



**January 29, 2008**

**Open Letter to the Belize Rural South Area Representative and Other Officials to be Elected February 7, to Officials to be Appointed by the New Government, to the San Pedro Town Council and Other Local Agencies:**

I am writing on issues of great urgency that affect everyone who lives, works, owns a business or has invested on Ambergris Caye. (That these issues also affect everyone who lives, works, owns a business or has invested anywhere in Belize will be obvious. However, I will focus first on Ambergris Caye.)

This letter is not intended to be political in nature, even though I am asking for action by public officials. Whether those officials are PUP, UDP or otherwise is not my concern.

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. Those visitors may be tourists here for a week or those who purchase a condo, time share or house in order to return annually for a portion of the year.

Any number of surveys and studies make clear 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, national and local, must protect it.

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**

The Bird Cayes, natural resources of direct economic benefit to the people of Ambergris Caye and many other parts of Belize, are apparently being sold for development. These tiny cayes west of Ambergris Caye derive their common name from the huge population of resident and migratory water and land birds that feed, nest and roost there. The birds provide a continuous supply of nutrients (guano) to the mangrove habitats that protect the young of numerous marine species and thus benefit the fishing industry.

Among the many interesting features of the Bird Cayes are the well-known bonefish flat near Los Salones, an important breeding area for the roseate spoonbill and the largest known nesting colony of reddish egrets in Belize and possibly the entire Caribbean.

Two of the Bird Cayes are within the boundaries of Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. Another three are included in the Little Guana and Los Salones Cayes Bird Sanctuaries, originally designated as protected Crown Reserve bird sanctuaries in 1977. Since 1999, the Government of Belize has been "considering" a formal proposal for bird sanctuary status for the remaining Bird Cayes, along with the wetlands and lagoons on western Ambergris Caye that are the primary feeding ground

for many bird species of the Bird Cayes, Ambergris Caye, mainland Belize and the Yucatán Peninsula.

Just 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! .

Whether other Bird Cayes have been sold, surveyed or cleared I don't know.

Does the sale and destruction of the Bird Cayes matter?

The Bird Cayes *do* matter to the people of Ambergris Caye and 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.

Directly or indirectly, the Bird Cayes affect the livelihoods, property values and investment returns of *everyone* who lives, works, owns a business or has invested on Ambergris Caye.

The sales of the Bird Cayes must be undone. All sales of the Bird Cayes should simply be reversed and the purchasers refunded their purchase price. If the purchasers decline, the Government of Belize can exercise its power of eminent domain. Eminent domain allows a government to take property for a public purpose, such as for a road, a school or a *bird sanctuary*; and it also requires the government to pay fair market value for the property it takes.

In the case of the Bird Cayes, fair market value was established when the Government of Belize recently sold them. What the Government of Belize received for the cayes is the most it should pay to get them back. The amount paid should be further reduced in consideration of the loss of mangroves and any other damage that has already occurred, unless formally permitted by the Government.<sup>1</sup>

While I don't know whether the Government of Belize had the legal authority to sell a *Crown Reserve bird sanctuary* for development, I *do* know that the power of eminent domain provides the Government with the legal authority to buy back all the Bird Cayes sold. The next Government should do so as quickly as possible after the election. Then the next Government should quickly grant protected bird sanctuary status to all the Bird Cayes not yet protected.

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<sup>1</sup> If the cayes have already been sold to third parties for more than the amount received by the Government of Belize, the Government should still exercise of its power of eminent domain and pay the amount it received. Then the Government can ask the courts to determine fair market value. If the court decides the GOB sold the cayes for less than fair market value, the court can require the purchasers to either refund their profit on resale to the third party buyers or forfeit their profit to the GOB, depending on whether the third party buyers were involved in a scheme to obtain the cayes for less than their value. Any criminal matters could be investigated and resolved separately.

Most of all, the next Government and all the governments that follow must *in fact* respect and enforce the protected status of our natural resources.

## 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. These are the same areas for which protected status was formally requested in 1999.

Actually, these wetlands and lagoons had already been proposed for protected status many times before 1999. In addition, protection of these areas for bird watching, sport-fishing and other recreational activities have been a part of numerous plans for tourism development on Ambergris Caye. For example, the master plan developed in 1992 by the Ambergris Caye Planning Committee recognized the value and potential economic benefit of preserving these wetlands and lagoons. So did the 1990 program for development of tourism on Ambergris Caye commissioned jointly by the governments of Belize and Mexico.

The tour guides of Ambergris Caye have long understood the value and economic benefit to be derived from preserving the wetlands and lagoons of western Ambergris Caye. The owners of a local resort catering to sport fishermen even offered to purchase the area and donate it solely for conservation purposes.<sup>2</sup> Part of the area was sold for residential development

The recent sales of the wetlands and lagoons must be undone. The area of which we speak does not include the high ground suitable for development, nor does it include the existing San Mateo residential area (that was somehow deemed suitable for development several years ago). We refer to the area traditionally used for bird watching, sport fishing and kayaking. The area has been defined in the proposals and plans mentioned, but we will be glad to assist in drawing the precise boundaries.

Again, the sales can be reversed through the Government's and Town Council's exercise of their powers of eminent domain. Then the wetlands and lagoons should immediately be granted protected status by the Government of Belize.

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

Hol Chan Marine Reserve is another natural resource that matters to Ambergris Caye. When Hol Chan no longer attracts visitors, the effect will be felt first in the pocketbooks of those whose livelihoods and businesses directly serve visitors to Ambergris Caye. The negative impact on the rest of us and the value of our investments will follow not far behind. The reduction in tax revenues will be felt all over Belize.

Why is Hol Chan in need of protection? Hol Chan is endangered because its marine life and surrounding environment—the features that attract the divers, snorkelers and sport fishermen who support us—are threatened by the following:

- a. Adjacent to Zone C of Hol Chan Marine Reserve is the proposed South Beach development, a “gated resort community” modeled after South Beach, Florida. The building plans include condominiums, hotels, villas, shopping malls, marinas, a casino, a theatre, a trolley line to San Pedro and numerous supporting facilities.

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<sup>2</sup> The following appears in a report of The San Pedro Sun regarding a public meeting in 2000 concerning the future of these wetlands: “When questioned about a counter-proposal from a local resort, Town Council representatives related that the proposal made by El Pescador (to buy the land for US\$100,000 and subsequently donate it to Green Reef) would not be considered. They stated the land was not for sale, even if it could not be developed, as it could be used for collateral.” The San Pedro Sun, Vol. 10, No. 22, June 1, 2000.

See [www.southbeachbelize.com](http://www.southbeachbelize.com) to understand the massive scale of the planned construction. Look at the map to see clearly how close South Beach will be 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 see that view through the eyes of someone fishing in Hol Chan.

Construction of South Beach will require large-scale destruction of mangroves, dredging and use of dredged material for fill.

- Hol Chan depends upon mangroves and seagrass beds for future generations of its marine life since they serve as a nursery for most species of coral reef fish and many invertebrates.
- The food chain for Hol Chan's marine life begins in the mangroves with the algae that grow on mangrove roots and the bacteria and fungi that feed on decomposing mangrove leaves.
- Mangroves trap sediment washed into the water by rain and serve as a filter, keeping the water clear and protecting Hol Chan's reef and seagrass beds.
- Dredging not only destroys corals and seagrasses directly, but also adds sediments to the water. These sediments harm corals and seagrasses by reducing the light that can reach them, smothering them and altering the area's nutrient levels and sources.

Marine communities do not remain healthy through mangrove destruction, dredging, sediment suffocation of seagrasses and corals and use of dredged material for fill. Such construction-related activities have serious consequences for reef ecosystems, particularly fisheries productivity. Ask anyone who dived or fished near Ambergris Caye 20 years ago to explain the difference between then and now.

- b. 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.

Moreover, Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals provide critical habitats supporting Hol Chan and, for that reason, should have been included in the original designation of Hol Chan Marine Reserve. In the years since Hol Chan's creation as the first marine protected area of its type in Belize, the nation's experience in managing marine protected areas has shown that critical "feeder habitats" must be protected if the rest of the marine reserve is to serve its purpose. For that reason, the Hol Chan Board and the San Pedro Tour Guide Association, among others, have for years been advocating that the Marine Reserve be expanded to include Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals.

However, Cayo Cangrejo appears to have been sold. Survey lines have been cut on the island, suggesting that it has been sold and is slated for development.

Any development of Cayo Cangrejo and related mangrove destruction, dredging and use of dredged material for fill will involve the same threat to Hol Chan and its marine life as the South Beach development. It will also directly negatively impact the livelihoods of sport-fishing guides who frequent Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals. Indirectly, development of Cayo Cangrejo will negatively affect all of us.

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. Among whatever attractions these developments might offer will *not* be proximity to vibrant marine life communities, healthy coral reef ecosystems, fishing near Cangrejo Shoals or a Hol Chan worthy of being called a Marine Reserve. In this respect, these developments would indeed resemble South Beach, Florida.

If the South Beach and Cayo Cangrejo developments are completed, the loss of mangrove and seagrasses, reduced fish populations, greater sedimentation, disturbed and unhealthy corals and the visual impact of a developed skyline *will matter*. The resulting loss of visitation to Hol Chan and Ambergris Caye and loss of tour guiding opportunities *will matter*. The jobs lost and the negative impact on the livelihoods, property values and investment returns of the people of Ambergris Caye *will matter*, whether that impact is direct or indirect. Finally, the loss in tax revenues from Ambergris Caye *will matter*.

If Cayo Cangrejo has been sold, the sale must be reversed. Again, the sale can be undone through the Government's exercise of its power of eminent domain. Then the Hol Chan Marine Reserve should immediately be expanded to include Cayo Cangrejo and Cangrejo Shoals.

To eliminate the threat to Hol Chan, the proposed plan for the South Beach development must either be modified significantly or prohibited altogether. To the extent that construction and other necessary permits fall within the jurisdiction of the San Pedro Town Council, the Ambergris Caye Planning Committee or other local agencies, I ask that those institutions deny the permits unless the South Beach development plan has been modified to eliminate the threat to Hol Chan. It is unfortunately likely that the necessary modifications will cause the developers to lose interest; but without modifications sufficient to protect Hol Chan, the people of Ambergris Caye cannot afford the South Beach development. If South Beach is developed as now planned, the developers' investment returns will come at the expense of those of us who have already invested here, who live and work here and call Ambergris Caye home.

#### 4. Approve a master plan for Ambergris Caye

The people of Ambergris Caye must again develop a master plan for Ambergris Caye to be approved and supported by the Government of Belize. The Ambergris Caye Planning Committee proposed an excellent master plan in 1992. Had that plan been approved by the GOB and implemented, Ambergris Caye would have avoided many of the problems it faces today. The 1992 plan grappled with numerous complex issues and balanced various needs, interests and visions. Most of all, it provided a blueprint for growth and economic development (along with the necessary infrastructure), balanced with preservation of the natural environment and local culture.

Although the 1992 master plan was not adopted, its *approach* can be adopted *today* so that the *future* development of Ambergris Caye can be consistent with its long-term prosperity and the needs and vision of its people. 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." 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.

Along with approving a master plan, the Government must establish clear lines of authority, communication and coordination among Government agencies that interact with the master plan. Whatever good might be accomplished by a local authority acting in accordance with the master plan can be undone by, for example, a Geology Department that sells a dredging permit (and charges by the *ton of dredged material*) in close proximity to a marine protected area without even consulting those who actually understand the economic and other impacts of dredging.

#### 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. Just as the number of visitors will decline if we fail to protect our natural resources, that number will decline if our Government's *appears* unable or unwilling to actually

protect them. (The same can be said of the many granting organizations that provide funding to Belize.)

- The Government of Belize, including all its departments and agencies, must consider the *negative* economic impact of selling Crown Reserve lands and other protected areas and of permitting developments that impinge on protected areas.
- When evaluating a proposal for “economic development,” those in government at all levels must consider the jobs to be *lost*, as well those to be gained.
- The San Pedro Town Council and other government agencies need to consider the full economic effects of development on Ambergris Caye, permitting a barge terminal near Hol Chan, failing to restrict the number of vehicles on the island, *etc.* Not all these economic effects are positive.
- Meanwhile, just as the local community justifiably celebrates acts that contribute to the betterment of Ambergris Caye, we should also expose and denounce acts inconsistent with our welfare *over the long term*. We must do so even when actions worthy of condemnation are committed by those who have also made positive contributions to the community. For example, the facilitation of land sales and investments for developments such as South Beach are not a contribution to our long-term prosperity.

There are many ways to encourage tourists to choose other destinations. One of the fastest is to begin to view and treat our natural environment as some developers do: as a blank canvas to be “improved for (my) personal gain,” without regard to the *future* or the *overall welfare* of the population.

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These issues touch everyone in Belize—everyone who lives, works, owns a business or has invested anywhere in the nation.

First, since Ambergris Caye generates the majority of tax revenues collected by the GOB, the future of Ambergris Caye affects *anyone* in Belize who receives, or wants to receive, *any* service or benefit from the Government—schools, roads, disability payments, sewer systems, whatever.

But these issues are larger than Ambergris Caye. Tourism is important in many areas of Belize. Protected areas require *protection* wherever they are located in Belize. The birds of the Bird Cayes fly all over Belize. Tourists go to Hol Chan from all over Belize. Sustainable economic development anywhere in Belize requires a strategy.

Government officials who make decisions with only a short-term or even self-interested view damage the welfare and long term prospects of all of us. Government agencies do all of us a disservice when they fail to act with foresight, fail to coordinate with or defer to other agencies with greater expertise, or lack the integrity to say No when appropriate, even to those who are politically connected, wealthy or foreign.

The people of Ambergris Caye and of the rest of Belize are PUP, UDP, independent, third party and apolitical. Our families have lived here for generations, or we have only recently arrived. Regardless, all of us deserve government that will protect our long-term interests and our natural resources, these two being inseparable.

Sincerely,

*Mito Paz*

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