

We Used to Walk and Now We Take the ATV or Golf Cart
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INTRODUCTION

This panel is dedicated to understanding what influences human decisions about how to use or conserve elements of the natural environment in the Anthropocene. Our case study is a collaborative research project with conservationists on the small island of Utila, Honduras to understand the nature of relationship between the local population's cultural and environmental values and conservation priorities of the island's five environmental organizations in a time of rapid development and human intervention. In what follows, we introduce Utila's increasingly diverse population and their interrelationships with the environment. We apply Albrecht et al.'s (2007) concept of solistalgia and Cunsolo Willox's (2012) work on ecological grief to argue for the importance of documenting and sharing the experiences of community members vis-à-vis their changing environment as a mechanism for increasing environmental stewardship.

CONTEXT

This paper is based on a collaboration of anthropologists and Honduran-based conservationists, funded in part by the fellows programs of the Center for Collaborative Conservation at Colorado State University. With funds from the center we were able to bring six of the collaborators together for a retreat on collaborative conservation at CSU's mountain campus. This last summer, four U.S. based anthropologists conducted research in collaboration with our partners on Utila. We are currently coding interviews and this paper provides an ideal opportunity for preliminary analysis.

Utila is a small Honduran island in the Caribbean. It is a popular destination for scuba divers, especially first timers. Mainland Hondurans make weekend visits to relax, party, and enjoy the small town feel. Utila also attracts students and researchers, in particular from Europe and the U.S., who are interested in conservation. There are five conservation organizations which host volunteers and researchers and their projects range from protecting the local and endemic iguana, to hunting the invasive lionfish, to monitoring the reef. Students and researchers are sometimes involved in the work of the

organizations and are sometimes provided support to engage in their own research. Staff from these organizations were partners in this research.

CHANGE OVER TIME

In some ways Utila is an utterly unique context, and in other ways it parallels numerous other locales. The town of Utila is small, with a main “road” that runs along the southern coast and two principle “roads” leading to other parts of the eastern side of the island. The appropriateness of the word “road” is debatable here, because they more so resemble wide bike paths by U.S. standards. It has been within the last few years that these paths have become roads. Today motorized vehicles on the island include golf carts, tuc tucs, and quads, as well as full-size vehicles. Until recently, people walked or road bikes, and sometimes used quads. It is said that for a long time there were only two vehicles on the island. Motorized transportation has brought congestion, pollution (including noise pollution), and accidents. While we were on Utila, one woman’s small dog was run over by a golf cart and we witnessed another dog hit forcefully by a motorcycle. A long term expat said, “I remember the first time I started looking both ways, stepping out [and] looking both ways.” People also lamented the fact that neighbors would now drive several blocks to get to church on Sunday rather than walk. For those who live and work in town, these mechanisms for convenience seem unnecessary; for those who live further inland, vehicles have certainly made getting around the island much easier.

Traffic, congestion, pollution, accidents, and road rage—these are challenges faced in so many communities. How is Utila unique? The speed at which changes are unfolding, the small size of the community and the fact that it is located on an island, as well as the governing structure, which in some ways reflects complex patterns found elsewhere in Central America but in others are quite unique due to the history of the island. It therefore provides a valuable and interesting context for analysis of conservation and community.

Alongside of and related to the upsurge in traffic is the influx of mainland Hondurans. Some of this flow is simply rooted in the hope that the tourism and dive economy of Utila will provide livelihood opportunities. But this flow is also linked to a series of deep and troubling problems on the mainland

which stem in large part from the 2008 coup. Population growth, then, is a pronounced theme on Utila. The environmental and other challenges that accompany this are rooted in political, social, and economic processes which are somewhat distanced from the community negotiating the effects. Short of capping the number of people permitted on the island, there is no way to stop mainland Hondurans from moving to Utila, and population growth may be an ongoing reality.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE

These two trends give you a sense of the changes unfolding on Utila. Both are tied to increasing infrastructural development, which directly impacts this small place and its environment. Seventy percent of the island is mangrove and associated ecosystems, and the island is surrounded by fringing coral reef. Development comes at a cost for the several species supported by Utila's many distinct ecosystems. Local reactions to these changes are highly varying. Because both are intimately linked to concerns with sustainability, they help to set the stage for a consideration of local interrelationships with Utila's environment and attitudes towards conservation.

For such a small island—perhaps around 7000 people—the island of Utila is incredibly diverse. We cannot detail all of the complexities here, but instead will focus on several key groups. First, there are individuals whose families have a long history on Utila—we might think of these as native Utilians. This group is somewhat mixed, though it includes descendants of the original families who are of European descent and speak English. There are also families of mestizo descent and Afro-Honduran descent whose families have been on the island for more than one generation. A second group with a long-term understanding of the island consists of resident expats; these are individuals from Europe and the U.S. who have lived on the island for years or even decades, thereby having witnessed the most recent and rapid changes in Utila.

The concept of solastalgia (Albrecht et al. 2007) serves as a helpful lens through which to consider feelings and attitudes regarding changes on Utila. Solastalgia is a theme which unites interviewees in these two groups. It refers to “the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory” (Albrecht et al. 2007,

43). Albrecht et al. further note: “It is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one’s sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. It is an intense desire for the place where one is resident to be maintained in a state that continues to give comfort or solace” (2007, 43).

A theme in interviews with people from both populations which reveals solastalgia was that Utila was once an island characterized by plenty. There was no need for restraint in accessing resources such as fish, conch, and iguanas. One interviewee, Miranda (a pseudonym as are all of the names used in this paper), reminisced about how plentiful bananas, coconut, cassava, and fish were on the island when she was a child. Today, the local availability of all of these has greatly diminished or disappeared altogether. Miranda also described evenings lit up with lanterns and moonlight: “we had light all night and we played all night too,” she said, laughing. In recent years the island gained access to 24 hour electricity via a diesel generator. Deforestation of hardwood and mangrove forests was discussed by many. Miranda articulated that she hoped for a move towards reforestation and farming rather than cattle ranching. For Miranda, the solutions to environmental problems are intimately intertwined with the solutions to social problems. In reminiscing about her community in the past she said, “people were much nicer. Much friendlier. They were willing to do the right thing.” Now, she argued, the island struggles with racial tensions and cultural differences. Future problems were also identified by interviewees, for instance, the threat of decreases in the availability of fresh water. Miranda explained that wells were already being drilled at greater depths in order to access the water table.

Regarding the tuc tucs and other vehicles, Walter, a somewhat eccentric expat who has lived on Utila for around 30 years said, “it’s an invasion of viral machines that have taken over the streets and we’ve noticed that the attitude of the people translates into more hostility, more impatience, and on a small island like this...that’s the last thing you want. The natural charisma of open doors, the feeling you would get, that the tourists would get from the locals was present for maybe ...ten years after I got here

but eventually after the dive shops came in, people stopped saying hi to each other.” Like Miranda, he pointed to an intertwining of environmental and sociocultural shifts.

The following selection comes from an extended interview from 2002 fieldwork with a then 34-year old descendant of another original family. We hear what Danny believed made Utila special and how the island changed over his lifetime.

Utila’s a special place because you know if you’re born here there’s a lot of freedom and there’s a lot of communication with the people here. We all understand each other. Actually for me it’s a special place because it has beautiful surroundings like caves, reefs. It’s a tranquil place – no crimes – not a like of crimes on the island up to this day. . . [Regarding change] I think you know, the reef of the island, it was extremely colorful. I mean once you got in the water, if you were local or wherever you came from, if you got in the water, you didn’t want to come out. It was a different temperature and everything. It was beautiful. You know I remember as I look back I would see these tremendous coconut trees, all over the beach and the beach was completely full of sand – all over – no erosion. . . The coconut trees and the big sandy beach? [That was in] the 70s. I could remember ‘78, I was a kid running on the beaches, playing with the coconut. You had beaches 8 to 10 feet wide from the water. Beautiful beaches. It sloped off, but it was always long. Right now you see what we have left. And I mean this is worldwide – reefs and beaches and everything, this is changing. But I mean it was absolutely a paradise. I mean it[s] still paradise and we still have something, but compared to then, it was incredible . . . You know the days I would go up in the coconut trees and I looked down, things looked small, you know they were huge coconut trees. . . beautiful leaves and coconuts. . . some of the coconut trees expanded 30 feet in width, with the leaves hanging all the way out. But now with the coconut trees we have, the most expansion we can get is 10 to 12 feet, because they’re sickly, you know, and the climate has changed and erosion has affected them.

While the coconuts declined and the beaches withdrew from the 70s to the 90s, the reef maintained just enough diversity and the islanders just enough of their small town, laid back way of life that it continued to attract foreign dive tourists looking for an off-the-beaten path, unique experience.

Many who had a deep history with the island seemed to be experiencing solistalgia. They lamented the changes they had witnessed and the implications of these changes. Utila also has a third population which we’ll consider here: these are individuals who have resided on the island for shorter periods of time. These can be grouped in two ways: (1) recent arrivals from the mainland and (2) shorter-term residents employed by the conservation organizations. People in the latter group come from either mainland Honduras (for example, for an internship) or other countries.

The relationship between the first group, the mainland Hondurans, and the environment was seen by many interviewees as concerning. The pressures of poverty lead to poaching, the inadequate housing infrastructure and finite resources leads to mismanaged grey waters. At the same time, there is a clear understanding amongst interviewees of what leads some people on the island to strain resources. First, some are in subsistence mode and illegal fishing, harvesting, and poaching are strategies used to supplement diets and incomes. Second, for a few people with long histories on the island, harvesting turtle eggs, blue crab, and lobster is a cultural practice (be it for sustenance or sale), and efforts to limit and punish these activities are seen as authoritarian and imperialistic. As Fannie, a native of New Orleans who married a Utilian man and moved to open a hotel with him in the 1970s shared;

“Look, the country didn’t care about Utila for years, but now tourism is coming. . . Now they’re telling them to stop being fishermen. All these Americans saying ‘stop doing this’ and ‘don’t do that,’ but the first thing they want to eat when they sit down is a lobster or a big fish. Look, this is always been a poor fishing village. The gov’t should give the islanders a break – put islanders to work. . .”

With regards to solastalgia, a key question is whether it takes a long term relationship with an environment to generate a sense of obligation to protect it? Is there a sort of ‘environmental empathy’ that can somehow be stimulated in an expeditious and productive way? Albrecht et al., theorize that individuals can experience solastalgia via empathy; “the earth is their home and . . .witnessing events destroying endemic place identity (cultural and biological diversity) at any place on earth are personally distressing to them” (2007, 46).

In the case of Utila, we encountered the potential for some shorter term residents to experience solastalgia. In particular, and not surprisingly, this especially included individuals employed by conservation organizations. One does not have to have lived through the changes to grieve for what was and worry about what will be. For instance, several interviewees described turtle patrols, which involve the nighttime monitoring of a beach to watch for sea turtles making nests and when found, prevent the harvesting of eggs by people hoping to eat or sell them. The summer of our research saw a significant decrease in the number of nesting turtles. While there may be a somewhat benign explanation for this,

such as El Niño, anxiety was often present in the voices of those who described this trend. The sea turtle was a species that some felt passionate about protecting. Patrolling requires sacrifices—including losing a great deal of sleep—for about four people, this was an almost nightly commitment. The turtle exemplifies the potential for Utilians and others to grieve reductions in populations, as well as experience “anticipatory grieving” (Cunsolo Willox 2012, 140). That there could come a time when the turtles would no longer nest on Utila seemed to be a weight on the shoulders of some. Similarly, mourning the decline of crab this summer, this local fisher shared “years ago the crabs was so plenty; so much crabs, [that when] you walked the road, you had to skip across... [and] once they spawn... you had to dodge, walk fast and it was just hundreds, and hundreds, and thousands of crabs.” Today people are dodging tuc tucs, motorbikes, and ATVs. Cunsolo Willox argues: “Despite the anthropogenic focus of mourning in current discourse, we can, and we should, extend this discussion of mourning to the non-human, and use this mourning as a resource for recognizing non-humans as *fellow* vulnerable entities and mournable subjects” (2012, 147). Be it sea turtles, blue crab, iguanas, whale sharks, mangrove forests, or another species or ecosystem to which people are accustomed to knowing is on or near the island, the vulnerability of these was felt deeply by some on Utila.

INSIGHTS

We have, then, evidence of diversity in terms of experience or lack thereof with solistalgia or anticipatory grief in relation to the environment of Utila. What potential do the efforts of the conservation organizations on Utila hold for encouraging shifts among those who do not seem to experience either of these? For staff at the organizations, environmental education is seen as the key tool. Two of our collaborators worked tirelessly to help children on Utila to better understand their environment in the hope that it would lead to more conservation-oriented attitudes among the younger generation. Staff members of the organizations told us that some of the children they work with in the schools believe that bats smoke and that this contributes to negative attitudes towards bats. Staff members of the conservation organizations have worked to dispel such beliefs and inspire children to value bats and numerous other

species on the island. Perhaps their efforts are the most straightforward and promising approach to increasing community awareness and action.

In a helpful and related examination of the perspectives of elders on the disappearance of manatees from their local lagoon ecosystem in Veracruz, Mexico, Smith-Cavros et al. suggest that “examining past choices and their natural and cultural effects is important because more choices remain to be made in the present and future... that will affect the plants, animals and people of the area” (2012, 78). Some on Utila are almost desperate for a more widespread and genuine stewardship ethos to take hold of the community. Perhaps the stories of those experiencing solastalgia need to be more widely shared? It seems that a characteristic of the Anthropocene may be that we take “nature” for granted unless and until it is transformed (and these transformations are occurring at a relatively intensive rate in some places); stories like those shared here may represent one mechanism for minimizing the extent to which Utila’s mangrove forests, sea turtles, reef ecosystems, and even tarantulas are taken for granted.

With a more direct articulation of that which is mourned for, or that which may be mourned for in the future, the potential for change could be augmented. As Cunsolo Willox articulates, “public mourning can be an important mechanism for political mobilization, the counteraction of dominant discourses around the derealization of non-human bodies, and for sharing grief experienced from climatic and environmental change” (2012, 151). She argues this is in fact necessary in order to “counteract the violence and derealization to repopulate climate change discourse with the voices and experiences of environmentally-based mourning, and to socially constitute non-humans as mournable and grievable” (2012, 152).

Informed choices, however, require an understanding of causes of environmental change. Preliminary analysis of interview data suggests widely diverging explanations. Is tourism development to blame? Commercial fishing? Mainlanders? Poverty? Climate change? Traditional subsistence strategies? Power structures and governance? Or some combination of all of these? In their informative work on understandings of diminishing pheasant populations and changing habitats in South Dakota, Errington and Gewertz find that some community members assumed “the inevitability of a capitalist

socioecological project. From their perspective, a radically different world was not possible” (2015, 409). Similarly, in the case of Utila, for some a different world is not possible and for others, not desirable. Perhaps, then, the potential of solastalgia as a mitigation tool is limited? Yet Cunsolo Willox insists that the task of mourning falls upon all of us. She states: “We need to continue to eulogize and read out the names of those non-humans that have been lost, or are close to disappearance. We need to continue to speak the names of the extinct (or close to) at public events, in classrooms, and in private settings” (2012, 152). So we close on this thought: perhaps a key role of anthropologists in conservation is a familiar role—to continue to document and share, but in this and similar cases with an eye toward solastalgia and ecological grief as experiences demanding to be named, traced, and shared. At a minimum, such steps can help to provide space for shared mourning and therefore, individual healing. As we continue to work with our partners in Honduras we will explore possibilities for incorporating these findings in the action reports and other deliverables provided to collaborating organizations.

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