaries were submitted for the consideration of the government. One set of proposed boundaries delineated an area a kilometer and 1/2 around the El Pilar site; another covered 3x3 kilometers, or roughly 2000 hectares of land. The DoA moved ahead with the latter. As the El Pilar program worked toward the official establishment of these boundaries, a network of alliances and collaborators evolved that reflected the growth of the El Pilar vision, now posed to touch two nations and upwards of 60,000 locals in zones adjacent to the reserve.

An Expanding Network

From the outset, Ford was concerned that the development at El Pilar translates into real opportunities for the local village of Bullet Tree Falls and surrounding communities. Convinced that local stewardship is key to effective conservation efforts in the Maya forest, Ford consulted the community regarding the creation of a local organization related to the development of El Pilar as a protected reserve. In 1993, a broad-based community organization called Amigos de El Pilar (AdEP) formed to advocate the conservation efforts at El Pilar, sustainable development in the community, and local education geared towards the conservation of cultural and natural resources.

An expanding network of collaborators connected AdEP and the El Pilar Program to the tourist world. In 1994, Godsman Ellis, president of the Cayo Belize Tourism Industry Association, approached Ford about joining forces with AdEP and BRASS/El Pilar in a collaborative project that would bring El Pilar into the growing fold of eco-tourism with funds from the Natural Resource Protection Program, under USAID. With the NARMAP resources and matching funds from the BRASS/El Pilar Program, the Ford's research endeavor at El Pilar grew into a much larger undertaking that required collaboration non-governmental agencies NGO's within and outside of Belize and with government agencies such as the Department of Lands, the Ministry of Natural Resources, and ultimately the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Guatemala was drawn into the El Pilar vision.

Funds were directed towards a number of initiatives that materialized over the following years. In 1994, the Belize government guaranteed that permanent funds be allotted for the maintenance of a caretaker at El Pilar. This was the first official step toward the protection of the site, and came along with other developments. The El Pilar Program continued to provide for two over caretakers to maintain the grounds, and began the construction of a caretaker's facility that would ensure full-time surveillance of the site. With the Amigos de El Pilar, the BRASS/El Pilar Program created a network of trails that incorporated the site's various ecological zones and Maya monuments, providing the infrastructure to attract visitors to the region as tourists began to hear of El Pilar's charms and make their way to the site.

At the start of 1994, an impressive delegation of government officials visited El Pilar through the Ministry of Natural Resources in order to assess the lands situation and the establishment of reserve boundaries. Now working more closely with ministry officials such as Lindsay Belinge, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Natural Resources, and also Dr. Víctor Gonzales, the PS of the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, it became clear that the government strongly supported the establishment of a reserve. With ministry officials, it was decided that the park should be an Archaeological Reserve, under the administration of the DOA, to avoid the bureaucratic complexity of creating both an archaeological and a natural reserve that would have spanned multiple ministries. Though El Pilar would officially be an archaeological reserve, a name was chosen that incorporated the environmental emphasis of the reserve - the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna. At the end of the 1994 field season, a lands survey was commenced to determine the official boundaries of the reserve.

As it is presently known, the El Pilar site is divided into three primary sectors. In Belize, Xaman Pilar (North) and Nohol Pilar (South) are connected to Pilar Poniente (West) in the Petén of Guatemala via an ancient causeway that bisects the international border between Belize and Guatemala. Though the two nations have been historically divided by a contentious past, the BRASS/El Pilar Program instigated a path of conservation and research that united the Belize and Guatemala around the protection and management of El Pilar.

Conservation efforts in Guatemala began in May 1994 at a Mayafor USAID meeting on community development. Archie Carr III arranged for the participation of Ford, who made a presentation on the initial progress of the fledgling community organization, AdEP. The presentation introduced Guatemala circles to The BRASS/El Pilar Program's vision for community inclusive management of shared resources at El Pilar. During that trip, Ford also met with the head of Prehispanic Monuments at IDAEH (Instituto de Antropología e Historia), Erik Ponsiano, to introduce him to the work at El Pilar and to ask permission to map Pilar Poniente. Ponsiano agreed to the mapping and was enthusiastic about the possibility of a contiguous reserve.

No time was lost in the mapping of Pilar Poniente. Guatemalan archaeologist Miguel Orrego and José Sanchez of CONAP spent a week mapping the area and submitted an initial report to IDAEH and Consejo Técnico de Arqueología by July. In September 1994, Ford was invited to meet with the Guatemalan Ministry of Culture to present her vision of a contiguous reserve at El Pilar. By 1995, El Pilar was established as a paper park in Guatemala and the official boundaries of the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna were established in Belize.

Parallel Paths of Conservation in the Maya Forest

Connecting Communities to Conservation

To bring together representatives from Belize and Guatemala to discuss the future of the El Pilar and outline preliminary and strategic plans for the reserve in Belize and Guatemala, the BRASS/ El Pilar Program organized a binational workshop called the “Encuentro El Pilar.” Sponsored by the Comisión Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo (CCAD), directed by Jorge Cabrera, representatives from Guatemala included Juan Antonio Valdes, director of IDAEH, and Erik Ponciano of Monumentos Prehispanicos. José Anotonio Montes from the Institute for Environmental Rights and Sustainable Development also attended. Montes would later become an important component of the EL Pilar Program. Representatives from Belize included the Commissioner of Archaeology, Brian Woodeye, representatives from Forestry, and the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, Natural Resources, and the Amigos de El Pilar. All participants had the opportunity to visit El Pilar to assess its possibilities.

The Encuentro El Pilar led to solid commitments on the part of Belize and Guatemala. Participants outlined short and long-term steps towards formal protection of El Pilar. Representatives from Guatemala developed a strict timetable for the establishment of a Cultural Monument at Pilar Poniente, which falls in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala’s Petén. The Government of Belize committed sign into law the Statutory Instrument making El Pilar a legal national reserve and pledged continuing support to the El Pilar Program, directed by Ford. Jointly, participants agreed to develop parallel management schemes for the administration of El Pilar, delegating management to include local communities.

The Encuentro El Pilar set the stage for the Mesa Redonda El Pilar, held in Mexico City in 1997. With funds from the Ford and the Macarthur Foundations, the El Pilar Project organized the Mesa Redonda, bringing together 28 professionals from Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States representing archaeology, ecology, law, and the government to develop a vision for the future management of the contiguous reserves at El Pilar. The Mesa Redonda’s end result was a comprehensive set of values and guidelines to shape the focus of development at El Pilar. The innovative plan devised by experts at the Mesa Redonda recognizes that a critical component for the preservation of cultural and natural resources is the incorporation of local communities in management design and implementation.

Indeed, local communities represent the ultimate stewards of natural and cultural resources. The Maya Forest will not be effectively protected until communities are incorporated in conservation efforts. At El Pilar, communities have shown that they play an important role as guardians of the forest. When a group of displaced farmers threatened to burn land in the reserve in 1996, AdEP gathered

the signatures of over 100 community members who sought the protection of El Pilar. AdEP then went to the capitol to meet with government leaders and vent their concerns. Through this effort, and the subsequent action of the DoA, the government acted to stop the destruction of the reserve. In this case, the community acted as a watchdog and government advocate to ensure that national regulations be enforced at El Pilar.

Apart from recognizing the need for local stewards, participants of the Mesa Redonda also noted that the development of El Pilar as an archaeological reserve would undoubtedly draw tourists to the area, noting that although Belize had a successful track-record with tourism, it is still dominated by large hotels, cruise packages, and tour packages that bypass local villages. John Morris of the DoA emphatically stated that, "the development of infrastructure for tourism needs to take priority. Emphasis on small scale enterprises, local arts and crafts, village and community cooperation can help" [Ford, 1998 #833].

The El Pilar Program and the community organization Amigos de El Pilar are committed to develop the type of tourist venture that does not overlook local residents. While participants of the Mesa Redonda stressed that community-based ecotourism is the most appropriate path of development for El Pilar, AdEP President Marcos Garcia described the work ahead for AdEP and the local community in a statement to fellow participants: "People of the village do not have a clear idea of what ecotourism is all about...we need to be trained so that the impact of ecotourism will be positive and not negative. This is one of the alternatives we think should work in conjunction with Amigos de El Pilar, reaffirming that we have a future with ecotourism." (Ford, 1998 #833) To offset these obstacles, the participants of the Mesa Redonda urged the governments of Belize, Guatemala, and national and international organizations to work with local communities to forge a model for cooperative cultural and natural resource management.

Through the initiative of the BRASS/El Pilar Program and AdEP, local communities are gaining awareness of El Pilar and the opportunities it presents for local development. AdEP sponsored events such as local workshops, BBQ's, an essay contest, and community outreach has effectively integrated locals into efforts surrounding El Pilar. This significant document recognizes the importance of surrounding communities as local stewards and those most impacted by development at El Pilar. The BRASS/El Pilar Program inaugurated an annual Fiesta El Pilar that highlights local culture, and Maya history, and draws thousands of visitors to the site every year.

To increase the effectiveness of the El Pilar Program and advance its goals within the community, Help for Progress (HfP), a Belizean NGO committed to improving rural life in the Maya Forest, was enlisted by the BRASS/ El Pilar Program to work with AdEP in 1997. In respect to reserve management, regional program advocates were formally incorporated into the El Pilar Program. In

Belize, Anselmo Castaneda focuses on local and regional environmental issues. In Guatemala, Jose Antonio Montes concentrates on legal and political processes.

The official development of contiguous reserves at El Pilar was the highlight of the 1998. In Belize, Statutory Instrument #54 of 1998 was signed into law by the Minister Henry Young of the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, officially protecting the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora. In Guatemala, the Monumento Cultural El Pilar was declared as a protected area within the Reserva de la Biosfera Maya by Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP), the government agency that oversees the Maya Biosphere Reserve and El Pilar. The cross-border aspect of the El Pilar archaeological reserves site is unique in the region. With both the governments of Belize and Guatemala recognizing El Pilar as two contiguous reserves protecting one cultural resource in two countries, the next step would to develop a strategy for managing the reserves.

To work out this point, The BRASS/ El Pilar Program organized a second Mesa Redonda El Pilar (MRII). Held in Placencia in 1998, the Mesa Redonda II brought together the a growing network to further the unique program of research and development at El Pilar. With reserves officially established on both sides of the border, the El Pilar Program was now in a position to bring broad goals introduced by the first Mesa Redonda into a design for concrete action. Participants drafted a management plan for El Pilar that included short and long-term goals related to law, community participation, and tourism.

A gratifying number of locals from villages in Belize and Guatemala participated in the proceedings of the MRII. The clear accord between AdEP and the government representatives at the MRII was underscored by the latter's approval of the community's role in reserve management planning, a role that they suggested would be enhanced by university level training aimed at building local management capacity. Not only was AdEP an effective participant in the MRII, endorsing the drafted management plan, they relayed the results of the proceedings to the residents of surrounding communities. The inclusion of the community – the group that has the greatest stake in the future of the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve –in the MRII augmented the viability and the credibility management planning process. The work done at the MRII continued into 1999.

The development of the contiguous reserve, the remarkable achievement the marked the BRASS/El Pilar program in 1998, was topped in 1999 by the endorsement of parallel management plans that were developed at the MRII. The Protected Areas Technical Evaluation Committee El Pilar (PATEC-EP) was formed and held six meeting to finalize the draft management plan for El Pilar. The committee reaffirmed the importance of ensuring that local communities receive direct and long-term benefits from El Pilar, describing for, "in order to promote the advantages that can be derived from El Pilar's location, an alliance has been formed between the Amigos de El Pilar and the site, the El Pilar

Program, and internationally.” The PATEC committee finalized and endorsed the innovative management plan, which is the first of its kind for the DoA and which, “will serve as an example for the many management plans in archaeology yet to be developed in the region as well as those within the DoA,” wrote Hon. Mark Espat, Minister of Tourism and Youth.” [Ford, 2001 #52].

A similar finalization process was undertaken in Mexico that led to CONAP's endorsement of the management plan. These proceedings culminated in November 1999 at the “Dia del Sombrero Verde” workshop in Yaxha. There, governmental and non-governmental agencies from both Belize and Guatemala drafted a letter of intent for cooperative management of EL Pilar. This significant document recognizes the importance of surrounding communities as local stewards and those most impacted by development at El Pilar.

The first two Mesa Redondas produced a comprehensive plan to guide the management of El Pilar. A third Mesa Redonda El Pilar (MRIII) was held in June 2000 in Remate, Petén, Guatemala. The objective of the MRIII was to formalize the institutional arrangements for the administration of El Pilar in Belize and Guatemala in legal terms. Initiated by the legal research of Montes and Thomas Ankersen of UF, the MRIII resulted in the creation of a technical advisory group called the Consultative Council for El Pilar (CoCEP) to support management entities in both countries and coordinate research and tourism development and El Pilar.. In June of the 2001, the first formal meetings of CoCEP convened, and a strategic plan for El Pilar that unifies the interests enshrined in drafts of both Belize's and Guatemala's management plans was approved (Appendix I). CoCEP membership is made up of representatives from all key management structures: AdEP Belize, AdEP Guatemala, Help for Progress, Canaan Kaax, the DoA, IDEAH, The Belize Department of Forestry, CONAP, Mesoamerican Biological Corridors, BRASS/El Pilar, INGUAT, and the Belize Tourism Bureau. The Council promises to secure cooperative management, prepare delegation agreements and statutory instruments, and to develop a sustainable, long-term funding base for the operation of the contiguous reserves. CoCEP will strengthen the participation of communities adjacent to EPAR in their efforts to promote conservation and responsible management of resources.

CoCEP is the final result of a management process that began in 1992 with Anabel Ford's initial consultations with the Government of Belize. The Mesa Redonda process provided El Pilar with a visionary management plan. Organizational structures have emerged from the process. Now, with CoCEP's establishment, the organizational infrastructure for the contiguous reserves at El Pilar is operational.

This threshold has arrived at a critical moment. Visitation to El Pilar has increased from 20 to 30 tourists to 3,000 tourists a year, and a considerable increase in tourist visitations is expected in the near future. We are rapidly approaching the moment that John Morris warned of at the first Mesa Redonda

nearly 5 years ago when large hotels, and arranged tours threaten to overpass local communities.

Fortunately, at El Pilar the foresight of the government of Belize, non-governmental organizations, and the BRASS/ El Pilar Program, a true path of community led conservation has been embraced. To predict the success of the El Pilar Program design in the future, it is useful look at how far the program has come in the past 10 years.

With the support of many institutions we have rescued the archaeological site, and little by little, we have created an awareness of it potentials. The Fiesta El Pilar has been institutionalized, now attracting thousands of visitors from around the world. Four important trails have been established for visiting tourists along with comfort stations, picnic area, and look-out point. Trail guides are available to inform tourists of the important work being done at the site. The development of contiguous parks and parallel management have been applauded by world-wide and hailed as a major accomplishment. Most importantly, the local community has been involved in the process.