

# Tides of time



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The Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, a Unesco World Heritage Marine site in Central America, is off-limits for certain activities, like fishing, but local communities benefit from tourism-related work and are deeply involved in protecting the site

**SPOTLIGHT | Getting involved**

## Belize Barrier Reef: Local communities help protect World Heritage site and reap the benefits

The Belize Barrier Reef in Central America is the world's second-largest reef, and it is the longest in both the Northern and Western hemispheres. A summary of the reef's World Heritage nomination was prepared in 1996 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, a Swiss-based forum with more than 1,000 government and nongovernmental member organizations, as well as almost 11,000 volunteer scientists in more than 160 countries. Describing the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System's justification for inclusion in World Heritage, the IUCN stated: "It provides a classic example of the evolutionary history of reefs, contains superlative natural phenomena and areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance, and is one of the most pristine reef ecosystems in the Western hemisphere. As early as 1842, Charles Darwin referred to it as 'the most remarkable reef in the West Indies.'"

**Charles Darwin called it 'the most remarkable reef in the West Indies'**

The report continues: "Its history illustrates the major role reefs have played in the history of humankind. Such interaction between human and reefs is particularly evident in Belize today, where a large part of the economy is dependent on the reef through fisheries and tourism."

Such interaction is possible only if the community feels involved, and Belize is a place where the locals are really making their voices heard. The national government, through the Forest Department and other stakeholders and agencies, administers the World Heritage site. Says David Perera of the Belize Forest Department's Protected Areas Program, "It's the government's intention to make locals participate in the tourism industry by training them in sustainable livelihood projects."

Local communities, Perera explains, have depended on the site's resources for many years, and it comes as a shock to them when the area is put off-bounds for certain activities, like fishing. So the Forest Department finds alternative work for them, which now includes tourism-related activities, such as guiding visitors who want to go snorkeling or diving.

The Forest Department, which for decades has sought a balance between development and conservation at the Belize Barrier Reef, seems to have hit on the right approach. Training is provided to those living close or adjacent to the protected marine areas. Says Perera: "They are the local caretakers and beneficiaries of most of these projects. Heavy involvement in the process

means they feel part of it." Today, he says, one in four Belizeans benefits directly or indirectly from the tourism industry.

Specifically, projects to encourage community involvement can be basic business-training courses in the villages or licensing agreements with tour operators, requiring them to use a percentage of local residents. When tourists visit the area, it is now mandatory to draw on the communal expertise; tour operators by law must hire local guides to lead tourist groups. "In this way," Perera explains, "we guarantee the sharing of the tourism pie, and also guarantee conserving the area in perpetuity for Belizeans and foreigners alike." Involving the local population is a relatively new concept that has taken hold, and it is making Belize a showcase site where a concerned population plays a principal role in sustaining its own economy.

But community participation goes further than this: natives help protect the site, too. Belize's citizens, for example, recently reacted strongly to development plans on a cay that was part of the protected area. Their reaction was so strong that the impugned project was scrapped. Recalls Art Pedersen, a Unesco program specialist on heritage and sustainable tourism: "It set off a worldwide — but more importantly, Belize-based — outcry against the development plans, which later were suspended. That's

the kind of support that makes a difference. We can show the economic benefits of these sites, but you need the other part — a sense of these places, within the community."

Developing this sense is best practice for World Heritage sites, and should begin early — ideally during the nomination process for World Heritage inscription, says Marc Patry, a Unesco specialist for Latin America and the Caribbean. "If a country is considering a nomination for World Heritage, it should carry out a consultative process with the stakeholders," Patry says. "It should not be a top-down decision. We've found that when inscribed after little consultation with stakeholders, you have a fragile site. Local communities have to become active in conserving it. If not, the site gets eroded — the help you need at the local level is not there."

The Belize public, notes Patry, already supported World Heritage. "When these development issues arose," he says, "the government had to back down because the whole country was up in arms." Such grassroots pressure can come only from a community that shares a firm dedication to its World Heritage site.

Unesco helps a protected area's management system confront issues such as inappropriate or illegal development. "But there's something else in play here," Patry adds, "the need to build local and national pride in these sites, to be able to counter such development. There can be pride in a flagship species, like a manta ray or whale shark — something people can relate to that symbolizes the site and World Heritage. There can be huge outpourings of public support for not doing something. We saw it in Belize. We need to develop that pride." ■

**Protecting World Heritage**

Unesco's World Heritage mission is to encourage countries to sign the World Heritage Convention and ensure protection of their patrimony; to date, 185 countries have done so. Unesco also encourages these countries to nominate sites within their territory for the World Heritage List, and to establish management plans and reporting systems on the state of conservation of their World Heritage sites. It helps countries safeguard these sites by providing technical assistance and training. Unesco also provides emergency assistance for World Heritage sites in immediate danger. For more information, visit <http://whc.unesco.org>

**DIVING | The Blue Hole and other sites**

## One of the Caribbean's top diving destinations

Spanning the country's coastline for about 185 miles (300 kilometers), the Belize Barrier Reef ranks among the top Caribbean diving destinations. Its offshore atolls — Turneffe, Glover's Reef and Lighthouse Reef — provide more than 100 diving and snorkeling sites, most of them easily accessible for the visitor.

The "Scuba Diving Belize" Web site ([www.scubadivingbelize.com](http://www.scubadivingbelize.com)) offers a comprehensive look at the reef for visitors planning a trip. Belize, it reminds divers, has been slower to develop than other parts of the Caribbean, which means the country can offer the luxury of uncrowded sites. Divers in Belize will encounter marine life of all varieties, including 70 types of hard corals and nearly 500 species of fish. Water temperature, the site says, remains constant at around 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 degrees Celsius), and the waters stay relatively calm inside the reef or on the unexposed side of the atolls.

Turneffe Atoll, 30 miles long, is the largest coral atoll in the Caribbean. It offers 60 diving sites and easy access to other spots, like the Blue Hole, located in the center of Lighthouse Reef. The ocean explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau made the Blue Hole famous when he took his ship, the Calypso, there in the early 1970s and filmed a television documentary. Now Belize's most famous site, the Blue Hole was once a cave. Scientists believe an earthquake collapsed

its ceiling, forming the almost perfectly round sinkhole 1,000 feet (305 meters) across and nearly 500 feet deep, so popular with divers and snorkelers today. Though farther out from the reef, it is a must-see. Stalactites from the Pleistocene age are visible on the canyon walls, and visitors can usually observe sharks here. The Blue Hole is one of the seven marine protected areas making up the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, a World Heritage site.

Turneffe Atoll offers locations to suit every level of diver. Its Web site ([www.tfiats.com](http://www.tfiats.com)), which commits one percent of its revenue to conservation, lists other favorites. These include the Chutes off Calabash Caye. Here, the site says, divers often find spotted morays and hawksbill turtles, an endangered species.

Amateurs of drift diving (an advanced-level method where one floats with the currents) should head for the canyons of The Elbow, at Turneffe's southernmost point, for groupers, turtles, sharks and eagle rays. According to the Turneffe Atoll Web site, dol-

phins also live close by and will often come to check out divers. Ocean currents bring schools of snapper and other pelagic species (those living in open waters). At Lindsey's Back Porch, another top location, divers can observe the white spotted toadfish, found only in Belize. Turneffe also offers amateurs of wreck diving a chance to explore the Sayonara, lying at a depth of 50 feet, and the HMS Advice, a British vessel that sank to 16 feet in 1793. Remains of another ship, called Amigo's Wreck, can be found at Ambergris Caye.

The official site of the Belize Tourism Board ([www.travelbelize.org](http://www.travelbelize.org)) offers this advice: "For something different, try snorkeling or diving near a mangrove colored island — the nursery of the sea — where you are sure to find tiny barracuda, snapper and other fish whose parents you might have seen in deeper water." In southern Belize, the site also recommends South Water Caye Marine Reserve and Silk Cayes, which it says is home to the world's largest population of whale sharks from February to May. ■



Under the sea: Belize offers spectacular diving.

**Patrick Musimu: 'You don't need to be a high-level diver to see fantastic species'**

Patrick Musimu, the first man to dive deeper than 200 meters (650 feet) on a single breath, spent 2002 in Belize, living at Ambergris Caye. "Belize has a cosmopolitan population, both a Spanish and an English feel," he recalls. For diving, he recommends spots along the coast. "I was struck most by the canyons behind the reef," he says. "It's an extraordinary garden. The coral formations are like the Grand Canyon, only under water." The maritime animals are eye-opening. "You don't need to be a high-level diver to see fantastic species, like the manatee," says Musimu, who has been wearing since June 2007 the Jaeger-LeCoultre Master Compressor Diving Watch during his free dives. "There's very little water beneath you. It's

just you among the coral and the fish." On his dives, he noticed how some species — groupers, for instance — are indifferent to the presence of several divers wearing oxygen tanks. "They are used to that and understand there's no danger," he says. However, when divers come singly or in pairs with tanks, the fish flee. Notes Musimu, "They have learned fear, since this is how they are hunted by poachers." Normally, he explains, underwater hunters are not allowed tanks — they must free dive. So the marine animals, he says, "seem to have learned that lone divers with tanks are dangerous. It's time to watch our comportment among maritime species because ultimately they will flee us whenever we penetrate their milieu."

Visit the Tides of Time Web site for videos, interviews and more information on World Heritage marine sites: [www.ihf.com/tidesoftime](http://www.ihf.com/tidesoftime)

**Tides of time: Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System** did not involve the reporting or editorial departments of the IHT. It is the fourth of a series on Unesco's World Heritage marine sites. The next installment, on the Tubbataha Reef Marine Park, will be published on Nov. 28. The series is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, Unesco's World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. Text by JOSHUA JAMPOL. For information on the IHT Advertising Supplements program: [www.ihfinfo.com/pages/advertising](http://www.ihfinfo.com/pages/advertising)



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