

“Protecting Our Natural Resources by Developing Our Human Resources”: Community Group Helps Protect Belize Barrier Reef Ecosystem

SGP Grantee: Friends of Nature

Location: Placencia, near Laughing Bird Caye National Park, Belize

Ecosystem Type: marine

Biodiversity Significance: UNESCO World Heritage Site, Global 200 EcoRegion 235 (Mesoamerican Reef)

Key Themes: community participation in protected area management, sustainable fishing, ecotourism

SGP Contribution: \$1,010.10 (planning grant, 2000), \$38,990 (2000), and \$49,511 (2002)

Background

The Belize Barrier Reef—the largest barrier reef in the western hemisphere—is home to a vast array of marine life, including many threatened species such as turtles and manatees. It is also of major importance to fish populations; every year, tens of thousands of fish come to spawn in certain spots along the shore. Local community members in Belize have played a remarkable role in ensuring that these biological resources are protected. They fought government efforts to sell Laughing Bird Caye, a small island 12 miles offshore of Placencia, and instead convinced the government to declare it a national park in 1991. It has since been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. When the government lacked funds to manage the park, community members formed an organization, which would later become Friends of Nature, to undertake the effort themselves through a co-management agreement with the Forest Department. Friends of Nature began as a small group of concerned citizens with little experience in conservation and no funding. It has since grown into a professionally staffed NGO, which undertakes biological studies to better understand and monitor natural resources, and finds ways to make conservation benefit the local community. The group's motto says it all: “Protecting our natural resources by developing our human resources.”

Project Implementation

SGP helped Friends get off its feet, providing a planning grant and advice as they worked to determine their role as co-managers of Laughing Bird Caye National Park. This assistance was critical for the group to develop a full project proposal, funded by SGP in 2000, to establish mooring and marker buoys, build a ranger's station and revise the management plan to charge user fees. The SGP grant helped the Friends leverage funding from other sources, including The Nature Conservancy and the Oak Foundation, and to build their capacity to look even beyond Laughing Bird Caye. After conducting a study of nearby Gladden Spit, a very important fish spawning site, Friends of Nature convinced the government to declare it a marine reserve, which Friends now co-manages. Their role is critical; since they are trusted by the local community, they have helped convince local fishermen to agree to fishing limits. Now they are lobbying for the protection of Placencia lagoon, an important manatee habitat. More recently, Friends of Nature has benefited from a program called Community Management of Protected Area Conservation (COMPACT), funded by SGP and the United Nations Foundation. With COMPACT's support, Friends of Nature has started a program to train local people be diving guides. This helps local community members benefit from the increased tourism associated with these parks. It also helps Friends' research efforts, since these divers can now participate in biological monitoring. According to Lindsay Garbut, executive director of Friends, this increases their ability to gain local cooperation for conservation: “We know that the communities will take our recommendations seriously because they will know that some of their neighbors were involved in the research.”

Results

Thanks to Friends of Nature, today two critical locations within the Belize Barrier Reef—Laughing Bird Caye and Gladden Spit—have protected status and are being managed for conservation. The local community is much more aware of the biological treasures amidst which they live, thanks to the biological research being carried out by members of Friends. They are also benefiting from this conservation. Prior to the parks' establishment, when local people could not earn enough from fishing, some would turn to hunting in local forests. Now, tourism is a major source of income for the local population, and Friends of Nature is actively involved in minimizing visitors' impact on the reef ecosystem.

Partnerships

SGP's support for Friends of Nature played a critical role. According to Garbut, "By investing in Friends, the SGP gave it instant credibility. Without that, Friends might still be floating." This has facilitated their access to other grants, and helped them work with the government more effectively. Through its involvement in COMPACT, Friends of Nature is now contributing to an international effort to build better models for community participation in protected areas. COMPACT, funded by the GEF Small Grants Programme and the United Nations Foundation, is operating in six UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Belize, Dominica, Mexico, Kenya, the Philippines, and Tanzania.