

Green Reef Environmental Institute

Summary of Open Letter to National and Local Government Officials

January 29, 2008

The prosperity of Ambergris Caye, the value of real estate and other investments on Ambergris Caye, and the tax revenues generated by Ambergris Caye depend ultimately on the island's ability to attract visitors. We need those who come for a week and those who buy a condo, time share or house to stay longer.

Studies and surveys show clearly that what attracts visitors to Ambergris Caye is the natural environment in and around it. That natural environment is our greatest asset.

We and our government must protect our greatest asset. We and our government ... national and local ... PUP, UDP or third party.

Everyone who lives, works, owns a business or has invested on Ambergris Caye depends on the protection of the natural resources that attract visitors.

I am requesting that, quickly following the election on February 7, those to whom this letter is addressed take such action as is necessary to accomplish the following:

1. Protect the Bird Cayes

These tiny cayes are famous for the huge population of resident and migratory water and land birds that feed, nest and roost there. They are also well-known for fishing, such as at the bonefish flat near Los Salones, because the birds provide a continuous supply of nutrients (guano) to the mangrove habitats that protect the young of many marine species.

The Bird Cayes attract bird watchers and sport fishermen, and they support the tour guides from Ambergris Caye (and elsewhere) who take them there. Now, it appears they are being sold.

Last week, I traveled to a few of the Bird Cayes on a trip organized by the San Pedro Business Association. Also on the trip were representatives of *Ambergris Today*, *The San Pedro Sun* and Hol Chan Marine Reserve. We saw and photographed the following:

- Cayo Punta Bajo has been cleared of mangroves. Survey pegs are firmly in place.
- Cayo Savannah has been cleared of *all vegetation*. Survey pegs are firmly in place.
- Little Guana, a *Crown Reserve bird sanctuary*, has been surveyed. Survey pegs in the water suggest plans for dredging and landfill.
- Cayo Iguana has been surveyed and is now being cleared of mangroves. The Guatemalans doing the clearing said they didn't know the identity of the owner or the development plans, but named the person who hired and paid them—a prominent San Pedro business man believed by many to be a champion of tourism!

All sales of the Bird Cayes can and must be reversed. (See below for how.) Then they must be given protected status that is respected and enforced.

2. Protect the Wetlands and Lagoons of Ambergris Caye

The San Pedro Town Council and the Government of Belize have each recently sold part of the wetlands and lagoons on western Ambergris Caye that are the primary feeding ground for many bird species of the Bird Cayes, Ambergris Caye, Belize and the Yucatán Peninsula.

The wetlands and lagoons to which I refer are those *historically* used for bird watching, sport fishing and kayaking. These are the same areas proposed for protected status many times in the past. In fact, reserving these areas for recreational activities has been recommended in virtually every broad plan for tourism development on Ambergris Caye.

I am not referring to the high ground suitable for development or the existing San Mateo residential area (that was somehow deemed suitable for development several years ago).

The recent sales of the wetlands and lagoons of western Ambergris Caye can and must be reversed. Then they must be given protected status that is respected and enforced.

3. Protect Hol Chan Marine Reserve, the single *most visited site in Belize*

Why is Hol Chan in need of protection? Hol Chan's marine life and surrounding environment—the features that attract the divers, snorkelers and sport fishermen who support us—are threatened.

➤ The proposed South Beach development is a “gated resort community” modeled after South Beach, Florida, to be built adjacent to Hol Chan's Zone C. The building plans include condominiums, hotels, villas, shopping malls, marinas, a casino, a theatre, a trolley line to San Pedro and numerous supporting facilities.

See www.southbeachbelize.com to understand its massive scale. Look at the map to see clearly its proximity to Hol Chan. Note that the South Beach map even labels a part of Hol Chan as its “Grand Canal,” on the shore of which are the labels “HIGH END LUXURY RESORT” and “EXCLUSIVE SUPER-LUXURY VILLAS, YACHTS DOCK.” Look at the architect's drawings of South Beach from the water, and imagine that view as you fish in Hol Chan.

Construction of South Beach will require large-scale destruction of mangroves, dredging and use of dredged material for fill. Marine communities do not remain healthy through such activities.

➤ Just south of Hol Chan are Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals. These areas now support a healthy population of bonefish and other species, which in turn supports a healthy sport-fishing industry. They also provide critical “feeder habitats” supporting Hol Chan and should have been included in the original designation of the Marine Reserve. The Hol Chan Board and San Pedro Tour Guide Association, among others, have for years been advocating the expansion of the Marine Reserve to include Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals.

However, Cayo Cangrejo now appears to have been sold. Survey lines have been cut on the island, suggesting that it is slated for development. Construction on Cayo Cangrejo poses the same threat to Hol Chan and its marine life as the South Beach development.

➤ The combined effect on Hol Chan of the South Beach development on its northern border and development on Cayo Cangrejo to the south is truly horrifying to contemplate. Hol Chan will have been reduced to a narrow strip of water and reef sandwiched between developments, diminished to the status of a hotel pond. Add the inevitable damage to its marine life, and Hol Chan will no longer be of economic benefit to the people of Ambergris Caye or anywhere else.

The sale of Cayo Cangrejo can and must be reversed. Then Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals must be added to the Marine Reserve.

Plans for the South Beach development must be modified sufficiently to protect Hol Chan or must be prohibited altogether. Without dramatic changes in the plan, the people of Ambergris Caye cannot afford it, no matter how many jobs it creates. The various agencies and departments of both the national and local governments must coordinate to ensure that none of them permits any action that could threaten the single most visited site in Belize.

4. Approve a master plan for Ambergris Caye.

The people of Ambergris Caye must again develop a master plan for the island, and this time the GOB must adopt and support it.

Even when the effect of an *individual* construction project (or dredging operation or new vehicle) is minimal, their *cumulative* effect—approved one permit at a time—can negatively impact the quality of life on Ambergris Caye and deter the very visitors we depend upon. Only with a vision of where we want to go can we judge whether a particular project will move us in the right direction. Approval of individual developments without regard to their impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people who live, work and invest here is not “economic development.”

In addition, the local and national governments must communicate and coordinate their actions. Whatever good might be accomplished by one authority acting in accordance with the master plan can be undone by, for example, a Geology Department that sells a dredging permit in close proximity to a marine protected area without considering its negative economic impact.

5. Consider the *full* economic impact of land sales and development.

Visitors are attracted to Ambergris Caye and to the rest of Belize not only by our natural resources, but by the nation's *reputation* for *commitment to the effective protection* of those natural resources. The same can be said of the many granting organizations that provide funding to Belize. The nation cannot afford to neglect either its natural resources or its reputation.

All officials and institutions of government, local and national, must consider the *full, long-term effects* of their actions. Evaluations of proposed for "economic development" must consider the jobs to be *lost*, as well those to be gained.

We cannot afford the long-term costs of selling a protected area, such as a Crown Reserve bird sanctuary, or of permitting developments that impinge upon or even *negate* a protected area.

How to Reverse Sales. The Government of Belize or the San Pedro Town Council can easily reverse the sales of the Bird Cayes, wetland/lagoon areas and Cayo Cangrejo by exercising their powers of eminent domain.

The power of eminent domain allows a government to take property for a public purpose, such as for a road, a school, a *marine protected area* or a *bird sanctuary*. The property owner does not have to agree.

Eminent domain also requires the government to pay fair market value for the property it takes. In the case of the Bird Cayes, wetland/lagoon areas and Cayo Cangrejo, fair market value was established when the GOB or Town Council recently sold them.

What the GOB or Town Council received for these properties is the most it should pay to reacquire them. The amount paid should be reduced if any loss of mangroves or other damage to the property was not properly permitted before it occurred.¹

"It's already been sold," "We don't have the power" and "We don't have the funds" are not acceptable responses.

The Bird Cayes, wetland/lagoon areas, Hol Chan, Cangrejo Shoals and Cayo Cangrejo: these natural resources *matter* to the people of Ambergris Caye and well beyond. They matter to the birdwatchers, sport fishermen, naturalists and ecotourists who come to enjoy them. They matter to the tour guides who accompany and guide them. They matter to those who house the birdwatchers, sport fishermen and their families—hotels, condominiums, real estate management and development enterprises. They matter to the restaurants, street vendors and bars that refresh them; the shops and street vendors that cater to them; the taxis that drive them; the water taxis and airlines that bring them here. They matter to the families and employees of all those just mentioned. And, eventually, these natural resources matter to the rest of us.

Everyone who lives, works, owns a business or has invested on Ambergris Caye depends on the protection of the natural resources that attract visitors. We need not encourage those visitors to choose other destinations by failing to act thoughtfully and with a long term perspective.

Sincerely,

Mito Paz
Executive Director, Green Reef Environmental Institute
Member, Hol Chan Marine Reserve Trust Committee

¹ The price to be paid by the government (GOB or Town Council) should not change if the Bird Cayes, wetland/lagoon areas or Cayo Cangrejo have already been sold to third party buyers for a higher amount. The courts will decide to whom the original purchasers should forfeit their profit on resale—to the government if the third party buyers if innocent. Any criminal matters could be investigated and resolved separately.