

## Combining Sustainable Tourism and Cruise-Ships in Belize

**Carel Roessingh**

Faculty of Social Studies  
The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

**Myrte Berendse**

Faculty of Social Studies  
The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the way tourism entrepreneurs and the government of Belize cope with the apparently conflicting processes they come across while developing their tourism product. Although traditionally focused on small-scale, sustainable tourism, Belize has recently been discovered by cruise ship lines. The impact of this on the world of tourism entrepreneurs is not yet clear and there is a discussion going on between those who argue that cruise ship tourism and sustainable tourism can go hand in hand and those who consider this impossible. The case of Belize is used to further develop ideas on practicing sustainable tourism and cruise tourism, with a focus on the role of governments and tourism entrepreneurs in this development.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism, cruise tourism, development, entrepreneurship, government policy.

### Introduction

Sustainable tourism development requires both state and market intervention in tourism planning. Governments can provide coordination and implement long-term sustainable tourism plans that contain both strategies for education and regulation (Brohman 1996; Drost 1996). The assumption is that the market forces driving the private sector do not necessarily go hand in hand with long-term sustainability and an equal distribution of the costs and benefits. To quote Brohman:

“Without state intervention, tourism development will likely lack the cohesion and direction necessary to sustain itself over the long term. Unregulated short-term initiatives, which serve the narrow interests of powerful forces in the industry may well jeopardize the sustainability and longer-term tourism potential” (1996: 62).

Or in the words of Keune and Dahles: “leaving the sector to the mercy of the powers of the ‘free’ market’ could turn out to be irresponsible” (2002: 158). When talking about sustainable development, governments are assigned an important role. But the introduction of sustainability in tourism has also broadened the scope of tourism planning to local actors and their needs. Sustainable tourism development therefore needs local participation (private sector and community involvement) just as much (Brohman 1996; Dahles and

Keune 2002). Generally, the need to include private sector and local communities in sustainable development concerns two different aspects. First, when getting involved in sustainable tourism development, the private sector, as the provider of tourism products, becomes more aware of its responsibility in carrying out sustainable practices. Second, sustainable tourism assumes that the private sector or rather the local community benefits from tourism, so including local participation in tourism planning and management seems no more than logical and even necessary.

Brohman (1996) points to the fact that increased participation of different actors in tourism policy and planning requires institutional reforms. Local entrepreneurs and actors should get the possibility to organize and represent themselves in order to exert influence. Nevertheless Dahles and Keune (2002) claim that instead of cooperating with and supporting local businesses, governments often facilitate large-scale transnational investments at the expense of local, small-scale initiatives. And where, in theory, sustainable development should involve the local population, in practice it can be used to exclude them from decision making processes as well. Cohen remarks that external agents sometimes “possess, or claim to have, the authority to define the criteria of sustainability” and this enables them to “take control over valuable sites or attractive cultural practices in the name of sustainability” (2002: 268). Rather than functioning as an instrument to include different actors in tourism development processes, the concept of sustainability then suddenly becomes an instrument of power in a struggle over rare and valuable resources (Cohen 2002). To prevent this from happening, local actors should get the opportunity to become involved.

Dahles and Keune (2002) argue that governments should not only promote tourism as a key to development, but that they also have to act on that by designing a clear policy focused on community based development. Others speak of an increasing importance of public-private partnership, which encompasses all different organizations within the private sector. Looking at the case of Belize in Central America includes not only community-based operations, but also the family-run “mom-and-pop” businesses as well as other local entrepreneurs like tour operators and guides and even local foreign entrepreneurs who have settled in Belize (Blackstone Corporation 1998).

In 1996, the World Tourism Organization stressed that “although tourism is an activity sustained mainly by private initiative, governments have traditionally played a key role in its development” (Jeffries 2001: 102). The private sector can be seen as the primary investor and an active player, but governments have the broader task of setting the stage for tourism and of intervening where the private sector is unable to act or where developments improve the country’s overall state as a tourism destination. Government

interference lies for example in the development of infrastructure like roads, airports and communication, as well as in creating a legal framework or an overarching marketing strategy (Jeffries 2001).

According to Lickorish et al. (1991), the overall functions of a national tourism organization include research, information and promotion of tourism within the country, regularization of standards and control of the private sector's activities, solving technical and juridical problems, development of selected tourist areas and overall tourism policy and promotion. Sometimes governments separate tourism policy and implementation by establishing statutory bodies for tourism marketing and promotion, while others unite them in one administrative ministry of tourism (Hall 1994). The government of Belize has chosen the first option. With the establishment of the Belize Tourism Board as a statutory board, which is responsible for tourism marketing and product development, tourism implementation and policy have been separated into different bodies. Hall (1994) also observes that many tourism ministers have non-commercial tourism advisory councils or committees that provide advice on tourism-related matters. A substantial part of the members often comes from out of the private sector, making these committees more into semi-state institutions. We can see this in Belize, where the highest regulatory body to advise the Ministry of Tourism, the Belize National Tourism Council, consists of both public and private sector representatives.

Tourism policy development takes place in a political arena in which various groups of people interact and compete with each other in order to influence the process of tourism policy making and implementation. Interest groups like industry associations, conservation groups or community groups, institutions such as government departments and agencies responsible for tourism, significant individuals like high-profile industry representatives and the institutional leadership represented by responsible ministers and members of government departments all try to determine the policy selection and implementation (Hall 1994). These actors have different interests, goals, ethics, biases, beliefs, attitudes and objectives, or in other words they carry different values that guide their behavior and performance in the decision making process (Hall 1994). However, the different actors also encounter different constraints in their abilities to enter and then influence the decision making area. This is the result of power arrangements that govern the interaction between individuals, organizations and agencies (Hall 1994). Similarly, Dahles and Keune note that the "different stakeholders are not 'equal' partners (...) unequal power relations define their position" (2002: 5). The question always remains how representative the decision-making process is when it comes to the power of local actors and their real influence on tourism development. It is striking that this attention for public-private partnership comes into prominence even more with the rising concern for sustainable development.

## Combining Sustainable Tourism and Cruise-Ships in Belize

According to Johnson, one of the principles of sustainability is “the integration of tourism with local people’s wishes” (2002: 261). But what are the local people’s wishes? When using sustainability as a guideline in tourism development, different tourism products should be able to exist side by side.

This broad application of responsibility or sustainability in tourism comes back in the guiding principle for tourism development by the Belizean government. Ever since its National Tourism Development Plan of 1998, the Belizean government has proclaimed that *responsible* tourism will be the key guiding principle for tourism development in the future:

“It refers to an ethic and a set of practices that chart a sensible course for all types of tourism, ranging from what may be called ‘deep ecotourism’ at one end of the scale (e.g., that which is in very remote areas, allows only very low levels of development, is costly, and attracts only a small market segment), and more conventional ‘mass tourism’ at the other” (Blackstone Corporation 1998: 1-4).

This stresses the meaning of responsibility in tourism as a basis for tourism planning, policy and management, rather than as a type of tourism. By focusing on responsible tourism, the government enables both the mass tourism industry as well as other forms of tourism to grow. Notwithstanding the fact that, in theory, both mass tourists and small scale tourism can now be welcomed to Belize, the same government states in its National Tourism Development Plan that: “The fact that Belize is attracting the high-yield, upscale tourist means that it does not need to resort to attracting mass tourists, who tend to spend less, are less culturally sensitive ...” (Blackstone Corporation 1998: 5). Though the practice of responsible tourism could put mass tourism into a more positive light, one can still feel a preference for the more small-scale sustainable kind of tourism.

Since the 1980s, the cruise industry has increased at almost twice the rate of tourism overall and many destinations now receive more cruise tourists than stopover tourists (Wood 2000). Not only the number of companies, the number of cruise ships and the passenger capacity of these ships have changed. While traditionally focused on the upper and upper-middle class, the cruise sector now also attracts what can be called the middle-class mass market (Wood 2000). Johnson remarks that:

“At its inception, in the 1920s, cruising was the preferred mode of travel for the world’s social elite. Post World War 2 cruising declined, losing trade to passenger aircraft. However, the latter part of the 20th century has witnessed a tremendous revival. Cruise companies have aggressively targeted different market segments, attracted younger passengers, offered fly cruise options, raised cruise capacities and changed cruise durations, prices and itineraries” (2002: 262).

The growth of this type of tourism (middle class, 'low' expenditure, mass market) seems to contradict the highly sought-after type of 'new' or 'alternative' tourists (upper class, high expenditure, small-scale market). But despite the explosive growth of the cruise industry, relatively few studies have been conducted. Within this small body of research, most authors focus on the economic impacts (Dwyer and Forsyth 1998) or the environmental sustainability of cruise tourism (Johnson 2002). The introduction of the cruise sector at a tourism destination does change the established tourism network. It challenges local governments, entrepreneurs and communities to develop and manage a new sector within an already existing industry. The growing importance of cruise tourism has also generated controversy within the Belizean tourism sector. The case of Belize is used to show how the introduction of mass tourism enlarges the discussion on sustainable tourism and unravels the debate into different layers of interest and goals behind the local actors' wishes. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of the government and tourism entrepreneurs in this development and on their different interests, values and interpretations of sustainable tourism in connection with mass tourism. The central question in this article is how the government and tourism entrepreneurs cope with these apparently conflicting processes in the development of tourism in Belize.

The data presented in this article are the result of an ethnographic research conducted in Belize from January until June 2003. Several qualitative research methods were used to obtain information about the tourism industry in the country and the way the government and tourism entrepreneurs cope with apparently conflicting processes in the development of tourism. The research methods include participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured in-depth interviews with people who are either directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry. Additionally, secondary data like statistics, case studies, consultancy reports, government action plans and policies were obtained from the national archives, government agencies and through the weekly newspapers.

## **Combining Responsible Tourism and Cruise Ships**

### **Belizean Tourism: An overview**

On 21 September 1981, Belize, the former British Honduras, becomes independent. This date is the formal end of a process of gaining independence that has taken seventeen years. In 1964, British Honduras receives the right to internal self-government and in 1973, the name of the country is changed into Belize. The government of this multi-ethnic country, with a population of 232,111 inhabitants (Central Statistical Office 2000a), strives towards national unity. Therefore, the first image presented to the outside world is one in which the various ethnic groups are happily living together in a nation state. This

implies that the inhabitants of Belize have or ought to have a common national interest, amongst others to improve the economic situation of the country.

Belize is not a very rich country and natural resources are scarce. Belize's tourism industry starts out in the 1960s, mainly with divers that are attracted to the second longest Barrier reef in the world. It is only in the 1980s, when the government changes seats, that Belize starts to look at tourism as a serious option for development. Until then, the ruling People's United Party (PUP) has been resenting tourism, mainly driven by anti-colonial feelings. In 1984, the United Democratic Party (UDP) embraces tourism as an option for development and when, five years later, the PUP regains power, it actively starts promoting eco-tourism (Barry 1995). The Ministry of Tourism is established and gets connected to the Ministry of Environment. This reflects the government's focus on the rapidly growing eco-tourism market. Sutherland (1998) characterizes the 1970s in Belize as a period of adventure tourism, the 1980s as one of recreational tourism and the 1990s as the decade of eco-tourism. At the end of the 1990s, one can see the rise of a 'new tourism'. Rather than focusing on eco-tourism, Belize starts promoting 'responsible tourism', referring more to a way of doing tourism than to a type or segment of tourism. Responsible tourism then includes what can be called eco-tourism, but also 'natural heritage' tourism, diving and marine-oriented tourism (Blackstone Corporation 1998).

In 1997, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and the Belize Tourist Board see the need for a long-term development plan. A study is undertaken by the Blackstone Corporation, resulting in a National Tourism Development Plan for the next ten years, also known as the 'Blackstone report' (Blackstone Corporation 1998). The plan is formally adopted by the government of Belize where general elections have just brought the PUP back into power in 1998. This results in a revitalization of the Belize Tourism Board and the start of a new marketing campaign. The slogan 'Belize – The Adventure Coast, Undiscovered and Unspoiled' is replaced by 'Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret' and a new logo. The newspaper San Pedro Sun explains this as follows:

"The colorful new logo sports a toucan, a rising sun and the headline, 'Catch the adventure'. The various colors indicate the diversity of our country. The sun represents the tropics where Belize is located. The toucan was chosen because of its friendly nature and the fact that it is the national bird (...) The words of the logo should also lead the tourist to believe that there are more activities to do here than lay back on a beach" (San Pedro Sun: June 29, 1999).

One of the activities is a visit to the rich Maya heritage of Belize. In order to put Belize on the Mundo Maya tourism map, a project is established for the development and conservation of the major archaeological sites. In 2000, the Inter-American Development Bank provides Belize with an \$11 million loan to strengthen the tourism sector and to preserve and protect environmental

and cultural assets (Inter-American Development Bank 2000). Together with loans from several other funding sources, this results in a four-year Tourism Development Project. On the mainland we now see an additional form of tourism that we could call 'heritage tourism'. Again this is embedded in the institutional framework of the government, as in 2001, the portfolio of Culture (including the Department of Archaeology) is taken away from the Ministry of Rural Development and is added to the Ministry of Tourism, followed by Economic Development in 2003. This results in the present day Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Economic Development. The latter reflects what the development of tourism in Belize is all about: economic development. Accordingly, the mission statement of the Belize Tourism Board is: "to fulfill the emerging needs of our local industries and the international tourism marketplace for the benefit of Belize and Belizeans" (2003a). And since growth numbers are often used to testify the positive projections of the industry, the government regularly publishes these statistics in newspapers. One thing is for sure, the numbers are growing indeed.

The number of tourist arrivals in Belize in 1991 is 77,542. This number rises to a total of 172,292 in 1999. Since 1991, there has been an average annual increase of 2.7% in the number of overnight-tourist arrivals (Central Statistical Office 2000b). On the one hand, the latest figures show no remarkable growth (185,705 tourists in 2001 and 186,087 in 2002). But, on the other hand, when looking at the figures of cruise ship arrivals (48,116 in 2001 and 319,690 in 2002) there is an explosive growth of 585% between 2001 and 2002 (Belize Tourism Board 2003b). Belize now receives more cruise ship passengers than there are Belizeans living in the country. As a result, local entrepreneurs get to deal with different kinds of tourists. Next to the traditional overnight tourist most of these entrepreneurs have to consider how to deal with an increasing number of tourists that are only in Belize for a few hours. While this changes the organization of the industry tremendously, one thing has not changed. Whether arriving in massive groups or individually, both cruise and overnight tourists are invited to discover Belize as if it were 'Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret'. Though from diverging backgrounds, these two groups are often visiting the same cultural and natural assets, being the remains of the Maya civilization, hidden in the jungle or in underground caves.

### **Cruise Tourism in the Jungle of the Ancient Maya**

Caving is a new kind of tourism business in Belize. Or, as the Lonely Planet puts it: "The fascinating activity of cave exploration is relatively new in Belize and cave excavation is even newer" (Miller Carlstroem and Miller 2002: 165). Especially in the Cayo district in the western part of Belize, a cave tour will be on most visitors' schedule. Barton Creek Cave, Che Chem Ha, Actun Tunichil Muknal, Rio Frio Cave, St. Herman's Cave, Jaguar Paw and the Caves Branch

River System, all cave's in the Cayo district, are increasingly popular spots to bring tourists underground. Some of these caves are dry caves, others are wet caves where one either has to swim, canoe or tube. Many caves in Belize contain pottery and other relics used by the Mayas to perform their ceremonies. Belize has a high concentration of archaeologically significant caves and this is an increasingly popular tourism attraction next to the Maya remains found on the surface (Veni 1996). Most Belizeans say that it is not just the caves that make caving in Belize special. In addition to this, Belize might be one of the only countries offering tours to places where you can see Maya artifacts exactly where they have been discovered.

Though highly popular, cave tourism is a sensitive subject as well. This has to do with both local feelings towards caves and the fact that the caves are easily destroyed. For the Mayas, a cave is still a sacred place. Some guides explicitly tell you that the Mayas do not like people going into the cave because you should respect the cave and the ancestors. For others, respect is more directed towards seeing caves as dangerous places where you can become badly injured, get lost or caught in an unexpected flooding. When tourists are taken into the cave, they are often told to show respect by not touching the artifacts or the formations. The increasing number of tourists interested in caving tours raises concerns about the fragile nature of cave sites. Action has just been undertaken to control the number of people going into the most fragile caves and it is most likely that in the near future the artifacts will be protected by a rope, separating the tourists from places where they can damage the remains.

It is the growth of tourism that raises questions about the best way to protect caves. Not only overnight tourists have caving on their itinerary. The growing stream of cruise passengers is interested in Belize's underground activities as well. This leads to ranking the caves from 'high adventure in wild and unspoiled caves' to the more group oriented cave tubing in a place like Jaguar Paw. However, there is a heavy debate on how many tourists Belize's spelunker's paradise can handle. Some people ask for strict regulations in terms of limiting the number of people going into the caves and properly training guides to protect both the cave and the well being of the visitors. Others do not see any harm in sending massive groups to a cave like Jaguar Paw as 'it is a very roomy cave that can hold a lot of people and there is no need to worry about people stepping on artefacts as they are simply tubing'. Or they minimize the effect by simply saying: 'they can screw up that cave as long as they stay out of the other caves'. These opposing opinions about preservation of the country in view of both sustainability and the image of Belize as an unspoiled tourism destination have been growing stronger since the increasing popularity of Belize as a cruise destination.

At the end of 2001 the tourism village at the seaside of Belize City opened its doors to cater to the increasing number of cruise passengers. Before the opening

of the tourism village, cruise ships were using the pier of one of the hotels at the seafront of Belize City, being the only area that was deep enough for the tender boats to dock. Numbers certainly testify this growth: cruise passenger arrivals to the Caribbean have grown by an estimated ten percent in 2002 as reported by the Caribbean Tourism Organization (2003). With a growth of 564.4% in cruise arrivals in the same year, Belize is the fastest growing cruise tourism destination in the region. And numbers show that the growth will probably continue into the next year (Belize Tourism Board 2003c). Amongst others this growth is the result of cruise companies' recognition of the diverse tourism product that Belize has to offer, a reduction of the cruise passenger tax, the opening of the tourism village and a general trend in cruise tourism to move away from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean and, within the Caribbean, to those destinations relatively close to the US (Costello 2003).

Receiving 319,690 cruise passengers in 2002 in a country that has only 232,111 inhabitants, these numbers seem significant. Besides that, the number of cruise tourists also exceeds the number of the traditional overnight tourist. Johnson mentions that this is not unique to Belize, as "many established Caribbean destinations receive more cruises than stopover tourists" (Johnson 2002: 262). Though side-mentioned in the National Tourism Development Plan, this new development in Belize's tourism industry appears to have been slightly underestimated at that time (Blackstone Corporation 1998). The Blackstone report mentions the dramatic decline in cruise ship visitation in 1996 when there were only 152 cruise visitors: At the same time it points to the growth projections in the Caribbean stating that "it is likely that there would need to be significant upgrading of cruise ship infrastructure for Belize to compete with the many countries that are aggressively pursuing this market" (Blackstone Corporation 1998:7-5). Apart from mentioning the ongoing discussion on the development of a waterfront tourism zone in Belize City and revitalization of Belize City to make it a more welcoming tourist gateway, the plan does not give any concrete guidelines for the growth and development of the cruise ship industry.

With the consistent growth in cruise tourism and the positive future projections in mind, Belize's first Cruise Ship Policy comes into existence in 1999 after a lengthy consultation process with private and public sector partners. It is ratified by the Belize National Tourism Council early 2000 and mentions the mixed feelings that both the public and private sectors of the tourism industry have towards cruise tourism as an intrusive and incompatible sub-sector. As such it tries to formulate conditions to optimize the development of cruise tourism while at the same time ensuring that the growth is environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable (Belize Tourism Board 1999). In the view of the government, cruise tourism and the traditional overnight tourism are complementary and Belize can continue to promote itself as an eco-cultural

destination (Belize Tourism Board 1999). Still the cruise sector gets significant resistance from different parts of the country, especially the Cayo district that can be seen as the 'eco-cultural heart' of the country and where sustainability is an important issue for the local tourism entrepreneurs.

### **Tourism Entrepreneurs and Government Policy in Belize**

The arena of the Belizean tourism industry consists of different stakeholders. As mentioned before, this article focuses on two of them. First there are people who try to make a living out of tourism, the tourism entrepreneurs. Dahles defines an entrepreneur as "a person who builds and manages an enterprise for the pursuit of profit in the course of which she/he innovates and takes risks, as the outcome of an innovation is usually not certain" (1999: 3). The tourism entrepreneurs in this article mainly include tour operators, hair braiders, owners of resorts and independent tour guides. Obviously this is a representation of a broad variety of different organizations, ranging from small to bigger entrepreneurs. But since the focus here is on the new developments of tourism in the country and on the different ways that people working in tourism react on that, this approach seems justified. Not the actions of one particular set of entrepreneurs are under study, but rather the outcome of a complex network of initiatives by different people with different possibilities and different interests.

Second to this group of entrepreneurs is the government, which is responsible for policy development and decision-making and sets the stage and the legislation for tourism in the country. This does not necessarily mean that the government and entrepreneurs have different interests. Both stakeholders derive an income from tourism on a local and a national level.

Nevertheless, there is always a difference between the specific concerns of private entrepreneurs and the government's general public concern. Though both benefit from developing a prosperous tourism industry, the interests of the public and private sector are not always the same and sometimes they even contradict, for example with governments allowing and disallowing specific practices or encouraging growth in certain areas rather than others. Keune and Dahles argue that a good government not only has to be active in developing "sound conditions for the expansion of tourism sales potential, but also in embedding that sector in conditions and interests that offer guarantees for sustainable development in the broadest sense of the word" (2002: 158). This means that the government creates the space in which the entrepreneur acts, thus both enabling and restricting the activities of the private entrepreneur.

With their case study of competing entrepreneurs in the Cayo district, Volker and Sorée (2002) show that government interference can lead to quarrels on the local level. The arrival of cruise tourism changes the tourism arena in Belize and it is the task of the government to monitor and guide these changes.

Sometimes this leads to quarrels as well, for example in November 2002 when the Belizean newspaper the *Amandala* notes that the hair braiders and vendors in front of the tourism villages were removed to another area, not to the satisfaction of all of them (Amandala 2002). Though this does not represent everyday practice, the growth of cruise tourism and the way the government guides (or according to some does not guide) this development, results in a fragmented picture of how local entrepreneurs deal with the arrival of cruise ships and their reasons for doing so. Whereas some entrepreneurs immediately seize upon the development of the cruise industry for economic opportunities, others are rather skeptical about the cruise sector as a part of the Belizean tourism industry. Besides a diversity of (economic) interests, this also reflects differences in opinion considering the impact of cruise tourism on the natural and social environment of the country. Johnson describes this debate as follows:

“Some commentators have argued that cruise tourism, being a formally organized and spatially confined leisure activity, can be viewed as a sustainable and sociologically harmless option. Others contest this, highlighting problems associated with waste generation and disposal, together with pressures exerted on fragile environments and host communities” (2002: 263).

The government is aware of this tension and continually stresses its commitment to its unique tourism product. As the current Minister of Tourism, Mark Espot, said in a speech at the Fifth Annual Tourism Industry Presentation:

“Let us at the start of this term, renew our commitment to pursuing the eco/cultural/adventure tourism that has delivered this balanced and genuine development to our country and its people. The glitter of mass casino and mass cruise tourism is but a ruse that will fall far short of its apparent shine” (Minister of Tourism: April 2003).

Assuming that cruise tourism is in Belize to stay (at least for a while), the debate amongst the different actors in the Belizean industry is not so much about a choice between cruise tourism versus no cruise tourism as it is about what kind of cruise tourism should be developed and questions on how to structure and guide this new development.

In the daily practice of tourism in Belize, one can see the same distinctions. On the one hand one can see entrepreneurs that embrace cruise tourism as a new opportunity to gain income, like the hair braiders, street vendors and taxi drivers at the tourism village in Belize City. While some of these entrepreneurs might merely be driven by economic motivations, others are convinced that cruise tourism can be practiced in a sustainable manner. On the other hand there is a group of entrepreneurs who refuses to deal with cruise tourism. Opposition is strongest in the Cayo region where they are mainly focused on overnight tourists. Still most of these tour operators and lodge owners do not

totally disagree with the arrival of cruise ships, but rather with the way this development has been regulated by the government. As one resort owner says:

“A lot of people think that because I’m involved in heavy eco-tourism, adventure travel that I would be against cruise ships. No, I’m not. I’m not against anything, if it’s done right and if the way it’s done makes sense. The problem is not cruise ships coming in, or even three or four cruise ships coming in. The problem is how we equally disseminate those thousands of people throughout the country to minimize not only destruction on our national resources, which is the jungle or the caves and the Maya ruins, by having two thousand people a day walking over the Maya ruins. But also in the sake of other tourists coming here for that unique adventure, non-developed experience but when going to Maya ruins they are being inundated with two thousand people a day” (Interview 2003).

### **Other Owners Mention the Same:**

“I’m not saying that we should disallow any cruise tourism. Because this government needs to open as many niches as they possibly can ... I think it’s good to have both, but the growth in cruise ship tourism has been over five hundred percent in the last year alone. It’s unregulated” (Interview 2003).

An informant from the government acknowledges this failure, but points to the relative young state of the Belizean tourism industry:

“We are still young, growing and improving. Important are the means of making it sustainable. These high increases are not sustainable in the long run” (Interview 2003).

The current debate on the role of cruise tourism as part of the tourism development in Belize is not just a result of opponents equating mass tourism with unsustainable practices, but rather stems from the fact that until now the government has not been able to keep up with the developments in order to make sure they happen in a responsible way. Cruise tourism is a relatively new development in Belize and it was not thought to grow the way it is currently growing. A lack of experience and foresight are responsible for the current focus on the negative aspects that come along with unplanned and unstructured mass tourism. The underlying assumption is that governments have the task of setting the stage for sustainable tourism in a country. But the developments in Belize appear to go the other way around.

Part of the private sector is urging the government to get more involved in sustainable tourism practices by stressing the needs for standards of control and implementing policies that will guide and plan the current tourism growth. This is probably a consequence of the fact that tourism on the mainland has developed out of environmentalist groups and has traditionally been focused on strong eco-, nature and adventure tourism in which sustainable practices,

often connected to small tour groups, are highly valued. These entrepreneurs have nothing to gain out of the cruise sector and tend to see the current development as a threat to their well-established businesses in the long run. The current focus on cruise tourism is seen as a short-term thing that hinders the sustainability and longer-term tourism potential of the country (Brohman 1996). The question arises whose long-term benefits are being jeopardized: the interests of some specific entrepreneurs or that of the country as a whole? The conflict can be seen as an example of diverging interests between a part of the private sector and the public sector. Though both government and Cayo's tourism entrepreneurs highly value the type of tourism that has developed in the Cayo region, the governments concern is a broader one. Allowing the cruise sector to grow and thereby enabling some entrepreneurs to enter the tourism industry, sometimes seems to clash with the specific interests of other tourism entrepreneurs. These opposing tour operators and resort owners not only refuse to deal with cruise ship passengers because they do not want to see their business turn into "just another high-impact destructive tourism operation", but they also try to find different ways to continue doing business according to their own philosophy.

Sometimes it seems that reserving the unique or fragile sites for a small group of people is legitimized in terms of being 'non-destructive'. This comes close to Cohen's (2002) remarks on sustainability and equity, where he claims that agents sometimes try to take control over valuable sites or attractive cultural practices in the name of sustainability. Whereas Cohen mainly points to 'external agents', in Belize the same practice occurs among local entrepreneurs. As mentioned before in the example of cave tourism, some entrepreneurs start to rank the caves, leaving some to cruise passengers while moving their own tours somewhere else. One resort-owner comments:

"I will not send my guests to that destination, because I can't run the risk of them going there and floating inside the cave with seven hundred cruise ship passengers. And we know a lot of other caves that the cruise ship people would never go to. It just means that we would become more unique in our product" (Interview 2003).

### **Or as a Tour Guide said:**

"I like to be out there with only my guests, I don't like to be seeing other tourists with other tour guides doing the same thing that I'm doing, in the same area when I'm there. I want them to feel that the tour is special, that they are the only ones there. If I can't offer that kind of experience any more at that cave, it's time for me to move on again" (Interview 2003).

Another commonly heard phrase is to avoid going to these places (be it a cave or an archaeological site) on 'cruise ship day', because the cruise ships (still) only arrive on certain days of the week. So while disagreeing with the current

government policy in developing the cruise sector, these entrepreneurs try to continue their own business as much as possible. Though opposing to the development of cruise tourism for private reasons (either economic or ideological ones or just a personal preference for a specific type of tourism), these entrepreneurs also 'warn' for the supposedly negative impact of cruise tourism on the whole country of Belize. The comment of someone in Cayo illustrates this attitude:

"There are those when we criticize cruise ship tourism, they say that we are being jealous. But I say even for their interest it [the unstructured development] is not a good thing" (Interview 2003).

Besides the often heard complaint that cruise tourism is not sustainable and that it will destroy the country, some also think that cruise tourism is just a 'hype' that will easily turn its back on Belize again. Several informants wonder what Belize will have left when after a couple of years the cruise ships might stop coming. They fear a negative impact on the image of Belize as an important destination for responsible, eco-cultural adventure tourism. Next to this, most of the entrepreneurs that are against cruise tourism, claim that it does not bring much profit to the country either, comparing the low expenditure cruise ship passenger with the more elite overnight-tourist whose money goes directly to the local community.

Sustainable development does not only have to do with regulating the number of tourists, defining the carrying capacity of sites and zoning or directing groups to certain areas to minimize pressure on the environment. Sustainable development also contributes to the social and economic development of the local community (Brohman 1996, World Tourism Organization 2003). Throughout the various regions questions are raised about who actually benefits most from the tourism village and the trips of cruise ship passengers: the broader community or merely a few big companies. But as Dahles comments: "governments and industries all over the world legitimate the development of tourism in terms of the revenues and employment opportunities that emanate from this sector" (2001: 217). And this works the same way in the case of Belize. The government of Belize sees tourism as an important catalyst for economic growth, stating that "tourism means business" (Belize Tourism Board 2003d). The title of the Tourism Action Plan 2003-2004 is: "Tourism is our future, and it is for all of us!" (Belize Tourism Board 2003a). Besides looking at cruise ship tourism as a diversification of the tourism industry, it is also hoped for that some of these passengers will return to Belize as overnight tourists. In this view eco-tourism and cruise tourism can go hand in hand, providing the country with a source of income. The government defies the arguments made by the opponents of cruise tourism. As an informant at the Belize Tourism Board comments:

“It’s a narrow view that cruise ships don’t benefit the country. The country is large enough. The western part of the country may be the eco-cultural hart. But for Belize City it’s a different story. Cruise ships provided the city with many jobs and income opportunities. Besides that, it’s a naïve view that cruise ships will go away. The cruise ship industry is growing every single day. We will not survive without looking into it. We can’t be exclusionary” (Interview 2003).

At the same time the benefits cruise ship tourism has for local entrepreneurs are regularly underlined in the government-related newspaper the Belize Times. Headlines such as “Cruise tourism soars to new heights” (Belize Times 2002) and “Braiding = big bucks” (Belize Times 2003) feature the job and revenue opportunities for Belizeans as a result of cruise tourism. On the contrary, the opposition-related newspaper the Guardian continually attacks the PUP government’s tourism policy for being foolish and dishonest, claiming that they sell out the country to “private interest, party interest, special interest, foreign interest - every interest other than the national interest” (Guardian 2003). Another Belizean newspaper the Reporter once questioned the supposedly growth in income opportunities by saying:

“There seems to be an attempt by big money interests to control the cruise ship industry at the expense of the small artisans and vendors and possibly also at the expense of the small tour operators” (Reporter 2003).

The opposition often presents cruise tourism as a negative example of mass tourism, accusing the cruise sector of being foreign controlled, unplanned and short-term. Whereas Brohman (1996) remarks that mass tourism does not need to work this way with more selective and deliberate planning, community participation and local control over development, opponents argue that these are the exact points that seem to be missing.

As argued before, sustainable tourism development requires the involvement or participation of different local actors in tourism policy development and implementation. Belize seems to have quite a lot of different advisory bodies, organizations and committees to involve the private sector. The Belize Tourism Board continuously praises the strong partnership between the public and private sector (Belize Tourism Board 2003a). This can also be heard from the side of the private sector:

“I’m sure that the only way forward is for government and private sector to work together in a small nation like this. We simply have to work together. And I think we have been able to achieve that” (Interview resort owner 2003).

Entrepreneurs are also organizing themselves or strengthening the already existing organizations to be able to lobby with the government for a more structured development of cruise tourism. For example, both the ‘cruise ship

task force' and the Cayo Belize Industry Association accordingly have sent letters to the Minister of Tourism and the Belize Tourism Board. And after consultation of the different stakeholders, the Cruise Ship Policy is being revised at the moment. But even for these industry associations it is not always easy to take a clear position in the debate, given the fact that the different members have different interests. Before the Cayo Belize Industry Association directed its letter to the government, a discussion took place concerning the question with whose voice the association should actually speak. Someone observed the weak spot:

"There are members on our national basis, especially and even on the local basis, who are benefiting by cruise ship tourism. The Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA) umbrella. So it covers a lot of businesses" (Meeting Cayo Belize Industry Association 2003).

Tourism policy development takes place in a political arena in which various groups of people interact and compete with each other (Hall 1994). This produces an unclear overall picture, not only at the micro level of tourism entrepreneurs, but at the macro level of the government and the related political parties as well. The question what tourism actually means on the political agenda is often heard in Belize. As Richter states "there is often a political agenda – wise or foolish, benign or selfish, compatible or incompatible – underlying the explicit tourism program" (1989: 19). Cheong and Miller comment that "tourism policy is often entangled with, or subordinate to, other policies, which may well hinder policy intervention in development and weaken the representation of the stakeholders in such places" (2000: 373). This might be the case in Belize as well. The earlier mentioned entrepreneurs that complain of a lack of structuring by the government in the development of cruise tourism, often praise the current Belize Tourism Board and the Ministry of Tourism. But they cautiously wonder about the understanding of tourism in the broader arena of the government. At the end of his above-cited speech at the Annual Tourism Industry Presentation, Mark Espot, the Minister of Tourism, even touches upon this matter himself by saying:

"The BTB is but a spoke in a giant wheel of tourism, willing to play whatever role benefits our industry. In most instances this role is as advocate, a supporter, a promoter rather than leader. Our sister Ministries of Government, City Councils, Town Boards and the Village Councils will find a willing partner in our BTB and will find themselves in the leadership role if they too are serious about tourism" (Espot 2003).

But a lot of actors think that these other 'sisters' are not serious about tourism:

"The rest of the government, including the Minister of Finance, the Prime Minister and the other Ministries, although they can see that they are making finance from tourism, they really don't understand how it works. And they

tend to look at it as a cash cow for increasing taxation. They don't realize how vulnerable tourism is, how tickle" (Interview resort owner 2003).

Power arrangements govern the interaction between the different actors and often the different stakeholders do not enter the process as equal partners. Some people argue that the Ministry of Tourism and the Belize Tourism Board are regarded as responsive to the needs of the industry, but as weak actors in the broader political arena. Obviously there are different levels involved in the formation and the development of Belize's tourism policy (Roessingh and Bras 2003). This makes the discussion on combining sustainable tourism and cruise ships a difficult one.

## Conclusion

We started this article wondering how the government and tourism entrepreneurs cope with the apparently conflicting processes in the development of tourism in Belize. The growth of cruise tourism has changed the traditional focus of the Belizean tourism industry towards small sustainable tourism. Examining Belize as an upcoming tourism destination provides insight into the relation between cruise tourism and sustainable tourism. Emphasis is placed on the role of several actors, with different interests and diverse means of exercising influence.

Even though, in theory, sustainable tourism is not constricted to small-scale tourism programs, people often seem to look at it this way. As long as tourism in Belize remained small, the debate on whether all the actions were really responsible remained small as well. It is often assumed that small groups can be controlled easily and that their impact will not be too destructive. Besides that, the tourists that are attracted to such a unique experience are willing to pay for it, making this type of tourism economically viable as well. One can always wonder what sustainable tourism is all about, and in the case of Belize the arrival of cruise tourism has magnified this discussion. The recent influx of cruise tourism has fuelled a debate on how to develop the Belizean tourism industry towards the future, a debate that is given shape on two different levels. The first is a 'practical' one, considering whether cruise tourism can be sustainable and whether it benefits the country economically. The second one is a rather 'symbolic' one, questioning whether cruise tourism will still allow Belize to keep its current unspoiled, undiscovered image as "Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret". By supporting cruise tourism, the government permits the tourism industry to move into a new or at least other direction. This will change the traditional focus on small-scale tourism into one in which both mass tourism consisting of cruise passengers and small tourism consisting of stopover tourists, will make use of the same cultural and natural assets at the same time. Tourism entrepreneurs can actively use this new development to gain profit, or they

can keep doing their 'old' thing while either tolerating the cruise sector to develop aside, or by actively refraining from and discouraging it.

Differentiation arises between the people that see cruise tourism and sustainable tourism as compatible and those who do not. Those who reject the cruise sector, argue that cruise tourism threatens the unspoiled character of the country. If not structured, the massive aspects of cruise tourism will not only destroy the country's natural assets, but also its outside image of being a well-kept secret. This group is represented by a certain group of entrepreneurs, mostly the ones who have been in the industry for a long time and who are traditionally focused on eco-, cultural and adventure tourism. On the other side one sees entrepreneurs who argue that cruise tourism can be handled in a responsible way and who do not want to lose the economic advantages. Everyone, both government and tourism entrepreneurs, seems to agree that the sector has to be structured and guided and that this is a task of the government. With cruise tourism already there, the question is not whether Belize wants this sector to develop, but rather how Belize wants it to develop. This discussion is a difficult one, since there are several actors involved with different (sometimes opposing) interests and different values and concerns. Practical questions like "what do we gain out of it?" and symbolical ones like "do we want our paradise to be discovered?" both seem to play an important role. Answers to these questions seem to be of vital importance to Belize as well, as the discussion often seems to end because of a lack of knowledge on statistical data. Nevertheless, the matter of emotional value should not be underestimated. As described in this article, the way Belize is promoting itself expresses a certain emotion in describing the country as 'hidden, undiscovered or nature's best kept secret'. Although the proponents and opponents of cruise tourism often use claims about the economic and environmental impact, there seems to be a more essentialist point of view underlying the debate. Questions like "do we want massive groups of tourists to be able to enter our Maya caves" seem to play a role.

The case of Belize and particularly the example of cruise ships entering a tourism destination that has traditionally focused on small-scale tourism, highlights a few points concerning the roles of the government and tourism entrepreneurs in developing their tourism industry. All parties make use of economic, sustainable and even responsible rhetoric in the debate. While the ones taking a stand against cruise tourism argue that the culture, adventure and nature tours in Belize require small-scale tourism, and that this form of tourism also brings in relatively much money, the advocates of the cruise sector claim that structured and controlled cruise tourism can be practiced in a sustainable manner as well, bringing in a lot of money at the same time. Clearly, both groups use economical motives to enforce their arguments. Both groups also claim to look at long-term development. The opponents think that the

cruise tourism sector is not viable in the long run. They argue that after investing heavily in this sector, the big cruise companies will soon pass on to another undeveloped country leaving Belize socially, culturally and environmentally destructed. The proponents conversely argue that cruise tourism is there to stay and that Belize literally should not miss the boat. More than the proponents, the opponents seem to be guided by 'emotional' arguments. They often refer to a fear of losing the image of a well-hidden natural treasure. Since the opposition is strongest in the Cayo region, where tourism has generally developed out of environmentalist groups or at least some of the early eco-tourism entrepreneurs have, this 'emotional' attachment seems quite logical.

Beside the role of regulating, controlling and facilitating the action the Government is also seen as investors or players when it comes to actions that go beyond the responsibility of the individual entrepreneur. The Government, but also the tourism entrepreneurs are both responsible for the structure around sustainability. The private sector is seen as the primary investor, shaping the industry on a practical level by providing a product. As such, there is a constant interplay between governments and entrepreneurs, reacting both on each other and on the developments that are taking place. Practicing tourism in such a way that it benefits the needs of the current and future population without harming the natural, social and cultural environment, underlines the need for governments and tourism entrepreneurs to work together in a public-private partnerships.

## References

- Amandala. (2002). Gegg: Novelo fight for tourists! December 1, 2002 , pp. 1-2.
- Barry, T. (1995). Inside Belize. Albuquerque: Resource Center Press.
- Belize Times (2002). Cruise Tourism Soars to New Heights.  
[www.belize-times.bz/news/story/1072.shtml](http://www.belize-times.bz/news/story/1072.shtml) September 8, 2003.
- Belize Times (2003). Breeding = big bucks. [www.belize-times.bz/news/story/1830.shtml](http://www.belize-times.bz/news/story/1830.shtml) - September 8, 2003.
- Belize Tourism Board (1999). Belize Cruise Ship Policy. Belize City: Belize Tourism Board.
- Belize Tourism Board (2003a). Action Plan 2003-2004. Tourism is Our Future and it is for all of us! Belize City: Belize Tourism Board.
- Belize Tourism Board (2003b). Tourism Statistics. [www.belize-tourism.org/statistics.html](http://www.belize-tourism.org/statistics.html) - August 21, 2003.
- Belize Tourism Board (2003c). First Quarter Tourist Arrivals set another benchmark. [www.belize-tourism.org/press/142.htm](http://www.belize-tourism.org/press/142.htm) - August 21, 2003.
- Belize Tourism Board (2003d). Strategic Vision for Tourism in the New Millennium. [www.belize-tourism.org/policy.html](http://www.belize-tourism.org/policy.html) - September 9, 2003.

## Combining Sustainable Tourism and Cruise-Ships in Belize

- Blackstone Corporation (1998). Tourism Strategy Plan for Belize. Belmopan: Belize Archives Department, MC 4408.
- Brohman, J. (1996). New Directions in Tourism for Third World Development. *Annals of Tourism Research* 23 (1): 47-70.
- Caribbean Tourism Organization (2003). Key Tourism Statistics1(1)  
[www.onecaribbean.org/information/documentview.php?rowid=1059](http://www.onecaribbean.org/information/documentview.php?rowid=1059) – August 31, 2003.
- Central Statistical Office (2000a). Population Census 2000: Major Findings. Belmopan, Belize: C.S.O. Ministry of Budget Management.
- Central Statistical Office (2000b). Environmental Statistics for Belize 2000. Belmopan, Belize: C.S.O. Ministry of Finance.
- Cheong, S and M.L. Miller (2000). Power and Tourism. A Foucauldian Observation. *Annals of Tourism Research* 27 (2): 371-390.
- Cohen, E. (2002). Authenticity, Equity and Sustainability in Tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 10(4):267-276.
- Costello, E. (2003). Belize: Tourism Development Project II. Concept Paper. Belize Tourist Board: Unpublished.
- Dahles, H. (1999). Tourism and Small Entrepreneurs in Developing Countries: A Theoretical Perspective. In H. Dahles and K. Bras (Eds.), *Tourism & Small Entrepreneurs. Development, National Policy, and Entrepreneurial Culture: Indonesian Cases* (pp. 1-19). New York: Cognizant Communications Corporation.
- Dahles, H. (2001). *Tourism, Heritage and National Culture in Java: Dilemma's of a Local Community*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Dahles, H. and L. Keune (2002). Introduction. In H. Dahles and L. Keune, (Eds.) *Tourism Development and Local Participation in Latin America* (pp. 1-11). New York: Cognizant Communications Corporation.
- Drost, A. (1996). Developing Sustainable Tourism for World Heritage Sites. *Annals of Tourism Research* 23 (2):479-92.
- Dwyer, L. and P. Forsyth(1998). Economic Significance of Cruise Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research* 25(2):393-415.
- Espat, M. (2003). Speech at Fifth Tourism Industry Presentation. Monday, April 7, 2003. Biltmore Plaza Hotel. Unpublished.
- Guardian (2003). Glorify the past, sell the future – Culture & Tourism. [www.guardian/bz/sell%20future.html](http://www.guardian/bz/sell%20future.html) – August 19, 2003.
- Hall, C.M. (1994). *Tourism and Politics. Policy, Power and Place*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Inter-American Development Bank (2000). IDB approves \$11 million to support tourism in Belize [www.iadb.org/NEWS/Display/PRView.cfm?PR\\_Num=115\\_00&Language=English](http://www.iadb.org/NEWS/Display/PRView.cfm?PR_Num=115_00&Language=English) – August 29, 2003.
- Jeffries, D. (2001). *Governments and Tourism*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Johnson, D. (2002). Environmentally sustainable cruise tourism: a reality check. *Marine Policy* 26:261-270.

- Keune L. and H. Dahles (2002). Future Prospects and Perspectives of Latin American and Caribbean Tourism Policies. In H. Dahles and L. Keune (Eds.), *Tourism Development and Local Participation in Latin America* (pp. 153-161). New York: Cognizant Communications Corporation.
- Lickorish, L.F, Jefferson, A., Bodlender, J., and C.L. Jenkins (1991). *Developing tourism destinations: policies and perspectives*. Harlow: Longman.
- Miller Carlstroem, C. and D. Miller (2002). *Lonely Planet Belize*. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd.
- Reporter (2003). Big Bucks vs Struggling Artisans – June 15, 2003, pp. A.
- Richter, L. (1989). *The Politics of Tourism in Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Roessingh, C. and K. Bras (2003). Garifuna Settlement Day: Tourism Attraction, National Celebration Day or Manifestation on Ethnic Identity? *Tourism, Culture & Communication* 4(3):163-172.
- San Pedro Sun (1999). New logo for Belize Tourism Board. [www.sanpedrosun.net/old/99-142y.html](http://www.sanpedrosun.net/old/99-142y.html) - June 29, 2003.
- Sutherland, A. (1998). *The Making of Belize: Globalization in the Margins*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey.
- Veni, G. (1996). Speleology in Belize: an introduction. In *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* 58(2):67-68.
- Volker, S. and J. Sorée (2002). Fighting over Tourists: A Case Study of Competing Entrepreneurs in a Small Town in Belize. In H. Dahles and L. Keune (Eds.), *Tourism Development and Local Participation in Latin America* (pp. 101-114). New York: Cognizant Communications Corporation.
- Wood, R.E. (2000). Caribbean Cruise Tourism. *Globalization at Sea. Annals of Tourism Research* 27 (2): 345-370.
- World Tourism Organization (2003). Sustainable Development of Tourism: Concepts and Definitions. [www.world-tourism.org/frameset/frame\\_sustainable.html](http://www.world-tourism.org/frameset/frame_sustainable.html) – November 21, 2003.

### *About the author*

---

**Carel Roessingh** (1951) studied cultural anthropology and received his Ph.D. at the University of Utrecht. His Ph.D. research was on the Belizean Garifuna. His current research topics are religious entrepreneurs (the organizational activities of the Mennonites in Belize and Central America) and tourism development issues in the Caribbean basin. He works as a senior lecturer at the Department of Culture, Organization and Management, Faculty of Social Studies, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

**Myrte Berendse** (1978) conducted her research on tourism development in Belize and received her MA, *cum laude*, in organizational anthropology. She works as a junior lecturer at the Department of Culture, Organization and Management, Faculty of Social Studies, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

## Combining Sustainable Tourism and Cruise-Ships in Belize