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## Belize: Where forests can still be saved

Much of the Belizean territory is still covered by forests, which host an enormous diversity in plant and animal life. Those forests have however been exploited for centuries in an unsustainable manner. What the forest hides is the fact that the most commercially valuable hardwood species have all but disappeared, particularly mahogany.

In spite of the fact that the mahogany tree is emblematic to Belize --the national tree and prominent in its national flag-- the colonial history of the country really begins with the exploitation of another tree: logwood (*Haematoxylum campechianum*). Most of the logwood trees were cut and exported to Europe from the late 1500s to the mid 1800s to be used as a dye for the European textile industry. The trade was so profitable that pirates attacked Spanish and English ships loaded with this cargo. A single load of 50 tons of logwood was worth more than an entire year's cargo of other merchandise. Loggers --and slaves-- worked in terrible conditions. According to Alan K. Craig (*Caribbean Studies* Vol. 9: 53-62, 1969), "swampy conditions in the early logwood camps were unbearable. Crude living quarters were constructed on raised platforms amidst clouds of mosquitoes. During the rainy season, a logwood cutter stepped out in the morning into two or more feet of crocodile infested water and remained there all day."

Coincidental with the discovery of cheaper, aniline dyes obtained from coal tar --which marked the disappearance of logwood as a dye-- the famous furniture maker Thomas Chippendale decided in the mid 1700s to use mahogany in the furniture he produced. His success resulted in a huge demand of mahogany by the furniture industry and loggers in Belize combed the country to cut and export this new "red gold". Given that no investment was made in road infrastructure, logs were transported to ports floating down the rivers. As mahogany was the only desirable species there was no clearcutting and therefore the forest cover remained almost unchanged, but one of its major and dominant components all but disappeared.

The wide acceptance in the US of chewing gum --based on the sap of the chicle tree (*Manilkara zapota*)-- gave Belize's forests a new opportunity of providing employment and export earnings, but this had also an ending when natural chicle was substituted by synthetic vinyl gum.

As in many other tropical countries, when travelling around Belize, it becomes patently obvious that all the wealth generated by logwood, mahogany and chicle must be somewhere else, because it is obviously not there.

Now other processes --again linked to export earnings-- are putting new pressures on the forest, particularly three large scale industrial monocrops: sugar cane, bananas and citrus, which have resulted in the clearance of important areas of forest. Additionally, industrial shrimp farming and tourism have resulted in the destruction of some of the mangroves which protect the coastline from the frequent hurricanes.

In spite of the above, the fact is that Belize still has important forest areas which can be rehabilitated and this is a positive starting point. Much will depend on the capacity of the government in solving the

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serious unemployment and poverty situation which is being faced by too many Belizeans.

The whole history of the country is proving that an export-oriented economy is not a long term solution. In words of Barry and Vernon --authors of "Inside Belize"-- the country "has an opportunity to avoid many of the mistakes that have wreaked such environmental and economic havoc elsewhere in the region. Unlike developed countries at the curative stage in environmental conservation, Belize can still employ primarily preventive measures to preserve its ecostability ... The challenge facing the nation is to advance economically while at the same time recognizing the ecological boudaries of economic progress."

Article based on information from: Tom Barry with Dylan Vernon.- 'Inside Belize. The essential guide to its politics, economy, society, and environment.' New Mexico, Resource Center Press, 1995;