



Socio-economic assessment of Programme for
Belize's activities on the primary buffering
communities of the Rio Bravo Conservation and
Management Area

FINAL REPORT



1. Executive Summary

Programme for Belize (PfB) intends to retain Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification through Rainforest Alliance's SmartWood Certification Program which follows the Rainforest Alliance/SmartWood Interim Standard for Assessing Forest Management in Belize (FM-32-Belize).

For such certification to be retained the Rainforest Alliance/SmartWood Interim Standard for Assessing Forest Management in Belize (FM-32-Belize) requires PfB to undertake an independent socio-economic assessment of its forest management system within the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (RBCMA).

The specific Principle to be addressed by the socio-economic assessment is: ***Management planning and operations shall incorporate the results of evaluations of social impact. Consultations shall be maintained with people and groups (both men and women) directly affected by management operations.***

Using the Drexler SPEECH Tool, data was gathered for this assessment by conducting interviews with individuals from the primary buffering communities, non-buffering communities, La Milpa Ecolodge and Research Center and Hill Bank Field Station staff, and the Programme for Belize staff in Belize City. The data was analyzed by coding for themes and looking for patterns in the responses to establish the impacts of RBCMA's activities in the communities.

The report contains community profiles for the following primary buffering communities: Rancho Dolores, St. Paul's Bank, Willow's bank, Lemonal, Indian Creek, New Hope, San Felipe, and Blue Creek. Community profiles are also included for the following communities: Double Head cabbage, Bermudian Landing, Isabella Bank, Flowers Bank, Indian Church, San Carlos, Yo Creek, San Lazaro, Trinidad, August Pine Ridge, and Shipyard. A profile of the major neighboring landholdings is also included: New River Enterprises Ltd., Gallon Jug Agroindustries, and Yalbac Cattle and Ranch Company.

Section 5 of the report contains the analysis and discussion of the data, specifically the community surveys, the SPEECH analysis, and the workers' interviews.

The findings and results of the socio-economic assessment of PfB's forest management activities at the RBCMA revealed information that is of vital importance to the organization and to the management of the RBCMA.

The communities that were surveyed are familiar with their neighbor to the west and south (the RBCMA), which was established almost 25 years ago. The majority of the residents of the communities are familiar with both PfB and the RBCMA, although about two-thirds of those surveyed stated that the RBCMA has had no effects on their livelihoods. However, almost one

third of those surveyed claimed that PfB's activities at the RBCMA have had some positive effects on their livelihoods.

The RBCMA is clearly a very visible neighbor. Almost one-half of those surveyed were able to identify two or three of the main RBCMA management programs, while one-fifth of those surveyed were able to point out all four of these programs. However, PfB is best known for its conservation and protection activities and programs at the RBCMA. This is testament to the effective outreach activities that PfB has directed toward the communities in the past.

Nonetheless, only one-third of those surveyed were aware that PfB had an active timber management program. This is probably a result of the fact that PfB, quite likely by design, has not publicized its efforts in this program to any great extent.

The report ends with a list of eight recommendations, and a Control and Monitoring Plan to provide guidance for the implementation of the recommendations.

Recommendations

a. PfB should increase and sustain its outreach to the communities via a well-designed Communications Strategy. Such a strategy should include school visits and programs, presentations to schools, meetings with village councils and other village groups, partnerships with non-governmental organizations sharing a similar mission, and so on. The Rancho Dolores Environment and Development Group (RDEDG), the Community Baboon Sanctuary Women's Group (CBSWG), and the Belize Rural High School are potential partners that could collaborate with PfB to implement its Communications Strategy in the Belize River Valley area. The main purpose of the Communications Strategy would be to make people aware of the work of PfB, the importance of its management programs, and the value of the RBCMA. RBCMA staff at Hill Bank and La Milpa should also be targeted. We noted that Hill Bank staff were more familiar with the RBCMA management programs (and overall PfB work) than the La Milpa staff.

b. The scholarship program should be maintained and expanded if possible. While PfB spent only \$6,937.50 on scholarships during the 2010 to 2012 period, this program is well recognized among the communities. It is noteworthy to point out that such a small expenditure over a three year period (an average of approximately \$2,300 per year) has resulted in a high degree of goodwill toward PfB. Just doubling this annual financial expenditure would greatly increase the stature of PfB among the communities. This is the expenditure that has given PfB the most "bang for its buck" in terms of community goodwill support to the work of PfB in the RBCMA.

c. PfB should strengthen its enforcement and protection activities, particularly along the eastern and north-eastern boundaries of the RBCMA. The surveys made it clear that hunting and fishing within the RBCMA persists to this day and probably at increasing levels given the near absence of game species outside the reserve and near the communities. Several community members reported that they have not seen RBCMA Rangers in a long time, suggesting that protection patrols may not be conducted regularly or as frequently as before. Interviews with the RBCMA staff suggested that this was indeed the case. The importance of maintaining a strong protection

presence cannot be understated. Even with strong community support and goodwill towards Pfb, human nature dictates that there will still be the occasional foray into the RBCMA for hunting and fishing – these resource extraction activities are considered to be traditional and will not change anytime soon.

d. Together with the Communications Strategy, Pfb should develop and implement an Environmental Education Strategy and Action Plan that seeks to: i) increase the understanding by local stakeholders about the value of conservation to ensure the long term sustainability of natural resources, and ii) provide regular and accessible public information on ecosystems and forest management to promote behavioral change designed to protect and sustainably utilize the natural resources.

e. Pfb should strive to continue supporting local tourism development ventures in line with its tourism management program. Before deciding to support new projects, Pfb should make an assessment of the status of the projects that it has supported over the past three years. Pfb financial records indicate that Pfb donations to community groups and schools amounted to \$21,442 during the 2010 to 2012 period, with most of the donations expended in 2010 (\$19,470). Pfb should seek to support those projects that have the best potential to economically benefit the communities and to be sustained. Whatever support is given to these projects, Pfb needs to ensure that it devises an exit strategy so that the beneficiary community groups are able to sustain the projects after the conclusion of Pfb financial and technical support.

f. Pfb should consider including neighboring communities in the value-added part of its timber management program. The Shipyard Mennonites have set up a profitable furniture industry albeit based on unsustainable supplies of timber. Pfb should conduct a feasibility study and market analysis to determine the viability of a certified furniture cottage industry using RBCMA timber processed at a regional sawmill facility following strict chain of custody requirements (i.e. record keeping, paperwork, certification) as prescribed by SmartWood/FSC. This type of community development project (along with tourism development ventures) can serve to boost the economic state of the communities.

g. Heads of Departments (HODs) based at the Pfb office should strive to visit the RBCMA field stations on a more regular basis. While the field station staff seemed appreciative of and valued their jobs, and the working conditions were generally good, dissatisfaction about the current level of wages was expressed. The field staff was of the opinion that HODs would better appreciate the concerns and needs of the field stations and field staff if they would visit and meet with the staff more often.

h. Pfb should strengthen its collaboration with the YRCC. There is room for closer collaboration in areas of forest protection (poaching, illegal logging, control of wildfires), use and maintenance of forest roads, and exchange of experiences with sustainable forest management and reduced-impact logging.