



ECOSYSTEMS AND CULTURES: THE BELIZE PROJECT

June 24 – August 6, 2017

Meeting Place: Belize City, Belize

15 quarter credits/10 semester credits

FULL PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Thank you for your interest in the Belize Program. Team members will take part in a unique investigation of Belize's diverse tropical ecosystems, the remarkable animal and plant communities found there, and the human cultures they support. Here, in a dramatic cross section of landscapes, participants will gain a firsthand understanding of Belize's interwoven ecosystems and cultures while participating directly in field studies to help preserve Belize's ecological and cultural heritage.

Belize is a developing country but is unusual in its commitment to conservation. This gives us the opportunity to explore intact tropical ecosystems in relatively pristine conditions. In addition, we will examine how the various cultural groups attempt to balance economic development with conservation and cultural survival.

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I. Background Information

Situated just below Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula on the Caribbean, and formerly known as British Honduras, Belize's relatively unknown and distinctly exotic lands stir the imagination. Far removed from other Central American countries in history, culture, ethnic makeup, and language, Belize stands apart as a politically stable ex-British colony whose official tongue is English. From barrier reef to towns of rebel African slave descendants, from lowland Neotropical jungle to Mayan Indian villages, from mountainous hardwood rainforest to isolated Mennonite settlements, Belize offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to investigate a truly wild place, not yet overwhelmed by the pressures of global expansionism.

A quiet and peaceful English-speaking land, Belize is an ideal destination for North American student travelers. Belize possesses some of the Earth's most extraordinary environmental and cultural diversity, as well as one of the most environmentally oriented governments in the world today.

More than a third of Belize's lands have been set aside as protected in one form or other, raising a variety of intriguing questions for the scientific community and our Wildlands Studies team. As we shall discover firsthand, the Belize government has encouraged a variety of methods for wildland environmental protection. Such methods often have several consequences and, in Belize, a struggle exists between those who traditionally live a subsistence lifestyle and the re-categorization of homelands and hunting grounds as wildlife preserves. In addition, as the government courts eco-tourism as a major business and economic blessing, this also has a double edge. The introduction of outsiders and human presence in remote and uninhabited areas alters the environment and disrupts animal behavior, and, as displaced native peoples struggle to find new economic balance, traditional cultures can begin to erode and become reshaped under the pressure.

II. Project Goals and Activities

During the Belize program team members will study the principles of tropical ecology and conservation, acquire new field method skills, investigate the fascinating ecosystems of Belize, and examine both the government's role in protecting wildlands and the various roles that cultural groups hold within Belize. Students will engage with members of the different ethnic groups on a personal level, observe local conservation ideals, learn individual personal histories, and record language and dialect dictionaries. Lectures and discussions on the cultural histories of Belize will serve to enhance our understanding of modern Belize, and give team members the chance to develop a relationship with the people.

In Belize, team members will study key ecological research and wildlife monitoring techniques such as rapid ecological assessment of streams and rivers, watershed successional patterns, wildlife transects, scientific observations, and human impact patterns. Traversing the country from mountain to coast, we will study the ecology of Belize's principle terrestrial ecosystems: rainforests, coastal mangroves, lagoons, and riparian zones. We will also assess the effectiveness and long-range sustainability of resource management strategies for Belize's protected nature reserves.

Off the Belize coast exists the second largest barrier reef in the world. Studded with mangrove and coconut palmed cayes, and guarded by atolls to the east, the 180 mile long reef is ecologically complex and intimately tied to the rainforests through its many water courses that deliver nutrients to the sea. In this system, dazzling numbers and varieties of plants and animals are supported: 30-50 coral species, sea turtles, manatees, and over 250 varieties of fish. Snorkeling through the reef environment, we will study the ecology of the system, collect evidence of human disturbance, and assess the impact of increased human use.

Another focus of the program will be a field assessment of management techniques for private (independently owned and operated, in some instances by foreign nationals and institutes), government (held in trust for the people of Belize by the central government), and communal (locally owned or overseen by the native peoples) conservation areas. We will consider the physical size and location of each, levels of diversity, ecosystem complexity, permitted uses and restrictions, degree of human impact, types of management plans employed, levels of operational efficiency, funding requirements and sources, and environmental and economic impacts on the local economies. Finally, we will evaluate the relationship of the conservation areas to the local cultures in terms of environmental and economic benefit or injury, and the enhancement or degradation of people's sense of history, place, and home.

Our studies will expose us to Belize's various cultures, and at times we will find ourselves as their guests. We anticipate staying in Maya villages, Creole and Mestizo communities, and Garifuna towns. As we travel we will conduct informal non-invasive interviews and collect personal histories/perceptions of Belize from these various ethnic groups. Our team will discover how the different cultures see themselves in relation to the land and how the concepts of conservation and stewardship vary across cultural lines. Topics we will consider include histories of ethnic diversity in Belize, ethnic harmony/tolerance, equality/access to advantages, isolation/assimilation, women's roles within the communities and government, and cultural eco-tourism. To frame our studies of the relationships between people and the land we will visit a select few Ancient Maya archaeological sites situated in the rainforest.

Throughout the program, through writings and individual projects, we will monitor our evolving impressions of the tropics and our deepening relationship with the rainforest. Each team member will gain an enriched sense of connection to the remote and establish a sense of place within the foreign.

All field methods and data gathering techniques will be taught in Belize. No prior research experience is required, but we expect participants to arrive excited and prepared for a rewarding field study experience. Our backcountry activities will be supplemented by field seminars led by Wildlands Studies staff, Belize government officials, and community/conservation organization leaders.

Belize offers our participants unique opportunities to hike through huge tracts of old-growth rainforest and along stunning mountain watersheds into isolated Maya villages and abandoned ruins, attend local music gatherings in remote Garifuna and Creole settlements and investigate mangrove forests by interlaced coastal waterways. The richness and diversity of the flora and fauna, and our ability to study it via low-impact traveling, provide an experience rarely available these days. Far from the cushioned eco-tourist travel packages offered by high-end companies, we shall experience Belize both intimately and practically. We look forward to you joining us this summer.

III. Academic Credit

Students will receive 15 quarter credits/10 semester credits from Western Washington University. Our staff will be happy to explain the program in further detail to the applicant's advisor, if necessary. This field studies program gives credit in three courses:

ESCI 497T, Environmental Wildlands Studies (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

ESCI 497U, Environmental Field Survey (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

ESCI 497V, Wildlands Environment and Culture (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

Students will be evaluated on the basis of: 1) examinations; 2) extent and quality of fieldwork and participation in group field activities; and 3) the design, implementation, and written report to the group of an independent project.

Team members are expected to conduct themselves in a mature and responsible manner. Wildlands Studies reserves the right to require any student to withdraw from the program if their conduct is detrimental to or incompatible with the interests, safety, or welfare of any course participants. We ask all students to read the Student Program Manual before joining the project on-site.

IV. Team Logistics

Participants will fly into Belize City and meet at the Belize City Airport. At the end of the program, you can decide whether you want to fly home on the scheduled date or remain in Belize to travel on your own.

All reasonable efforts will be made to follow the activities outlined above. However, please understand that on our project in Belize, travel arrangements can remain tentative until the traveling actually takes place. Weather conditions, road closures, and political and bureaucratic considerations may affect our plans. Wildlands Studies has put together an innovative, unique program in Belize, and team members need to be flexible, patient, and prepared to adapt to unexpected situations. Being flexible also allows us to take advantage of unique opportunities that inadvertently arise during our journeys, often producing some of the program's most memorable moments.

V. Accommodations

Primarily camping, occasional youth hostel or rural lodge.

VI. Official Documents/Visa

You will need a current passport that does not expire until three months after the end of the program. No visa is necessary for our stay during the program. However, you will need to extend your stay in the country after 30 days. Typically, we visit an immigration office in Belize, where you will be given an additional 30 days to stay in the country; thus, you may not need to extend your stay on your own. If you need to extend your stay because you plan to travel before or after the project, this can be done in Belize at the customs office and will **cost you about \$30 USD**. Make sure you are prepared to pay this amount. If you are staying after the program you will need to be prepared to pay this fee every 30 days to Belizean customs officers.

VII. Language

This program is taught in English. Belize stands apart as a politically stable ex-British colony whose official tongue is English.

VIII. Pre-Program Mailings

Detailed information regarding travel and visa information, equipment requirements, food costs, meeting plans, group expenses payment, medical and vaccination recommendations, and academic preparations will be sent to all team members in a logistics letter emailed about 8-10 weeks before the project initiates.

IX. Project Leader

RAYMON EDWARD (ED) BOLES: Ph.D. in Environmental Science, Jackson State University, 1999. Ed is a tropical aquatic ecologist and currently serves as Provost of Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in Belize, where he has lived and worked since 1988. Ed helped build the University of Belize undergraduate degree program in natural resource management. His research interests lie in ecological sustainability, specifically the protection of riparian forests and streams which serve as the primary filter systems of the landscape, control erosion, and provide important wildlife corridors. Ed's Ph.D. research focused on the macro and microfauna of freshwater river systems. He has taught our Belize Project since 2016.

X. Project Costs

Program Fee:	\$4150 plus \$150 Application Fee. Program fee due May 1, 2017. Enrollment on a space-available basis after the fee due date until the program is full.
Estimated In-country Expenses:	\$2800 per person This includes land/sea transportation and fuel in Belize, lodging, field activities/permits, group supplies, and readings.
Food in Belize:	\$400 (varies according to taste, dietary preferences and exchange rate)
Personal Spending Money:	\$400 (varies, but don't be caught short)
Estimated Airfare:	\$750

Students should inquire at the financial aid office of their home campus regarding the use of their loans or grants for this program. Wildlands Studies is not responsible for non-refundable airline or other tickets or payments or any similar penalties that may be incurred as a result of any course cancellation or changes.

XI. Contact Information

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