

Livelihoods and Conservation on Utila

Key findings

August 2017

This report summarizes key findings related to livelihoods from the research project titled *The Intersections of Voluntourism, Conservation and Livelihoods: Strengthening Approaches to Conservation in Utila, Honduras*. The project was a collaboration between conservation organizations on Utila, and faculty and students at Colorado State University and the University of Memphis. Support and funding were provided by the Center for Collaborative Conservation.

The two primary sources of data which inform this report are (1) a set of 53 interviews with a range of individuals living on Utila and (2) a door-to-door household survey administered to 80 households with representation from all neighborhoods on Utila. The following are key topics and themes illuminated via analysis of these sources.

(1) Tourism. There is recognition on the part of many that tourism directly (e.g., dive shops, restaurants, hotels) and indirectly (e.g., construction, mechanical work, captaining boats for dive shops) provides livelihood opportunities.

Themes related to tourism include:

- The desire on the part of some (e.g., 71 out of 80 of household survey respondents) to see an increase in tourism on Utila. The primary reason given by household survey respondents was because of the resulting jobs and economic growth.

- There are tensions between tourism and environmental sustainability. Some expressed concerns with the current population pressures in relation to island carrying capacity and others lamented the threat that ongoing growth posed to the island's environment.

- The importance of protecting the reef given the critical role that dive tourism plays in the economy.

(2) Mariner livelihoods. We did not obtain the exact number of individuals who engage in maritime activities; 14% of households (11 of 80) who participated in the survey listed a member who engaged in marine-based work and one interviewee estimated that about 15% of the population engaged in marine-based work. Themes related to mariner livelihoods:

- Several people discussed the importance of providing training and certification opportunities for these professions.

- This is an important livelihood strategy historically and has cultural significance. These may be additional reasons to work to protect this livelihood strategy.

(3) Fishing. Many discussed this livelihood activity and a variety of issues were raised. Numerous people articulated an understanding of the tension between this strategy and environmental sustainability, with reef health being a key focus. Similar concerns were raised with harvesting and hunting. Decreases in both ocean life and terrestrial fauna were identified as critical issues. Repeatedly, however, people articulated the understanding that poverty is a driving force behind these pressures that are placed on a variety of non-human species. Additionally, people discussed culture and customs as important variables shaping behaviors. This pattern is significant because:

- (1) it points to a case of economic and political processes shaping human behaviors that impact the environment.

- (2) it reveals an impressive level of community awareness and understanding regarding the pressures people are negotiating with regards to livelihoods and the environment.

Sample quote: *They don't have any money so they have to do it. They're gonna break the rules, they know the rules, but they're still gonna do it...if we had more jobs and more opportunities, we'd have more fish and more lobsters... every time they get a fine they have to pay the fine, and that sets 'em back more. But then they're just back in the water doing the same thing again.*

(4) Downside of fines. Several people discussed the concern that fines resulting from illegal fishing, hunting, or harvesting added significant pressure to individual and household budgets. Further, a case can be made that an individual might engage in additional illegal activities in order to pay the fine, thus actually working against the conservation goals of the fine-as-penalty approach.

(5) Conservation-related work constitutes another livelihood sector. Not only does it provide employment opportunities, but several discussed ideas for how more jobs could be created in this sector. Examples include nature tour guides and compensating people for turning in plastic.

(6) Farm work. A small number of people work on cattle ranches and small farms, on what appears to be land owned by a third party.

(7) Barriers to income generation lead to illicit livelihood activities. Barriers lead community members to engage in what some perceive as illicit livelihood activities, such as selling drugs, poaching, illegal harvesting and fishing, and prostitution. In some cases this results from the inconsistency and volatility of the tourism sector (e.g., changes in the ferry fare, global economic recession, instability on the mainland), as well as the influx of people from the mainland and elsewhere competing for jobs.

(8) Hiring foreigners rather than locals is perceived to be problematic. Related to barriers to income generation is the hiring of expats rather than locals. One interviewee pointed to the Maldives where employers are said to be required to hire a certain percentage of locals. An important issue, however, is language – increases in tourists from the mainland has led to a greater need for Spanish speaking staff, yet businesses also have considerable need for staff who speak English.

(9) It is important to note that people are also engaged in informal livelihood activities. Such activities include, for example, salvaging aluminum and other metals that are shipped to mainland. Artisans can be included in this category. The need for a place to sell handmade goods was identified, and the value of workshops or capacity building was mentioned as well. These can be important mechanisms for livelihood diversification.

(9) Vocational Training. An additional idea for increasing livelihood opportunities on the island was to provide training in health professions, which could also help to improve health care services on Utila.

(10) Gender. It is important to keep in mind that livelihood patterns are gendered. On Utila, this is true, for instance, in the tourism, mariner, and fishing sectors. Efforts to provide training or certification programs should be deliberate and strategic in recognizing that some programs may benefit one group over another.

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