



NATIONAL FOREST POLICY

BELIZE



MAY 1, 2015

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FOREWORD

The sustainable management of Belize's rich natural resource base is critical to the sustainability of the country's productive sectors and to the maintenance of Belize biological diversity. It is therefore important that Belize's forests are managed to continue to provide a range of goods and services which are critical to the health of its economy and well-being of its small national population. Belize continues to enjoy the highest forest cover in both Central America and the Caribbean, with 60% of forest cover.

Belize's National Development Strategy (Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy) is our strategic policy framework and seeks economic growth in the context of sustainable development as its central objective. The role of forested lands in achieving this aim is generally accepted and different aspects of forest conservation and management are expressed in a range of sectoral and cross-sectoral policy statements. It is therefore imperative that Belize's Forest Policy be aligned to the recently developed national policies on national development, agriculture, tourism and protected areas and their supporting strategies to enable the fulfillment of our common goal for the benefit of the nation.

Belize's current Forest Policy dates back to the colonial era, 1954, and continues to be Belize's current Forest Policy that is implemented through the Forest Act. That forest policy statement consists of 10 points and seeks "To create, maintain permanently, and develop a national forest estate taking into consideration the need for agricultural development and the protection of the environment". A new Forest Policy is needed to formally provide policy direction in a decade in which new policies are being formulated to focus on sustainable development, land-use, sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation, wildlife and protected areas management and to ensure their compatibility with our national economic development, climate change impacts and mitigation, people, poverty and their livelihoods, national security and land tenure rights.

The Forest Department initiated the development of a Forest Policy in 2012 with support from the FAO and in 2014, after extensive consultations with state and non-state partners, with the assistance of the GIZ through its Selva Maya Programme has finalized the draft National Forest Policy. The Forest Policy seeks 'A thriving and integrated forest sector, where the forests of Belize are valued for their significant economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits, and are sustainably managed for the lasting benefit of the nation.' The policy is grounded in the Constitution of Belize and responds to Belize's National Planning Framework, Horizon 2030. It consists of eleven (11) guiding principles, fifteen (15) policy statements each with a set of strategies for the implementation of the policy statement.

The National Forest Policy of Belize (2015) represents a significant achievement for Belize, a country whose forests and natural resource base are one of the cornerstones to its economic future. It is therefore my privilege to introduce Belize's new Forest Policy.

Wilber Sabido, Chief Forest Officer

May 27, 2015

ACRONYMS

ADMOS	Agriculture Development Management and Operational Strategy
BERDS	Biodiversity and Environmental Resource Data System of Belize
BRADS	Belize Rural Area Development Strategy
CATHALAC	Centro del Agua del Trópico Húmedo para América Latina y El Caribe / Water Center for the Humid Tropics of Latin America and The Caribbean
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBOs	Community-Based Organizations
CCJ	Caribbean Court of Justice
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FD	Forest Department
FP	Forest Policy
FRA	Forest Resources Assessment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GISP	Global invasive Species Program
GOB	Government of Belize
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPs	Indigenous Peoples
IUCN	World Conservation Union
MFFSD	Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and Sustainable Development
MLA	Maya Leaders Alliance
MNRA	Ministry of Natural Resources and Agriculture
MTDS	Medium-Term Development Strategy
NEAP	National Environmental Action Plan
NEP	National Energy Policy
NFP	National Forest Program
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NLUPP	National Land Use Policy and Planning Framework
NPAPSP	National Protected Areas Policy and System Plan

NPASP	National Protected Areas System Plan
NPESAP	National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan
NSTMP	National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products
PfB	Programme for Belize
RAMSAR	Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat
REDD	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management
SIB	Statistical Institute of Belize
TAA	Toledo Alcaldes Association
TIDE	Toledo Institute for Development and the Environment
UN	United Nations

GLOSSARY¹

Terms	Definitions
Afforestation	Afforestation is the conversion from other land uses into forest, or the increase of canopy cover to the 10% defined threshold for forest ² . The IPCC Guidelines define afforestation as the “planting of new forests on lands which, historically, have not contained forests”.
Agro-forest	An agro-forest is a complex of treed areas within an area that is broadly characterised as agricultural or as an agro-ecosystem.
Alien species	An alien species is a species, sub-species or member of a lower taxon that has been introduced outside its normal past and present distribution; the definition includes the gametes, seeds, eggs, propagules or any other part of such species that might survive and subsequently reproduce ³ .
Degraded forest	A degraded forest is a secondary forest that has lost, through human activities, the structure, function, species composition or productivity normally associated with a natural forest type expected on that site. Hence, a degraded forest delivers a reduced supply of goods and services from the given site and maintains only limited biological diversity. Biological diversity of degraded forests includes many non-tree components, which may dominate in the under-canopy vegetation.
Endemic species	An endemic species is a native species restricted to a particular geographic region owing to factors such as isolation or in response to soil or climatic conditions.
Forest	In this document, a forest is a land area of more than 0.5 ha, with a tree canopy cover of more than 10%, which is not primarily under agricultural or other specific non-forest land use ⁴ .
Forest biological diversity	Forest biological diversity means the variability among forest living organisms and the ecological processes of which they are part; this includes diversity in

¹ These indicative definitions have been adapted from the Report of the CBD’s *ad hoc* technical expert group on forest biological diversity.

² Ibid.

³ GISP, 2001

⁴ FAO, 1998 and FRA, 2000

forests within species, between species and of ecosystems and landscapes.

Forest certification is a soft policy instrument that seeks to use assessments of forest management, the verification of legality, chains of custody, eco-labelling and trademarks to promote the sustainable management, conservation and development of forests in a holistic manner without compromising the rights, resources or requirements of present and future generations.

Forest ecosystem can be defined at a range of scales. It is a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their abiotic environment interacting as a functional unit, where trees are a key component of the system. Humans, with their cultural, economic and environmental needs are an integral part of many forest ecosystems.

Forest fragmentation refers to any process that results in the conversion of formerly continuous forest into patches of forest separated by non-forested lands.

A forest species is a species that forms part of a forest ecosystems or is dependent on a forest for part or all of its day-to-day living requirements or for its reproductive requirements. Therefore, an animal species may be considered a forest species even if it does not live most of its life in a forest.

A forest type is a group of forest ecosystems of generally similar composition that can be readily differentiated from other such groups by their tree and under-canopy species composition, productivity and/or crown closure.

Habitat loss, used with reference to an individual species, is the permanent conversion of former (forest) habitat to an area where that species can no longer exist, be it still forested or not.

An invasive alien species is an alien species which becomes established in natural or semi-natural ecosystems or habitats. It is an agent of change and threatens native biological diversity⁵.

A native species is one which naturally exists at a given location or in a particular ecosystem, i.e., it has not been moved there by humans.

⁵ IUCN, 2000

Plantation forest	A plantation forest may be afforested land or a secondary forest established by planting or direct seeding.
Primary forest	A primary forest is a forest that has never been logged and has developed following natural disturbances and under natural processes, regardless of its age. Also included as primary, are forests that are used inconsequentially by indigenous and local communities living traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.
Reforestation	Reforestation is the re-growth of forests after a temporary (< 10 years) condition with less than 10% canopy cover due to human-induced or natural perturbations ⁶ .
Secondary forest	A secondary forest is a forest that has been logged and has recovered naturally or artificially. Not all secondary forests provide the same value to sustaining biological diversity, or goods and services, as did primary forest in the same location.
Sustainable forest management	The sustainable use and conservation of forests with the aim of maintaining and enhancing multiple forest values through human interventions. People are at the centre of SFM because it aims to contribute to society's diverse needs in perpetuity. The United Nations describes SFM as: <i>"[a] dynamic and evolving concept [that] aims to maintain and enhance the economic, social and environmental values of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations"</i> .
Value-added	Addition of value to a product/good, process or service, with accompanying cost and price increases at various steps along the way.

⁶ FAO, FRA 2000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first formal policy for forest administration in Belize (1947) focused primarily on the expansion of forest industries; the utilization of secondary hardwoods; the enrichment of Mahogany in selected areas; and improving the production of managed forests. The 1954 published Forest Policy of British Honduras included an emphasis on watershed protection and soil conservation⁷.

Today, the Forest Sector remains an important contributor to the national economy and national development for a number of reasons. However, much has changed in terms of the administration and protection of forested lands. Even though the 1954 policy remains as the only published forest policy in Belize, the Government has taken initiatives that have effectively shifted the policy direction. Such initiatives include protected area co-management agreements, long-term forest licenses and community-based forest licenses demonstrating a policy shift towards participatory forest governance; the establishment of a protected areas system with varied exploitation classes allowing for the strictest conservation of vital ecosystems; and multiple-use exploitation of robust ecosystems based on sustainable management principles. These initiatives demonstrate that there is significant involvement of non-state partners in the forest sector (as well as in the protected areas and wildlife sectors). The Forest Act, National Parks System Act, the Wildlife Protection Act, the Private Protected Areas (Conservation) Act, and the Fire Protection Act were all revised as late as 2003. This slew of legislation is indicative of a policy oriented towards sustainable management, biodiversity conservation and wildlife protection. This is a significant progression from the initial policy focus on production but still lacks consideration for other issues such as, forest dependent people and their livelihoods; climate change impacts and mitigation; hurricane damage; and national security and indigenous rights.

The last forest policy review was in 2012, but this process was delayed following a process of consultation with the Forest Department and with stakeholders. In light of the many concerns and changes, and the importance of the forestry sector to the people and country of Belize, the need to review and revise the situation and to prepare for the future, a new strategy for management, conservation and sustainable development of Belize's forests has become imperative. In response to the changing context, the government revised the National Land Use Policy in 2012, is currently revising the National Protected Areas System Plan, and plans to revise the Forest Act in 2015. These undertakings will inform the Forestry Sector through amendments or changes in forest legislation, development and implementation of action plans and inter-sectoral plans, creation of partnerships, information sharing, institutional reforms and capacity building for forest management, and the creation of the appropriate financial mechanisms. The new National Forest Policy and future National Forest Program form part of this process.

⁷ Belize Forest Department, 2011

This National Forest Policy document is divided into three main sections: 1) Background to the Forest Policy, 2) The National Forest Policy, and 3) Support for implementing the Forest Policy.

Section I provides information on the following:

- Introduction
- The need for a new Forest Policy
- The Status of Belize’s Forest Sector
- Factors in the decline of the forest resource base
- Forestry in the wider economy
- Wood industries
- Forests in rural livelihoods
- Conservation of biodiversity and environmental services
- Land tenure
- Sector Coordination
- Public sector reform
- The role of stakeholders
- Policy harmonization

Section II is the new Forest Policy itself, which comprises four sub-sections: eleven Guiding Principles for the Forest Sector, the Forest Policy Vision, the Forest Policy Objectives, and fifteen Policy Statements. Each Policy Statement includes a description as well as a set of Strategies for implementation of the Policy Statement.

The Forest Policy Objectives and Policy Statements are guided by the following Forest Policy Vision:

A thriving and integrated forest sector, where the forests of Belize are valued for their significant economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits, and are sustainably managed for the lasting benefit of the nation.

Section III sets out the key elements of support for the implementation of the Forest Policy. These include: 1) Sector-wide planning, 2) Sector investment, 3) Sector coordination, 4) Institutional reform, 5) Forest legislation, 6) Indigenous Land rights, 7) Gender and equity, 8) International and regional cooperation, and 9) Sector monitoring and evaluation.

SECTION I – BACKGROUND TO THE FOREST POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

Belize is located in Central America, in the south-eastern part of the Yucatan Peninsula and consists of 8,867 square miles. Its territory is bounded to the west and south by Guatemala, to the north by Mexico, and to the east by the Caribbean Sea. The northern half of the country is mostly flat, with swampy lands in the north eastern reaches and a series of escarpments in the north western reaches of the country. Most of the south is occupied by the Maya Mountains, with a coastal plain averaging 10 miles wide. The forest ecosystem is a diverse assemblage of different forest types. The underlying geology is dominated by limestone with some occurrence of metamorphic and igneous bedrock. Recent studies show the total forest cover to be around 63% with a deforestation rate of 0.06% per annum (Cherrington et al). Deforestation is due primarily to land use change, agricultural conversion being at the heart of this change.

Historically, the forests of present day Belize are quite different from what they were originally. Records show that the Mayan occupation of what is now geographically Belize significantly influenced the vegetation on the land. There is an unmistakable correlation between certain tree species, the Mayan occupation and limestone soils. For instance, during the latter part of the Mayan occupation the forest was completely stripped from the land, and the subsequent re-growth was dominated by pre-climax species such as Mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), and other species favoured by the Mayans such as Sapodilla and Cohune palm.

In the mid-17th century the forests of Belize (then British Honduras) were occupied by the British whose primary interest was the commercial extraction of logwood and later mahogany. The exploitation of these two timber species formed the basis of our fledgling economy for several decades. Unfortunately very little was done initially by way of forest management outside ineffective and ineffectual orders by elected magistrates who mandated the planting of seedlings where trees were felled.

The first snippets of comprehensive forest management came in the form of an ordinance (Forest Trust Ordinance No.22 of 15th August 1923) which established the Forest Trust in 1923. There was no formal Forest Policy at the time, however the first Conservator of Forests, Mr. C. Hummel had produced a report on Forests of British Honduras (1921) with suggestions that provided the policy direction for the Trust. The Trust's main objective was the "development and maintenance of the crown forests of the colony". Forest administration has progressed to address a diverse myriad of objectives. The composition of the Trust was notably small: the Governor, two public officials, and two unofficial members.

Financing for the work of the Trust came from the Forest Revenue, a set percentage, initially 20%, was set aside for this purpose. Over the year the percentage increased and was supported

by a loan mechanism. The profitability waned over the years with the Trust seeing a credit surplus in the late 1920's and a sizeable deficit and contraction of its work in the early to mid-30's. In 1935 the Trust was abolished and the Forest Department under the direct control of the central Government came into existence.

Again there was no formal policy for forest administration, and until 1947 the Forest Department could only rely on the Hummel Report for direction. The 1947 policy focused heavily on the expansion of forest industries; the utilization of secondary hardwoods; the enrichment of Mahogany in selected areas; and other objectives aimed at improving the production of managed forests. There was little emphasis on watershed protection and soil conservation until the 1954 published Forest Policy of British Honduras.

The legislation supporting the policy in many ways evolved as the policy did. Until the formation of the Forest Department, the forests were controlled by the Survey Department under the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1886. Like the initial policy the legislation only allowed for timber exploitation by means of licence provisions and made little provisions for controlled or responsible exploitation. Not until 1926 was a proper forest ordinance brought into effect which made provisions for the formation of forest reserves, the control over forest reserves and laid down the necessary procedures. The laws were further amended in 1939 to create a set of comprehensive rules which addressed among other things, the floating of logs down the Belize River. This revision was stimulated largely by the breaking of the boom on the Belize River which caused logs to be wedged against the Haulover Bridge and resulted in a precarious situation highlighting the need for better control of floating logs. The policy of 1954 had accompanying legislative changes which conferred more power on the Conservator of Forests for better management. These changes included amendments to the schedule of royalties for payment to be made by cubic foot instead of the tree (in more important species); provisions for the control of forest roads and for license application and license standards.

Concomitant with the changing emphasis in the policy direction of the 1954 Forest Policy of British Honduras towards the strategic establishment of a forest estate through reservation was the increase in reservation by law. Initially, the rural populations were so sparse, and the land cover dense with forest, that it was not necessary to engage in any formal reservation of forested lands. However, in 1956 the Chiquibul Forest Reserve was gazetted as the single largest addition to forest estate. Today, the Forest Sector remains an important contributor to the national economy and national development primarily because of the underlying interests in national land assets.

2. THE NEED FOR A NEW FOREST POLICY

2.1. EXISTING POLICY

The first formal policy for forest administration in Belize (1947) focused primarily on the expansion of forest industries; the utilization of secondary hardwoods; the enrichment of Mahogany in selected areas; and improving the production of managed forests. The 1954 published Forest Policy of British Honduras included an emphasis on watershed protection and soil conservation⁸.

Today, the Forest Sector remains an important contributor to the national economy and national development for a number of reasons. However, much has changed in terms of the administration and protection of forested lands. Even though the 1954 policy remains as the only published forest policy in Belize, the Government has taken initiatives that have effectively shifted the policy direction. Such initiatives include protected area co-management agreements, long-term forest licenses and community-based forest licenses demonstrating a policy shift towards participatory forest governance; the establishment of a protected areas system with varied exploitation classes allowing for the strictest conservation of vital ecosystems; and multiple-use exploitation of robust ecosystems based on sustainable management principles. The Government has also forged partnerships with non-profit wildlife rehabilitation centers. These initiatives demonstrate that there is significant involvement of non-state partners in the forest sector (as well as in the protected areas and wildlife sectors). The Forest Act, National Parks System Act, the Wildlife Protection Act, the Private Protected Areas (Conservation) Act, and the Fire Protection Act were all revised as late as 2003. This slew of legislation is indicative of a policy oriented towards sustainable management, biodiversity conservation and wildlife protection. This is a significant progression from the initial policy focus on production but still lacks consideration for other issues such as, forest dependent people and their livelihoods; climate change impacts and mitigation; hurricane damage; and national security and indigenous rights. One other noticeable stagnation in the de facto policy is in the exploitation and utilization of forests; the focus has been generally to extract and export as primary lumber with no further processing for increased marketability and market value and the focus has tended towards primary hardwoods with notable underutilization of secondary hardwoods, less well known timber species and non-timber forest products (NTFPs)⁹.

The last forest policy review was in 2012, but this process was delayed following a process of consultation with the Forest Department and with stakeholders.

2.2. CURRENT CONCERNS

The forests of Belize over the past 30 years have undergone extensive change. This is attributable to relentless pressures arising from increasing demand for fuel-wood, food and

⁸ Belize Forest Department, 2011

⁹ Ibid

timber; insufficient protection measures; diversion of forest lands to non-forest uses; and the tendency to look upon forests as revenue earning resources¹⁰.

Studies show the total forest cover in 2012 to be approximately 61.6%¹¹ with a deforestation rate of 0.6% per annum¹². Since 1980, the country's forest cover has declined from approximately 75.9% to 60.3% in 2014, and a trend of increasing deforestation is occurring¹³ (Figure 1). Deforestation is primarily due to land use change, driven by agricultural conversion; infrastructure expansion; unsustainable and illegal logging; and hurricanes, pests, and wildfires¹⁴. A projection study (based on a business as usual scenario) by Cherrington et al for 2025, shows these deforestation drivers increasing, with a 56% forest cover forecasted (Figure 2).

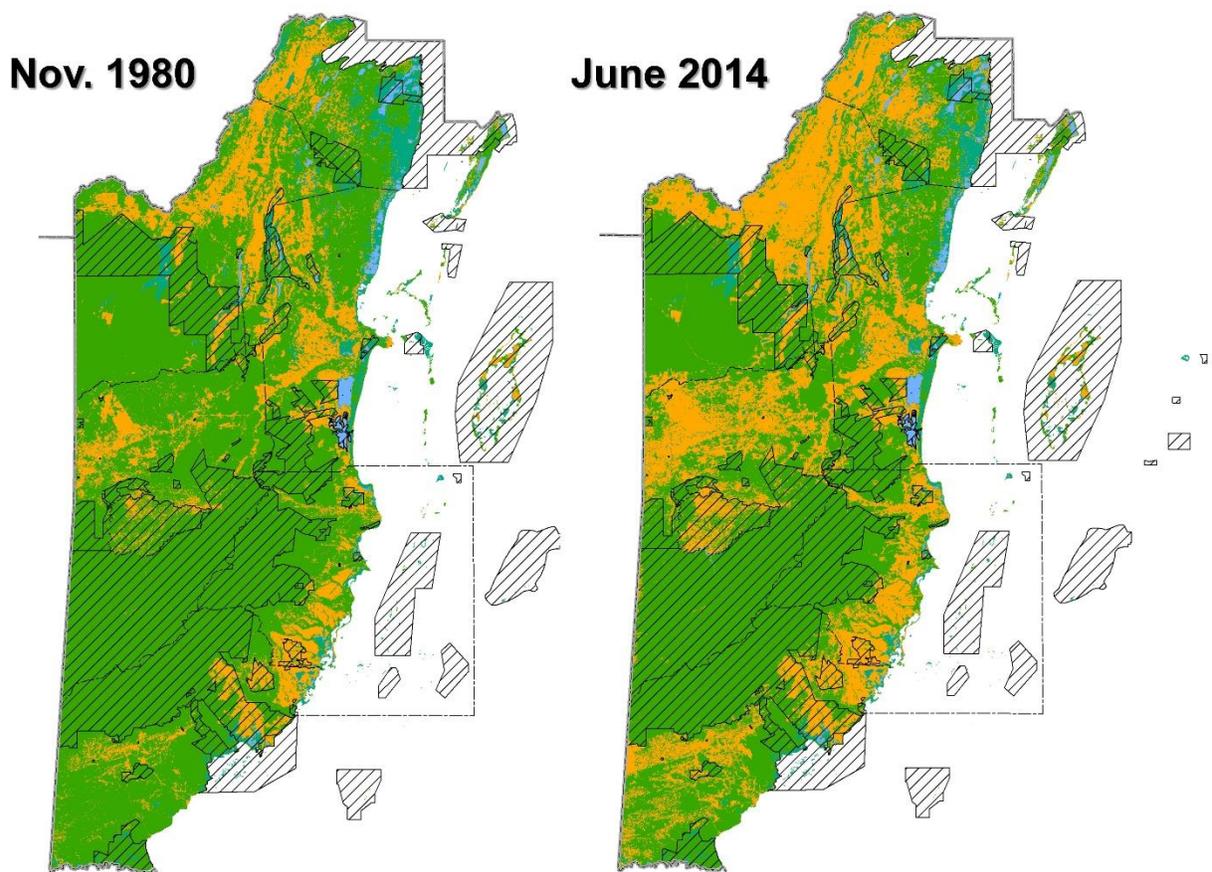


Figure 1: Belize Forest Cover from 1980 to 2013¹⁵

¹⁰ Belize Forest Department, 2011

¹¹ Cherrington et al., 2012

¹² Cherrington et al., 2010

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Belize Forest Department, 2014b

¹⁵ Source: Cherrington, 2014

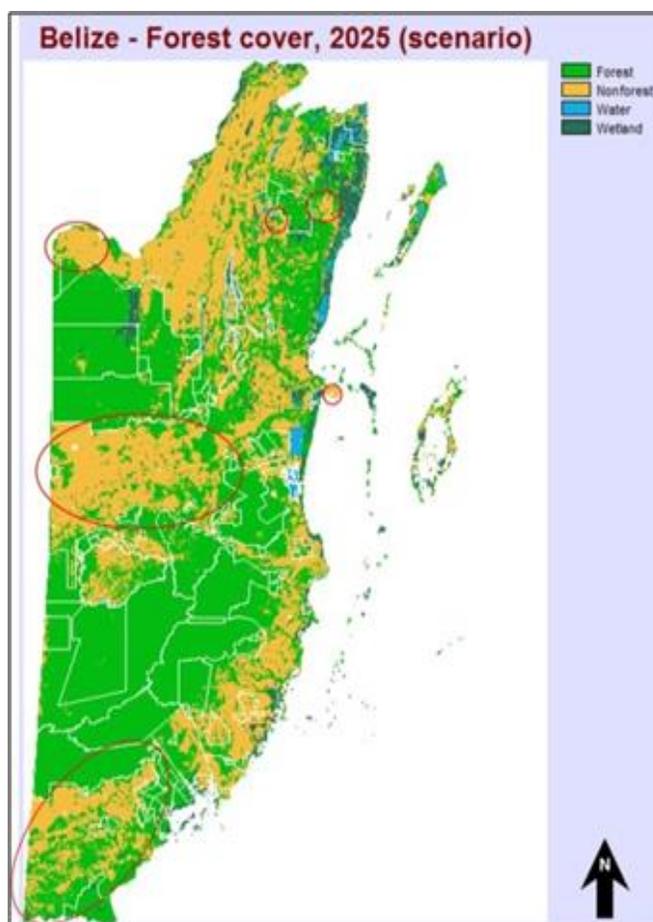


Figure 2: Belize Forest Cover 2025 Scenario ¹⁶

2.3. WIDER POLICY AND LEGAL CHANGES

In Belize, there have been a number of national and international commitments that are strengthening Belize’s management of its forest resources. Relevant national policies and laws have been revised as late as 2003 and some are scheduled for another revision in 2015 (Forest Act and National Parks System Act) and 2016 (Environmental Protection Act and Wildlife Protection Act)¹⁷ (Box 1). The Government has signed on to international obligations in relation to conservation and trade practices (Box 2).

Box 1 KEY NATIONAL POLICY AND LEGAL CHANGES AFFECTING THE FOREST SECTOR	Box 2 KEY INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS WHICH AFFECT THE FOREST SECTOR
The Forest Act (Rev Ed 2000)	The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, 1973
National Parks System Act (Rev Ed 2000)	United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992

¹⁶ Source: Cherrington, et al

¹⁷ Belize Forest Department, 2014b

Wildlife Protection Act (Rev Ed 2000)	The RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands, 1971
Private Protected Areas (Conservation) Act, 2003	The United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification, 1994
Forest Fire Protection Act, 2003	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1992
Land Utilization Act, 2003	Millennium Summit – Millennium Development Goals, 2000
National Lands Act, 2003	
Environmental Protection Act, 2003, 2016	
The National Food & Agriculture Policy, 2003	
National Integrated Planning Framework for Land Resource Development, 2011	
National land Use Policy, 2012	
National Protected Areas Policy and System Plan (ongoing)	
National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan, 2012	
Belize Climate Change Adaptation Policy, 2010	

2.4. NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

There are a number of significant development initiatives in Belize that are relevant to the forest sector:

The Horizon 2030 National Development Strategy, the National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan (NPESAP), and the National Medium-Term Development Strategy (MTDS), identify those sectors critical for long term policy actions and investments and in varying degrees serve to focus sector specific strategies and plans. The Horizon 2030 Strategy provides a new long-term sustainable development plan for Belize, with a clear strategic focus on social and economic development¹⁸.

Sector specific plans, strategies and policies provide the operational direction and the framework for national sustainable development action. They include the, the Belize Rural Area Development Strategy (BRADS), the National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan (NSTMP), the National Land Use Policy and Planning Framework (NLUPP), the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), the National Environmental Policy and Strategy, the Sustainable Chemical Management Action Plan, the National Protected Areas Policy and Systems Plan (NPAPSP), the National Health Plan and Policy, the Agriculture and Food Security Policy, and the Land Suitability Mapping System for Belize. In the specific case of the energy sector, Belize has recently adopted a National Energy Policy (NEP)¹⁹.

¹⁸ MFFSD, 2012

¹⁹ Ibid

Belize has also initiated processes to develop a National Water Master Plan to guide the regulatory actions on the 2011 Integrated Water Resource Management Act as well as a Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy. There is also expressed interest from the Government to explore a pathway to green development²⁰.

2.5. IMPORTANCE OF FORESTRY AND FORESTS

The Government of Belize recognizes that the country's forests play a significant role in its social and economic development, and is a significant contributor to the daily livelihoods of the local rural, indigenous and immigrant populations. Because of the relentless pressures facing the forestry sector, a new strategy for use, development, conservation, and sustainable management of forests has become important. Belize's forest resources provide energy from fuel wood; forest and tree products; employment; livelihoods support such as game meat, medicinal plants, and other NTFPs; government revenues; business opportunities; environmental functions and services (such as regulation of climate, water and air purification, soil conservation, and housing of biodiversity and its genetic pool); and they help to maintain ecological integrity²¹.

2.6. DIVERSITY OF STAKEHOLDERS

In Belize, a diverse range of stakeholders is affected by the forestry sector. The Government has recognized stakeholders whose interests are not fully addressed, and those whose roles and responsibilities need to be more well defined and coordinated.

The many stakeholders include:

- Forest resource producers (farmers, commercial tree growers and forest owners)
- Forest resource users (both commercial consumers, and the majority of the urban and rural poor who depend on firewood and other forest products for subsistence)
- Forest resource processors (charcoal makers, saw-millers, artisans and traders);
- The general public
- Government and non-government organizations and individuals involved in providing services of management, training, research and support in the sector.

2.7. CONCLUSION

In light of the many concerns and changes, and the importance of the forestry sector to the people and country of Belize, the need to review and revise the situation and to prepare for the future, a new strategy for management, conservation and sustainable development of Belize's forests has become imperative.

In response to the changing context, the government revised the National Land Use Policy in 2012, is currently revising the National Protected Areas System Plan, and plans to revise the

²⁰ MFFSD, 2012

²¹ Government of Belize, 2010

Forest Act in 2015. These undertakings will inform the Forestry Sector through amendments or changes in forest legislation, development and implementation of action plans and inter-sectoral plans, creation of partnerships, information sharing, institutional reforms and capacity building for forest management, and the creation of the appropriate financial mechanisms. The new National Forest Policy and future National Forest Program form part of this process.

3. THE STATUS OF BELIZE'S FOREST SECTOR

3.1. NATIONAL FOREST COVER

Belize's total forest cover is currently around 60%, accounting for approximately 1.4 million hectares. The vast majority of the total land area is a diverse assemblage of various forest types (60%), of which broadleaf forest comprises the most common, while the remainder is other vegetation (16.8%), water/wetlands (16.4%), agriculture (14%), and urban/industrialized areas (0.6%)²² (Figure 3).

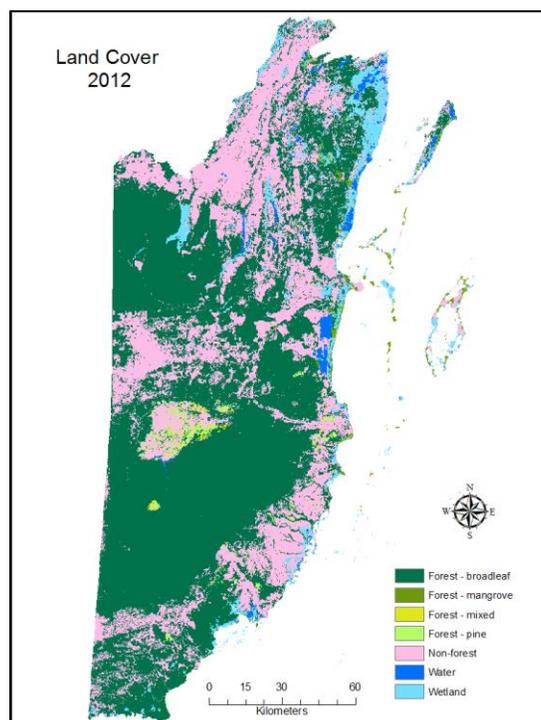


Figure 3: Forest Cover in Belize²³

3.2. THE FOREST ESTATE

About 40% of the national forest cover is under protected area status, and the other 60% is privately owned or situated on public lands that are not directly managed for forestry purposes.

²² Belize Forest Department, 2014b

²³ Source: Belize Forest Department

Of the publicly owned and managed forests, 65% are set aside for timber production (forest reserves), and the remaining areas are managed for non-extractive purposes²⁴ (Figure 4).

Regionally, Belize ranks high in terms of percent of the country's land area under forest cover and forest area per capita, attributable to its small population size and large terrestrial territory under protection²⁵.

The Forest Department is responsible for overseeing the use and protection of the forest estate, but economic forces such as government austerity measures, growth of the tourism industry, and decreased budgets for regulation and law enforcement, have led to pressures on the forestry sector, including the ability of the Forest Department to adequately perform its many functions²⁶.

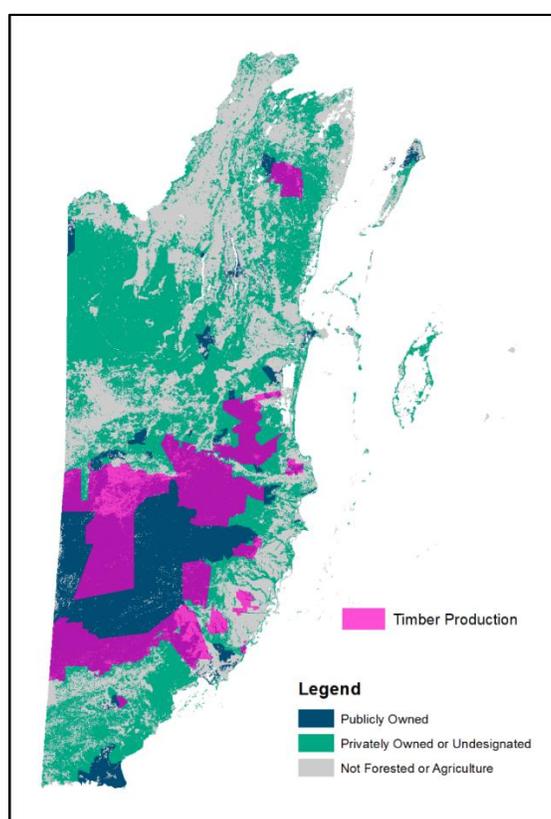


Figure 4: Forest cover in Belize showing timber production²⁷

3.3. DECLINE IN FOREST RESOURCES

In Belize, there is a trend of increasing deforestation and land degradation occurring, primarily due to land use/land use change drivers such as agriculture expansion; urban and infrastructure

²⁴ Belize Forest Department, 2014b

²⁵ Government of Belize, 2010

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ FD, 2014

expansion; unsustainable and illegal logging and harvesting of NTFPs; and hurricanes, pests, and wildfires.

- The pine bark beetle outbreak in the Mountain Pine Ridge in 2000-2003 affected about 80% of the area and caused a noticeable decline in the production of pine timber²⁸
- About 81,864 acres of forest were affected by hurricane and fire damage since the 2010 Hurricane Richard²⁹
- Approximately 93.6% of all deforestation that took place from 2010 to 2012 occurred outside of protected areas³⁰

3.4. KEY ISSUES

- How to ensure full gender participation. Insecure land tenure influences how women, in particular, use natural resources and adopt SFM practices
- More public education and awareness about SFM is needed
- How to ensure that the necessary changes in forest governance will be put in place and honored
- What measures to put in place to ensure that population growth, food insecurity, poverty, weak policies, and capacity to monitor will not continue to exacerbate threats to the forests
- The need to modernize the forestry sector
- How to maintain and enhance the Forest Estate
- How to improve the management of forest resources on private and customary lands
- How to properly develop Belize's REDD+ strategy to support the global REDD initiative

4. FACTORS IN THE DECLINE OF THE FOREST RESOURCE BASE

4.1. DESCRIPTION

Major factors in the loss of forest cover and the decline of the forest resource base in Belize include population growth, Belize's economic situation, and the socioeconomic and political situation of neighbouring countries³¹. In addition, insufficient planning and regulation, and lack of enforcement coupled with policy deficiencies relating to the private sector and local communities over land tenure are contributing underlying factors.

Population Growth

Population growth has led to a high rate of deforestation and degradation on both private and public lands due to agricultural, urban, and infrastructure expansion; and illegal extraction of forest resources as more people seek new and better sources of livelihoods.

²⁸ Cherrington et al., 2010

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Government of Belize, 2010

Immigration from neighbouring countries brings with it an increase in the demand for land for housing and farming as well as the introduction or reinforcement of unsustainable agricultural practices. This can also have a severe impact on the forest and reduce its quality because of the unsustainable harvesting of forest products such as wildlife, timber, and NTFPs.

Belize's Economic Situation

At the same time that the rapid growth of the tourism industry continuously requires newer attractions for the increasing number of visitors to the country, the timber industry has declined. This is compounded by government austerity measures which have reduced funding to the Forest Department, thereby limiting its capacity to sustainably manage its protected areas, respond to relevant management issues, and to control illegal logging or other illegal forest extraction operations³².

Transboundary Incursions

The political and socioeconomic situation in neighbouring countries is another factor in the decline of Belize forest resource³³. Farmers from neighbouring countries, in search of better livelihoods, often establish unsustainable farming operations and illegally extract forest products on Belize's side of the border. Belize is often limited by human and financial resources to adequately protect its borders, and as a result, such transboundary incursions are likely to continue.

4.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to address the major and underlying causes of deforestation, including population growth and rural poverty, the economy, immigration and trans-boundary incursions, forest resources market, and regulation and enforcement.

5. FORESTRY IN THE WIDER ECONOMY

5.1. DESCRIPTION

The Forestry Sector provides a wide range of economic benefits to Belize. Economically, it contributes to formal and well-established industries such as timber and tourism, particularly ecotourism, and also to emerging subsectors based on trade of NTFPs. The Forestry sector also contribute to the informal economy of the country through the provision of many products including fuel wood, game meat, and other NTFPs that are extracted and consumed by locals³⁴.

Gross Domestic Product

The contribution of the Forestry Sector to Belize's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was about 0.5% in 2007. During the 1970s up to the 1990s contribution by the forestry and logging sector

³² Government of Belize, 2010

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

to GDP ranged from 2.7 percent to 2.3 percent but has remained constant at about 0.5 percent since 2000³⁵. The forestry and logging industry contributed about BZ\$5.65 million in domestic export of sawn wood in 2013³⁶.

Tourism

The Forestry Sector also contributes economically to tourism, particularly through ecotourism and construction. The tourism industry has become the fastest growing and most important industry for the country in terms of its contribution to GDP. In 2006, tourism expenditure accounted for 16.8 percent (BZ\$398.8 million) of the country's GDP³⁷.

Protected areas

Apart from generating revenues through tourism visitation and production industries such as the timber industry, terrestrial protected areas contribute to Belize's economy in many other ways, including employment of protected area managers, park wardens and other staff, and generation of foreign exchange through large grants and donations³⁸.

Forest Products

Forests also contribute to the economy of Belize through less established industries and informal trade. Most of these informal industries revolve around the extraction of forest products such as fuel wood or of NTFPs that in Belize include: honey, game meat, medicinal plants, house plants, orchids, wild fruits, spices, raw materials for handicraft, palm leaves for thatching roofs, posts for construction, seeds for nursery propagation, and xaté palm leaves for floral arrangements. Fuel wood is still a primary source of energy for many households, and 26% of the energy consumed in Belize is derived from biomass in the form of fuel wood or bagasse³⁹.

Environmental services and biodiversity

A significant contribution of the forest sector to the economy of Belize is from the range of ecological services and biodiversity values the forests provide. Although these services and values have never been adequately reflected in the contribution to GDP, they are recognized as integral to regulation of climate, agricultural productivity, soil and water conservation, air and water purification, nutrient recycling, natural disaster mitigation, and biodiversity, including its unique genetic resources and diverse ecosystems. The link between forests and water security and quality is of tremendous importance, given that the country's watersheds originate within forested areas. This highlights the need for even more attention to forest management.

³⁵ Government of Belize, 2010

³⁶ Statistical Institute of Belize, 2014

³⁷ Government of Belize, 2010

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

5.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to capitalize on the economic, social and environmental opportunities in forestry without undermining the resource base.

6. WOOD INDUSTRIES

6.1. DESCRIPTION

Despite the decline in the timber industry, Belize has a fairly competitive domestic market in wood products, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors, and with the growth in the economy, the demand for these products is expanding. Most of the timber comes from the pine forests and broadleaf forests, with Mahogany, Pine, Yemeri, and Santa Maria carrying the highest production⁴⁰. Timber is extracted and processed primarily by logging companies that are given a permit to log by the Forest Department.

Since 2005, the Forest Department has shifted from granting short term logging licenses to granting long term (20 and 40 years) licenses. Long term logging licenses are designed to practice sustainable forest management (SFM), enabling logging companies to replant timber trees and harvest logs on a rotation basis⁴¹. Under the SFM initiative, a total of 15 long term licenses have been granted, incorporating an area of over 900,000 acres. This includes 345,000 acres from private entities, 132,000 acres from national lands in the Southern Coastal Plains, 420,000 acres from licensed forest reserves, and from other forest reserves⁴².

Another practice of SFM is the certification of timber harvesting operations. Certification can be used as an incentive for logging companies to manage forests sustainably as it allows them to transfer some of the costs of sound management to the consumer⁴³. At the same time, certification allows the consumer to make environmentally responsible choices when it comes to the timber products they purchase⁴⁴. And yet, another SFM initiative is community forestry that aims to get local people more involved in the management of their forests.

6.2. KEY ISSUES

However, various issues are creating inefficiencies, waste of resources, and poor incentives to investment in the timber industry. These issues are listed below:

- It is costly for the logging companies to do business in Belize. Timber is undervalued. The historically low royalty rates charged on timber do not reflect its full value in terms of the forest goods and services it represents. This has led to low revenues to Government for re-investment in forest management, and weak incentives for foreign investors

⁴⁰ Government of Belize, 2010

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Belize Forest Department, 2014b

⁴³ Government of Belize, 2010

⁴⁴ Ibid

- Lack of proper communication of Belize’s commitments to CITES and of the Forest Department’s reporting and management responsibilities to meet its obligation to that Convention
- Poor enforcement of regulations and extra-official decisions made outside of standard procedures have led to indiscriminate and illegal harvesting of forest resources
- Logging roads are poorly maintained. The logging companies have the responsibility to maintain logging roads but are unsure as to who is responsible to repair or upgrade them
- The development of wood-based products through secondary and tertiary processing can be improved, thus improving economic opportunities and incentives in the industry
- The Forest Department’s lack of capacity to monitor illegal activities taking place in the timber industry has led to a poor response to complaints filed by legitimate loggers and logging companies
- There is a lack of a formal association in the private sector, which has set the groundwork for political interference and mistrust among companies
- How to promote and regulate greater private sector involvement in forestry development, and to create a more positive investment climate in the sector.
- How to view sustainable forest management as the only mechanism that can ensure the survival of the forest resource.
- How to strengthen the Forest Department to enable it to facilitate the development of the Forestry Sector without losing its regulatory role and functions.
- How to increase revenue for timber and NTFPs from value-added activities.

7. FORESTS IN RURAL LIVELIHOODS

7.1. DESCRIPTION

Approximately 56% of Belize’s population is rural⁴⁵ (Figure 5), and a great many rural livelihoods are dependent on private and public lands for subsistence and income. In rural areas, forest resources have been traditionally utilized as a source of game meat, edible and medicinal plants, and forest products for construction.

⁴⁵ Belize Forest Department, 2014b

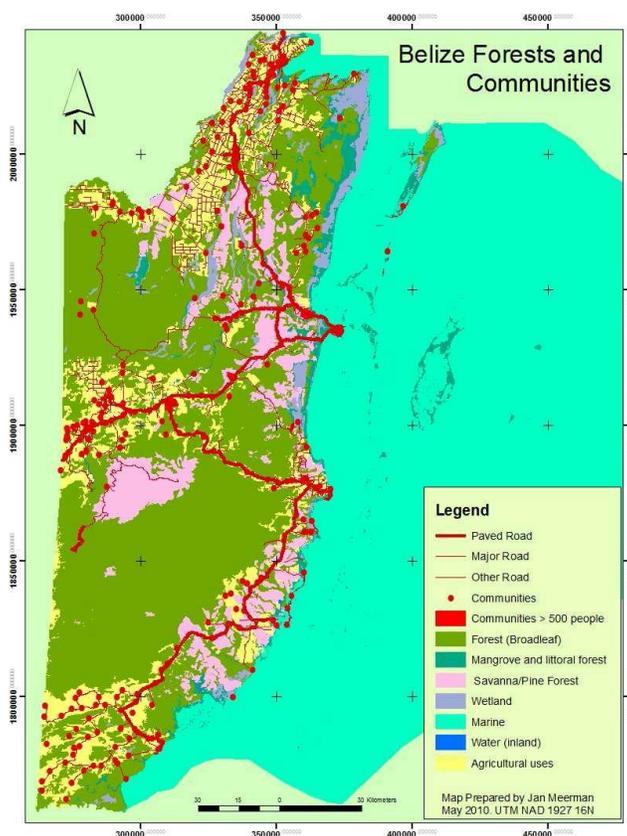


Figure 5: Forests and Communities in Belize⁴⁶

Public and Private Forest Management

Forests provide a rich source of wood, NTFPs, and environmental services to rural communities. However, much of the public and private forests in rural neighborhoods in Belize are at risk of being poorly managed or converted to agriculture or grazing lands, resulting in the continuing decline in forest cover in Belize.

Forest Plantation

Few forest plantations exist in Belize, and the Forest Department is currently looking at afforestation or reforestation using forest plantations to reduce forest loss and degradation and meet some of the demand from natural forests for wood and fibre.

Farming

Much of Belize’s agriculture is small-scale. Over 56% of the population of Belize lives in rural areas where agriculture is one of the main contributors to livelihoods. Poor land use practices have resulted in food insecurity, low farm incomes and environmental degradation, including deforestation. In many areas there is declining land productivity, soil erosion, and slope degradation.

⁴⁶ Source: Meerman

Community Forestry

In Belize, there is a history of open-access use of forests by people that live near to them. Individual farmers or local residents depend on these forests for wood, NTFPs, and the many environmental services they provide. The Government finds it increasingly difficult to police and regulate this open access without collective responsibility. It has been shown that organized communities can play a key role in natural forest management and conservation, while substantially improving their livelihoods.

7.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to engage forest owners, farmers and local communities to improve their livelihoods through new approaches to forestry.
- How to ensure that rural livelihoods and traditional practices in forest-dependent communities be respected and acknowledged.
- How to encourage private land owners to keep their lands forested.

8. CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

8.1. DESCRIPTION

Belize lies within Mesoamerica, recognized as one of the richest biodiversity areas on Earth. It contains a rich diversity of natural habitats (Figure 6), biodiversity, and genetic resources and is home to more than 3000 species of plants (including more than 600 known medicinal plants), about 141 species of reptiles, 163 mammals, and over 500 species of birds. It's biodiversity includes a number of Yucatan endemics and over 100 globally threatened species, including 31 that are endangered and 11 that are critically endangered⁴⁷.

This biodiversity has a great intrinsic value. It is important to human health and wealth, for example by providing traditional plant medicines, wild relatives of domestic plants, a variety of ecosystems and species important in the tourism industry, and potential opportunities for Belizeans to adapt to local and global change⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Belize Forest Department, 2014a

⁴⁸ Belize Forest Department, 2011

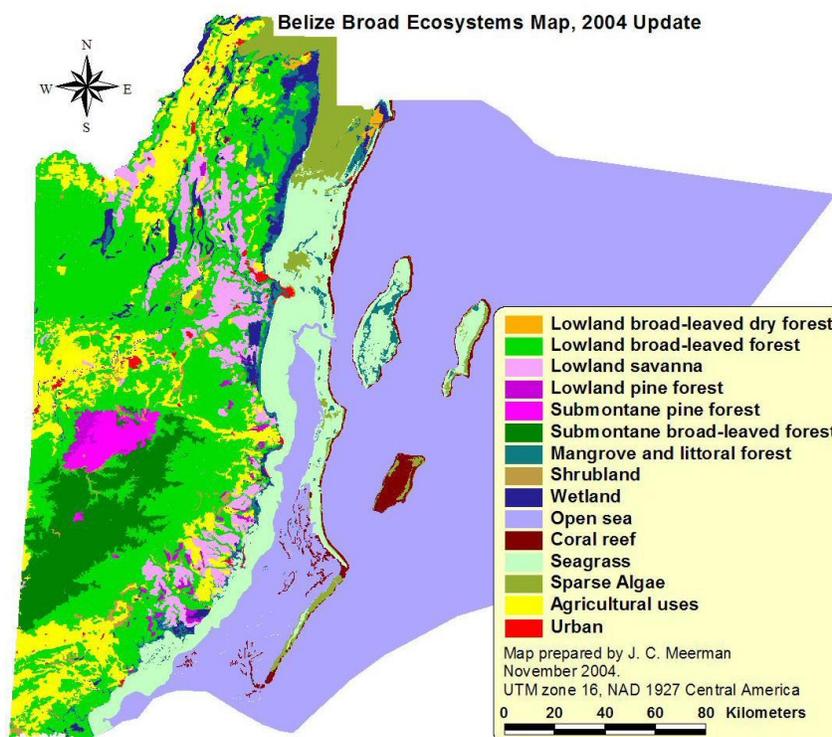


Figure 6: Broad Ecosystems Map of Belize⁴⁹

At the heart of Belize’s approach to habitat and biodiversity conservation is its extensive system of protected areas which contains much of the remaining forest cover. Management of these are guided by the 2005/2006 National Protected Areas System Plan (NPASP) and under various administrations (government departments, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations), under different Acts (primarily the Forest Act, National Parks System Act, and Wildlife Protection Act), and generally focus on different components of biodiversity⁵⁰.

Belize’s rich forest biodiversity is under threat from:

- The impacts of climate change
- Introduction and spread of invasive species
- Habitat loss and fragmentation primarily due to expansion of the tourism and agricultural sectors
- Improper disposal of solid waste
- Unsustainable harvesting and illegal trade in plants and animals
- Conflicting policies and legislation that incentivize deforestation
- The limited capacity of the Forest Department to fully and effectively manage protected areas due to limited financial and technical resources.

⁴⁹ Source: Meerman, BERDS

⁵⁰ Wildtracks, 2009

Forests also provide important environmental services in the protection of watershed and soil. There are increasing pressures on important watersheds due to their high agricultural potential. Poor crop and livestock management practices, including the cultivation and over-grazing of steep slopes and riverbanks, have contributed to extensive soil erosion, and in some areas landslides. The destructive harvesting of forest resources in watershed catchment forests is further contributing to soil erosion and sedimentation, and to a reduction in the quality of water.

8.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to ensure the survival of forest habitats and biodiversity and to balance this with the socio-economic development needs of Belize.
- How to maintain the capacity of forest ecosystems to deliver environmental services and maintain ecological functions.

9. LAND TENURE

9.1. DESCRIPTION

There are some uncertainties over land tenure and permitted land uses in Belize. Some lands are privately owned or designated communal lands, whilst the majority is owned by the government. There are many laws that prohibit access to and control over forest resources. However, all lands (whether private, communal, and protected and non-protected national lands) will face increasing pressure for alternative land uses.

Indigenous Land Rights

The relationship of Maya communities in southern Belize to the land is embedded in their livelihood systems and culture⁵¹. Large Government land holdings such as National Parks and Forest Reserves coincide with these communities having longstanding cultural and historic claims to the land but no legal title. The Maya have expressed setting aside lands in their villages as forest reserves to ensure continued access to timber and NTFPs, and other ecosystem services provided by forests. Section 6.6 describes these land tenure issues as it relates to indigenous people in more detail.

Gender Concerns

In Belize, men play a greater role than women in the exploitation of natural resources for commercial purposes—logging, grazing livestock, fishing, mining, and extracting various tree products. While both women and men are involved in economic activities such as farming, women have additional domestic responsibilities such as food preparation, water and fuelwood collection, child care, and maintaining family health.

The social status of Belizean women often limits their secure and independent access to land, or women may not be aware of their rights, or customs may exclude them from de-facto

⁵¹ DeVries et al., 2004

ownership. Such insecure land tenure influences how women access, control and use forest resources, and are therefore less likely to invest time and resources or adopt environmentally sustainable farming practices on land they do not own.

9.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to find practical and executable land use options that are compatible with the management, conservation and sustainable development of the nation's forest resources both within and outside of forest reserves and protected areas.
- How to ensure that improved tenure to land acts as an incentive for individuals, and women in particular, and communities to invest in forestry.
- How to address the Maya communal land rights claim: that is, the longstanding claims by the Maya people to land in southern Belize but no legal title.
- Defining community boundaries.
- Definition of a forest unclear.
- Improved decision-making, accountability and reporting.

10. SECTOR COORDINATION

10.1. DESCRIPTION

The Forestry Sector cuts across many natural resource management, including energy, agriculture, water, wildlife, fisheries, and economic development, and lack of co-ordination among these interests in the past has led to inefficiencies and waste of public resources.

The division of responsibilities and artificial sectoral boundaries created a number of potential and actual conflicts:

- Between lead agencies such as the Forest Department, Fisheries Department, Department of Geology and Petroleum, Agriculture Department, the Department of the Environment, and the Lands Department.
- Between different systems of land tenure that are comprised of overlays of various forms of customary law with modern land and forest laws.
- Between different land use policies, for agricultural expansion and for the conservation of forest resources.
- Between central government, local government and local community priorities for the use of forest resources.

With the amalgamation of the three primary government agencies involved in natural resource management (Forest, Fisheries, and Environment) into the Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and Sustainable Development (MFFSD) in 2012, greater coordination and collaboration has taken place.

The MFFSD is now the responsible body for the administration and use of the country's natural resources, including forests on national lands and protected areas. Within this Ministry, the Forest Department is responsible for overseeing the use and protection of forests including

granting of forest licenses and permits, collection of royalties for forest resources, monitoring, and to a large extent the design and implementation of management plans. The Forest Department is responsible for the management of approximately half of the country's protected areas. The Department of Lands and Surveys under the MNRA is another body whose activities and responsibilities involve the use and administration of forests mainly because they are the responsible body for land allocation and distribution.

10.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to integrate cross-sectoral policies and build synergy among relevant institutions.

11. PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

11.1. DESCRIPTION

Efforts at reform or modernization of Belize's public sectors have spanned several decades and are ongoing. A Public Sector Reform Council was appointed in 2000 to advise on and follow the progress of reform initiatives undertaken in the country⁵². Since then, a new Public sector Reform Committee was formed and the Government has pursued reforms in a number of sectors, including forestry, finance, health, and education.

Through the integration of the three primary government agencies involved in natural resource management, namely Forestry, Fisheries, and Environment, into the MFFSD in 2012, the government has expressed its commitment to the reform of these sectors. This shift aims to lessen some of the constraints on the Forestry Sector and encourage good governance, transparency, accountability, and stronger focus on results. The Forest Department remains as the lead agency in forest management in Belize.

11.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to harmonize the institutional goals of the MFFSD with the policies and planning frameworks that exist and are being developed for the Forestry Sector.

12. THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

12.1. THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

12.1.1. DESCRIPTION

The role of local government in managing forest resources in Belize has not been adequately established. The central government still maintains all the power and there is the need for devolution of this to the town boards and village councils. Many demands for logging permits to log a single tree or a few trees are coming from indigenous and non-indigenous communities where village lands are typically not allotted for forestry use. Giving autonomy to local

⁵² Ministry of Public Service, 2000

government will aim to ensure good governance and democratic participation in decision-making, including decisions concerning the sustainable management of Belize’s natural resources. The government recognizes that local authorities must play an important role in promoting forest sector development, including private and community responsibilities.

12.1.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to build capacity and systems for local government to engage actively in government and private forestry.
- How to foster good relationship between local communities and the government so that communities and their local leadership are valued and respected.
- How to increase local government participation in forestry monitoring and foster greater collaboration in forest management.

12.2. THE ROLE OF THE COMMERCIAL PRIVATE SECTOR

12.2.1. DESCRIPTION

The Government of Belize recognizes the need to engage the commercial private sector, particularly in areas where the commercial private sector can perform more adequately. The government sees a major role for the private sector in forestry, particularly in the production and processing of wood products and in ecotourism, which are major employers and which require good business management.

Since 2002, the Forest Department has been promoting sustainable forest management through granting 20 and 40 years logging licenses to logging companies in an effort to encourage the replanting of timber producing trees and the rotational harvesting of logs⁵³.

12.2.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to create more positive linkages and incentives ensure effective partnerships between government and private businesses.

12.3. THE ROLE OF FOREST-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES

12.3.1. DESCRIPTION

It has been a long-standing view that forest-dependent communities need to play a greater role in managing forest resources in Belize. Many communities in Belize are dependent on the forest for timber and NTFPs, as well as on the ecological services that the forest provides. The focus of collaborative forest management and community forestry should therefore be geared particularly towards these communities that are often driven by poverty into engaging in poor land management practices.

12.3.2. KEY ISSUES

⁵³ Government of Belize, 2010

- How to develop formal partnerships with local communities that improve forest management and improve rural livelihoods.

12.4. THE ROLE OF NGOS AND CBOS

12.4.1. DESCRIPTION

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in Belize play an important role in mobilizing and sensitizing local people, in strengthening civil society, and in supporting their active participation in the management of protected areas and forest resources.

Co-management partners with the Forest Department range from large non-governmental organizations such as Belize Audubon Society (BAS) and the Toledo Institute for Development and the Environment (TIDE); to community-based organizations such as Friends of Gra-Gra Lagoon and Rancho Dolores Development Group with limited infrastructure, human and financial resources; to private landowners such as Programme for Belize (PfB) and Bermudian Landing; and long term logging concession holders such as Pine Lumber Company, Wood Stop, and New River Enterprises⁵⁴.

The strengths of the NGOs and CBOs in Belize include their long-term commitment, access to communities, participatory approaches, independence, and their ability to act quickly. Their weaknesses can often be limited management capacity, a lack of specific skills relating to forestry, and a shortage of financial resources. NGOs and CBOs are key organizations in the implementation of forestry development, in a number of roles:

- Building capacity and providing an interface between government and civil society
- Providing a monitoring and watchdog role concerning the interests of poorer sections of society
- Advocating and supporting policy changes in the interests of sustainable forest management

12.4.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to strengthen and make best use of the capacity and reach of NGOs and CBOs in facilitating forestry development.
- Recognition by the Government that collaborative agreements do not release them from their financial and managerial responsibility to forestry.

⁵⁴ Wildtracks, 2009

13. POLICY HARMONIZATION

13.1. DESCRIPTION

A range of relevant policies, laws, and national development plans and strategies are aligned to the National Forest Policy. Sector policies that overlap with forestry in particular are agriculture, fisheries, and environment. The national Agriculture and Food Policy (2015-2030) interfaces and links with the National Forest Policy through promoting integrated management of the environment. This is achieved particularly through the development and implementation of measures to reduce watershed and land degradation, and reviewing and updating the legislative and regulatory frameworks for the sustainable management of forest resources in Belize. Through the National Land Use Policy and Integrated Planning Framework, land, forestry, and natural terrestrial ecosystems are recognized as contributing to forming the basis of a number of important industries in Belize's economy. This Policy also proposes the establishment of biological corridors to connect protected areas, and ensures that comprehensive management plans are developed for protected areas, and that any de-reservation areas be based on the needs of the country. The Belize Horizon 2010-2030 National Development Framework visions that the natural environment is valued and protected for all economic activity in the country, and that development planning is based on the principles of environmental sustainability.

The consultative process for the development of this National Forest Policy for Belize has encouraged greater awareness of the need for integration and complementarity with other related sectors.

13.2. KEY ISSUES

- How to develop a sector-wide programme that translates forestry policy into actions which complement programmes in other sectors.
- How to adequately integrate the Forestry Sector into Belize's Economic Development Agenda.
- How to streamline government policies to ensure harmonization among related sectors.

SECTION II – THE FOREST POLICY

1. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE FOREST SECTOR

The following general principles guide the Forest Policy. These principles build on the government’s national development priorities of good governance, sustainable development, and poverty eradication.

Principle 1: The Forest Policy is consistent with the national objectives and directive principles guiding sustainable development found in the Constitution and the National Development Framework for Belize 2010-2013 (Horizons 2030).

Principle 2: All citizens have the right to enjoy the sustained benefits of well-managed forest resources and services of Belize and the concomitant responsibility to ensure that such natural resources are properly protected, effectively managed and used sustainably.

Principle 3: Administrative decisions regarding the management and utilization of forest resources are most effective when they follow principles of sustainable development and if they are made transparently with inputs from stakeholders, based on best available science, valid technical information and free from political interference in a timely manner.

Principle 4: Good forest management aims to achieve multiple and complementary objectives: production of goods, protection of soil, water and other environmental services, conservation of biodiversity, provision of socio-cultural services, and provision of economic benefits, livelihood support and poverty alleviation.

Principle 5: Good forest management includes improved forest management practices that contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Principle 6: All stakeholders collaborate to ensure adequate implementation of policy through their advocacy for consistent and equitable application, transparency and accountability. Partnerships in forest governance should include:

- *The role of central government:* Central government should promote the involvement of the private sector and other stakeholders in the development of the forest sector and management of the forest resources, but maintain core functions of policy development and regulation.
- *The role of local government:* More forest resources should be managed through devolved responsibility wherever practical and advisable.
- *The role of private sector:* Private sector investment should be maximized in the development of the forest sector and management of the forest resources.

Relevant Sections in the Preamble of the Constitution of Belize (2012):

- require policies of state which protect the environment;
- respect the principles of social justice and therefore believe that ... there should be adequate means of livelihood for all,...
- require policies of state which protect the identity, dignity and social and cultural values of Belizeans, including Belize’s indigenous peoples...

The Horizons 2030 Vision for Belize encompasses the following relevant stakeholder views:

- The natural environment is valued and protected as the basis for all economic activity and therefore development planning is based on the principles of environmental sustainability.

- *The role of local communities:* The participation of local communities in the management of the country's forests should be actively encouraged.
- *The role of indigenous communities and forest-dependent people:* The development of the forest sector and management of the forest resources should take into consideration the customary and traditional use of forest resources by indigenous peoples where such practices help to ensure sustainable management.
- *The role of NGOs/CBOs:* The involvement of civil society organizations should be encouraged to build capacity and community participation, and to help develop the rights and responsibilities of forest users.
- *The role of Academia:* The University of Belize and other local tertiary institutions should introduce degree programs in forestry and forest management, and develop methods of evaluating the benefits of and assigning priorities to forestry research.

Principle 7: The Government of Belize, with the collaboration of all stakeholders, consistently works at ensuring adequate financial and human resources for the implementation of the Forest Policy.

Principle 8: The active participation of women and men, young people and the elderly, and vulnerable or disadvantaged groups should be integrated into forest sector development.

Principle 9: Public awareness and education are essential elements in developing well-informed and committed stakeholders needed to support the forest policy and legislation and for effective implementation of related plans and programmes.

Principle 10: Harmonization of the forest policy with other relevant national and international policies and agreements is essential for synergies in the implementation of the forest programme and to avoid contradictions that would otherwise impede that implementation.

Principle 11: All utilization and development of forests shall follow the rule of precaution.

2. FOREST POLICY VISION

The vision of the forest policy is:

A thriving and integrated forest sector, where the forests of Belize are valued for their significant economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits, and are sustainably managed for the lasting benefit of the nation.

This national forest policy vision and the objectives and policy statements set out below are in support of Belize’s national development strategy (Horizons 2030) and national land use policy, assuring balanced forest use and conservation with agriculture and other land uses.

3. FOREST POLICY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the National Forest Policy are to:

- I. Enhance the quality and productivity of Belize’s forests thereby ensuring environmental integrity and a sustained flow of goods and services to meet the development needs of the people;
- II. Encourage the participation of all stakeholders in the planning and decision making process for effective protection, security, management and development of the forest resources;
- III. Ensure equitable access to and use of forest resources by all persons within the confines of any over-riding public interest, acknowledging the equal and inalienable rights of all Belizeans;
- IV. Raise awareness and maintain a high level of consciousness among the public and government agencies on the functionality of forests and benefits to be derived from appropriate forest resource conservation and sustainable forest management;
- V. Enhance applied research and investigation into all aspects of the forest’s flora and fauna, including the influence of forest cover on the maintenance of water and soil resources, and the contribution of forest goods and services to the national economy, so as to provide for evidence-based management decisions;
- VI. Provide guidance for actions to be taken with regards to the direct and indirect threats posed by global climate change on forests and forest dependent people in order to reduce their vulnerability, increase their resilience and adapt to climate change.

4. POLICY STATEMENTS

The specific policy statements are set out below. For each of these, a range of strategies to implement the policy statement is then listed based on the guiding principles set out in Section

2. Following this, in Section 6, key elements of support for the implementation of the Forest Policy are set out. Since the forest policy is basically statements of goals for the forest sector without going into detail about how it will be implemented, the strategies and key elements of implementation support will be further elaborated during the sector wide planning processes that develop the National Forest Program, and will be the means by which the implementation of the Forest Policy will be kept current with Belize's needs.

Policy Statement 1: The national forest estate shall be protected and managed sustainably and in perpetuity

Security of tenure of forest resources and access to forest land is a basic principle and a prerequisite for sustainable forest management. Appropriate and reliable forms of forest and land tenure should be established by legislation, including various forms of forest ownership and usage rights.

As a fundamental component of national land use planning, the Government will expand the national forest estate, comprising forests of all ownership types, based on secure, long-term land tenure for local communities, concession holders and other forest users. Sustainable forest management, irrespective of purpose, cannot be planned and effectively implemented in the absence of a permanent forest estate. Land use planning should balance the developmental needs of the country as a whole, or for specific regions within a country, with those of natural resources conservation, including sustainable forest management.

The national forest estate will be classified into productive and protective zones on the basis of a national forest inventory, ecological considerations and community consensus. Forest management units for timber production within the national forest estate will be identified and responsibility for management allocated amongst various owners and users in a transparent manner.

The policy and trading environment of Belize will enable forest management units to be commercially as well as ecologically sustainable and socially responsible, and will permit sound business arrangements to be implemented that, in turn, will enable long-term forest management programmes to be achieved. Sustainable forest management⁵⁵ and forest certification⁵⁶ can be expected to be more expensive than is unregulated exploitation. Lower expectation of immediate profit by the private sector is an important pre-requisite to achieving sustainable forest management.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.1. Establish and maintain in perpetuity a National Forest Estate consisting of areas of national land in any of the following categories:
 - 1.1.1. Land unsuitable for permanent agriculture but supporting or capable of supporting forests;

⁵⁵ See Glossary for a definition of SFM.

⁵⁶ See Glossary for definition of forest certification.

- 1.1.2. Land capable of producing a greater sustained financial return, if retained or developed as forest than if used for other purposes;
 - 1.1.3. Land which is best kept or put under forest for the better protection of watersheds, catchment areas, drainage basins, steep hill slopes and for the prevention of erosion, the control of run-off, the regulation of stream-flow, the existence of biological corridors, and the stabilization of the climate;
 - 1.1.4. Areas of national land established as forest reserves or other categories of protected areas for the preservation of ecological functions, the provision of wildlife habitats and preservation of biodiversity;
 - 1.1.5. Areas of national land established as community-managed forests for the continued use of the areas by people dependent on it or for the greater public interest while maintaining the core ecological functions.
- 1.2. The national-level criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management (Lepaterique Process) should at all times be integrated into the development of the forest sector and management of the forest resources⁵⁷.
 - 1.3. A national standard for certifying forests should be developed with the full participation of all stakeholders. No interest group should be permitted to dominate that process.
 - 1.4. Develop and institute a comprehensive forest revenue generation scheme that includes payments for ecological services as well as revenue earned from sales of forest products, primarily from timber harvesting, to financially support all forest conservation, management and development activities (see Policy Statement 13 and accompanying strategies).
 - 1.5. Support institutional strengthening and reform of the government agencies and civil society organizations governing forests through the development of an effective national forest programme, including capacity building and knowledge exchange.
 - 1.6. Reform forest-related legislation and other regulatory provisions, with the involvement of all forest stakeholders, to align with the forest policy and to ensure better integration of the forest sector into national development plans and processes, considering interfaces between forests and other land uses.
 - 1.7. Identify and address the institutional and capacity building needs of government and civil society bodies responsible for implementing the forest policy at various levels, including private stakeholders, in order to align the institutional framework and institutions with the forest policy.
 - 1.8. Strengthen the Forest Department's capacity and budgetary resource allocations to enable it to effectively facilitate the development of the forestry sector while improving its regulatory role and function.

Policy Statement 2: The development and management of natural forests on community-owned and managed land by indigenous people and rural communities

⁵⁷ Criteria and indicators are considered objective, cost-effective and relevant in the assessment of the sustainability of prevailing forest management practices and take into account ecological, institutional, social and economic conditions and needs.

will be promoted

Community forestry is defined as “the management of commonly owned forests for resource extraction, which can provide both forest conservation and communal income generation”⁵⁸. Community forestry promotes improved livelihoods of rural communities, especially those which have a traditional dependency upon forests, through more effective management of tree and forest resources. Rural communities and forest users who depend on tree and forest resources for their survival and for economic development are the primary beneficiaries of community forestry activities.

Belize has a large number of communities living in close proximity to the forest. For centuries, subsistence agriculture has been their main livelihood opportunity. Agriculture sustained these communities but the poverty level in these regions is very high. An increasing demand for timber puts these communities in the position to explore forest-based livelihood opportunities through access to state-owned forest resources.

Forest managers will work with forest communities in assessing, planning and monitoring the management of natural forests, according to locally defined concerns, needs and goals, in order to better address rural communities’ needs. Effective mechanisms will be formulated that will enable the achievement of effective and enduring two-way communication between forest managers and forest communities. Such is the case with SATIIM, which has been supporting the villages of Conejo and Santa Teresa to manage their forests sustainably and derive income from the sale of forest products,

Three features will be recognized in encouraging rural community participation in sustainable forest management:

- A clear recognition and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples who live in or have a traditional dependence on forests;
- Promoting collaboration amongst people and institutions who are involved in the various aspects of forest management, including timber and non-timber production, integrating professional skills and training with traditional knowledge and resources of local populations in order to more effectively support the needs of rural communities and to minimise or avoid conflicts in forest management; and
- Enhancement of the well-being of forest-dependent communities.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.9. Articulate a clear legal framework for the regulation of forest commons (access and use), particularly those held under communal land rights to ensure that the benefits derived from its use does not proscribe the opportunity for others to benefit.
- 1.10. Support the development and commercialization of communal forest resources in accordance with sustainable forest management principles and community goals in order to improve livelihoods, alleviate poverty and contribute to community development.

⁵⁸ Barsimantov et al, 2011

- 1.11. Incorporate the traditional knowledge of indigenous people and local communities in relation to forests into sustainable forest management.
- 1.12. Identify and define legal boundaries of forest areas that could be managed under community forestry precepts.
- 1.13. Adapt simplified technical approaches to community forest management that are consistent with the principles of sustainable forest management.
- 1.14. Provide opportunities for interested communities to manage parts of the forest estate via the development of structured community forest management agreements that clearly identifies the roles and responsibilities of the State and communities.
- 1.15. Develop robust community institutions to ensure transparent decision-making, the adequate representation and participation of women, men and vulnerable groups and the equitable sharing of forest benefits and responsibilities.
- 1.16. Provide financial and technical support, and incentives, to communities for the development and management of forests.
- 1.17. Consistently evaluate the community forest management agreements to ensure that they are achieving the intended objectives and that such synergies are positively impacting management of Belize's forests.
- 1.18. Develop and conform to a National Consultation Framework when engaging in forest-related activities, including the Maya Consultation Framework for Maya ancestral lands.

Policy Statement 3: Collaborative partnerships and strategic alliances with the private sector shall be developed and strengthened for the sustainable management of forests

The Government will put in place the institutional framework within which forest development can best operate. The private sector will in turn make long-term investments in forest management under conditions of profitability, fair competition and security which can compete with investment alternatives. Private sector participation is essential in sustainable forest management. The entrepreneurship and business experience of private owners and enterprises can substantially enhance the operational performance and the economic base of management and lead to greater wealth generation upon which post-harvest management, environmental management and local community development are able to be funded.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.19. Provide opportunities for private sector participation in the management of parts of the forest estate through fiscal incentives, competitive bidding and the development of structured agreements that clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each partner to improve transparency, to increase revenues to government and to reflect the real values of the resource.

- 1.20. Consistently evaluate the partnerships to ensure that they are achieving the intended objectives and that such synergies are positively impacting management of Belize's forests.
- 1.21. Put measures in place that guarantee the protection of private sector investments in sustainable forest management.
- 1.22. Improve the regulation of concessions including the development of robust harvesting standards and transparent administrative procedures.
- 1.23. Promote the formation of a forestry industry association to improve communications, access to market information and technical collaboration in the timber industry.

Policy Statement 4: Increased competitiveness in the forest sector through the manufacture of value-added timber products will be encouraged and fostered

The private sector will play the major role in developing and managing the forest products processing industries, and will capture the potential for value addition through high quality processing. The role of Government is to facilitate and regulate these activities. The Government will develop and maintain a strong regulatory framework, which will reduce illegal logging and control other illegal practices, monitor best practice, measure environmental and social impacts, and collect dues. The government will also create a positive investment climate to encourage private investment in the processing industry.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.24. Develop a modern, competitive, efficient and well-regulated timber processing industry that abides with national laws and international treaties (e.g., CITES).
- 1.25. Develop an awareness campaign to sensitize the forest sector at all levels on the qualities and values of Belize's timber resources, and develop training programs for product development and quality assurance.
- 1.26. Strengthen linkages between the timber production industry and timber manufacturing industry.
- 1.27. Explore opportunities for the development of otherwise under-utilized but high market value products.
- 1.28. Encourage the full utilization of raw materials derived from forest resources and improve the processing standards to optimize the economic returns on the ecological and economic investments.
- 1.29. Optimize, via applied research and appropriate technologies, the use, processing and development of timber forest products.

Policy Statement 5: The government shall encourage the sustainable use of those non timber forest products (ntfps) with the potential for commercial exploitation while respecting their traditional and cultural use

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are any product or service other than timber that is produced in forests. They include fruits and nuts, vegetables, fish and game, medicinal plants, resins, essences and a range of barks and fibres such as bamboo, and a host of other palms (such as xate) and grasses; as well as products such as honey. Relative to forest management for the production of timber, NTFPs and environmental services have received only scant attention. Interest in NTFPs has grown slowly, in response to calls for using forests sustainably for the benefit of the wider society and particularly the rural population. Today's interest in NTFPs is based on the argument that in order to conserve the forests we have to find new products, develop markets and improve marketing systems for NTFPs, so that the forests will become far too valuable to destroy⁵⁹. NTFPs have been called the "potential pillars of sustainable forestry"⁶⁰. An underlying assumption is that communities will conserve and protect forest resources if they receive tangible benefits from sustainable forest utilization⁶¹. While this assumption still needs to be tested, currently local people appear to have only very limited rights to forests, despite the recognized importance of NTFPs for income generation and food security⁶².

In traditional forest communities, many NTFPs may be used for subsistence while others are the main or only source of income. Some NTFPs have significant cultural value, such as incense and other ritual items. Others have important medicinal value and contribute to the community's health and well-being.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.30. Develop a policy framework/guidelines for access to NTFPs by local communities in national forests.
- 1.31. Develop a comprehensive database on the species of NTFPs utilized and systematize the collection of actual production records for NTFPs so that reliable data on the value of NTFPs exists;
- 1.32. Promote research on key NTFPs to determine their maximum sustainable yield and contribution to national economy;
- 1.33. The Government will institute harvesting regulations for plant species of market value such as ornamental and medicinal plants;
- 1.34. Promote the establishment of a replanting program for native species used for crafts based on paucity of species;
- 1.35. Promote the establishment of small forest product processing enterprises;

⁵⁹ Byron and Ruiz-Perez, 1996.

⁶⁰ Shiva, 1995a

⁶¹ RECOFTC, 1995.

⁶² Lynch, 1995.

- 1.36. Support the organization of NTFP gatherers and collectors, including rural women, in groups, associations, or cooperatives, or through links with private companies through outsourcing arrangements, so that such organizations are better able to access credit, technology, training and markets.

Policy Statement 6: The development and management of natural forests on private land will be promoted.

The Government will promote the sustainable management of natural forests on private lands. Within the context of wider integrated land use and expanding agricultural needs, these private forests will be managed for the sustainable production of forest resources and to maintain the current national levels of forest cover. The Government recognizes that without deliberate action, natural forests on private lands will continue to decline. The Government aims to halt such decline, with the use of a range of tools to promote best practices. Public education and advisory services will raise the level of awareness among landowners of the value and multiple uses of natural forests, the ways that trees can be integrated into farming systems, and how fallow farmland can be brought back to forest cover. Reservation of natural forests by private or customary landowners will be encouraged, to set land aside for forestry in perpetuity. The Government recognizes that some form of incentives will be required for such reservation.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.37. Investigate and implement options for economic, social and cultural incentives to encourage private owners (and lease-holders) to maintain and manage natural forests.
- 1.38. Develop capacity of institutions such as local governments, traditional institutions and user groups and to sustainably manage private forests.
- 1.39. Develop capacity of individuals including land owners, women's and youth groups, to develop agroforestry initiatives through the management of private forests and integration of trees into farming systems.
- 1.40. Encourage NGOs and CBOs to support private forest management.
- 1.41. Require the development of standardized management plans for all private forests in order to establish minimum standards in the sustainable management of forest resources.

Policy Statement 7: The competitiveness and dynamic development of all aspects of forest management and the forest sector will be promoted through forest education and science and enhancement of professional expertise in forest related disciplines

The socio-economic and environmental impacts of loss of the forest resources are not yet fully appreciated by the policy-makers and the public, nor completely understood by scientists.

Dramatic losses of forests, with consequent losses of soil and decline of soil productivity, are occurring because of expansion of agriculture, urbanization, over-exploitation of forest

resources themselves, and increasing demands for timber, fuelwood and other products. The impact of forest fires should also be considered.

The Government and its partners will highlight the importance of applied research and education in attacking these problems, and will assign adequate financial and human resources, as well as adequate mechanisms for transferring results into practical resource management, so that research is robust and well-conceived, and research results are applied and socialized.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.42. Increase the capacity for forest management through applied research, training and forest extension, by coordinating with the public and private sectors, local and international institutions through mechanisms of technology transfer.
- 1.43. The Government, with the support of international development agencies and national civil society organizations, should provide the resources for applied research, development and application of appropriate, sustainable systems of forest resource management.
- 1.44. The social, political and economic issues underlying deforestation and pollution should be continuously analyzed.
- 1.45. The University of Belize and other local tertiary institutions should introduce degree programs in forestry and forest management.
- 1.46. The Forest Department and professional foresters, recognizing the complexity of relations among forests, environments and national socioeconomic welfare, should appreciate the need for relevant forestry research, particularly in deforestation.
- 1.47. Working together with researchers and extension foresters, the Forest Department and professional foresters should mobilize and speed the transfer of scientific findings to hasten the solution of socioeconomic and environmental forestry problems.
- 1.48. Develop and implement a targeted education campaign to promote the role and value of forests, forest biodiversity and forestry to national development.

Policy Statement 8: Forest biodiversity will be conserved and managed in support of social and economic well-being and international obligations

Forests are one of the most biologically rich terrestrial systems. Forests offer diverse sets of habitats for plants, animals and micro-organisms. Furthermore, forest biodiversity is interlinked to a web of other socio-economic factors, providing an array of goods and services that range from timber and non-timber forest resources to mitigating climate change and genetic resources. At the same time, forests provide livelihoods for people and play important economic, social, and cultural roles in the lives of many indigenous communities. Therefore, forests and forest biological diversity are innately linked to ecosystem and human well-being

In the past, timber production was regarded as the dominant function of forests. However, in recent years this perception has shifted to a more multi-functional and balanced view. Other forest functions and services, such as recreation, health and well-being, biological diversity,

maintenance of ecosystem services and the mitigation of climate change are increasingly recognized as integral components of sustainable forest management.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.49. Ensure that forest reserves and protected areas so proclaimed in Section 5.1 are established in a rational manner, and contribute to the overall representativeness of ecological form and function of the national protected areas system;
- 1.50. Develop a strategy for multiple use protected areas that would allow for the continued use of the area by people dependent on it or for the greater public interest while maintaining core ecological functions;
- 1.51. Manage forest lands in a way that conserves and enhances biodiversity.

Policy Statement 9: The government shall endeavour to reduce deforestation and forest degradation

Forests provide a wealth of public and private goods and services, including carbon storage, biodiversity, water filtration, storm mitigation, timber and non-timber products, wild foods and medicines, and tourism. Yet despite its inherent value, forested land is being cleared for other uses such as farming, pasturing, and urban development. Currently, Belize has an estimated 1.4 million hectares of forest covering approximately 60% of its land area. It is estimated that Belize's average annual deforestation rate is approximately 10,000 hectares (or 25,000 acres) or 0.6% of the total forest area per year⁶³.

An integral part of sustainable forest management is measures to protect forests from natural threats such as fire, insects and diseases. Increasingly, an additional and more severe threat has been affecting the forest sector worldwide - invasive species. Invasive species are any species that are non-native to a particular ecosystem and whose introduction and spread causes, or are likely to cause, socio-cultural, economic or environmental harm or harm to human health⁶⁴.

The potential for forest plantations to partially meet demand for wood and fibre for industrial uses is increasing. Forest plantations can provide a critical substitute for natural forest raw material supply and may help reduce logging pressure on natural forests in areas in which unsustainable harvesting of wood is a major cause of forest degradation and where logging roads facilitate access that may lead to deforestation.

The Government will devise a variety of deliberate policies, in addition to designated protected areas, geared at slowing the rate of deforestation and forest degradation.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.52. Develop and implement mechanisms, such as increased law enforcement and stiffer penalties, to reduce the incidence of illegal logging, deforestation and squatting in forest reserves;

⁶³ Cherrington, et al, 2010a

⁶⁴ FAO, 2015

- 1.53. Promote land usage and planning which contributes to the establishment and maintenance of forests for timber, biodiversity and ecological services, and forest connectivity with emphasis on abandoned and degraded lands, urban areas and agricultural lands;
- 1.54. Address the land tax regime that creates perverse incentives for deforestation on private lands;
- 1.55. Introduce payment for ecosystem services programs tying support for rural incomes to the maintenance of forest resources;
- 1.56. Promote the development of agroforestry in forest areas which directly buffer community lands where the pressure for agriculture expansion may be strongest thereby maximizing the economic output of forest buffers;
- 1.57. Provide incentives to encourage private investment in sustainably managed forestry related ventures in public or privately owned lands;
- 1.58. Develop forest plantations at appropriate ecological zones applying sustainable forest management principles.
- 1.59. Promote reforestation/afforestation and forest rehabilitation to increase the forest density for timber and carbon capturing capacity;
- 1.60. Plan and implement a strategy for the management of invasive alien species, including prevention and early detection; and response, which includes eradication, containment, control and mitigation.
- 1.61. Develop a national sustainable forest management system based on a set of mutually accepted and recognized national criteria and indicators with the insistence of its application by all actors in the forest sector inclusive of the private sector, local industries and communities;
- 1.62. Insist on the development and application of forest management plans and operational plans;
- 1.63. Promote the introduction of eco-labelling, certification, and sustainable sourcing measures among private supply-chain actors.
- 1.64. Develop required framework that allows for carbon sequestration and credits to encourage reduction in deforestation.

Policy Statement 10: The protection, improvement and rehabilitation of watersheds will be integrated into the sustainable management of forests

The Government will promote the rehabilitation and conservation of forests that protect the soil and water in the country's key watersheds and river systems. Achievements in watershed protection through forestry will result from the adoption of appropriate farm forestry methods on degraded private lands, from the improved management of natural forests on hilly private lands, and from the restoration of degraded hills on government lands.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.65. Promote the rehabilitation of degraded forests in water catchment areas and bare hills through private and community forestry initiatives;
- 1.66. Develop and promote guidelines on the management of riverine forests;
- 1.67. Develop accompanying regulations to the provisions of legislation (such as the National Integrated Water Resources Act) relating to watershed management, soil conservation and the protection of riverbanks;
- 1.68. Develop and promote awareness, educational and community mobilization programmes to promote good integrated land use practices in hilly areas, and protect watersheds from degradation.

Policy Statement 11: The government shall have special regard for conservation of those vegetated areas not traditionally considered productive forests but which play a significant role in providing valuable ecological services and maintaining biodiversity

Wetlands are characterized by their distinctive hydrology, soils and plants. Once regarded as wastelands, wetlands are now recognized as important features of the landscape that provide numerous beneficial services for people and wildlife. Some of these services, or functions, include protecting and improving water quality, supporting the fishing industry, rare species habitat, storing floodwaters, source of income, and providing opportunities for education and recreation. Belize has taken steps to declare important wetlands as Ramsar Sites, that is, sites recognized by the Convention of Wetlands of International Importance. These sites include the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary and the Sarstoon-Temash National Park.

Mangroves provide enormous benefits to Belize, especially as essential harbours for biodiversity, as highly effective carbon stores and sinks, as buffers against the destructive power of waves, high value timber and excellent fuelwood, and as nurseries for coastal and offshore fisheries. Over the longer term, mangroves can also help to build or maintain elevation in the face of rising seas and other climate change impacts. Conversion of mangroves for coastal aquaculture is the foremost driver of mangrove loss. Losses are being driven by a suite of other human threats as well, however, including over-harvesting and deforestation; agricultural, urban and industrial runoff; and poorly managed dredging and coastal development.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.69. Develop or strengthen laws and regulations that protect and regulate the use of wetlands, savannahs and mangrove forest areas in the country;
- 1.70. Develop a national inter-sectoral strategy for the best management and protection of wetlands (including Ramsar Sites), savannahs and mangrove forest areas in the country.

- 1.71. The Government should promote the rehabilitation and replanting of mangrove forests in areas that have been cleared of mangroves and that are prone to impacts from climate change.

Policy Statement 12: The government shall, recognizing the importance of fires as an ecological process, encourage its proper use and management in the protection and enhancement of terrestrial ecosystems, giving special consideration to human welfare and safety

There is the long-standing notion that fires are bad for forest ecosystems; however, if well managed, fires are important management tools. For example, pine and savannah ecosystems which are fire-dependent are burnt for a variety of purposes and objectives, and the plant and animal species found within have adapted accordingly but they require well-established fire regimes for their survival. Frequent fires or its exclusion creates inadequate conditions which cause negative consequences to the ecosystems and their biodiversity. Frequent fires displace animal species, reduce plant diversity and affect forest structure. Conversely, the exclusion of fires, leads to an overload of vegetation which adversely affects animal and plant species viability. The challenges affecting fire management include limited resources to actively undertake fire management, limited historical data on burnt acreage, and an increase in human encroachment resulting in further pressure on the forests. Belize has prepared a Wildland Fire Management Strategy which is geared at addressing these challenges.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.72. Develop a sensitization program to raise awareness among the Belizean populace of the important ecological benefits of fire in forest management;
- 1.73. Enhance inter-agency coordination and multi-stakeholder involvement as a cost-effective measure that addresses fire management for ecosystem sustainability;
- 1.74. Promote the development and implementation of fire management plans and programmes based on reliable and credible data;
- 1.75. Establish a cadre of trained personnel comprising of state and non-state actors to support a fire programme development and implementation.

Policy Statement 13: The government shall create appropriate regulatory frameworks for forest financing mechanisms and the sustainable generation and equitable distribution of benefits derived from those mechanisms

While the economic value of certain forest products such as timber is well understood, this often is not the case for other important environmental goods and services provided by forests (e.g., preventing severe water run-off and regulating climate). Such environmental goods and services are largely perceived to be free of charge. As a result, forest goods and services are often not responsibly managed, with devastating economic effects in addition to the negative biodiversity consequences. What is more, the associated costs are often unequally borne by the

poorest and most marginalized groups of these societies. The Government will devise and promote sustainable forest financing schemes to ensure that those who benefit from environmental goods and services compensate those who provide these services.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.76. Evaluate the total economic value, inclusive of its intrinsic value, of the major ecosystem blocks in Belize, the costs of maintaining these systems, and the potential returns on investments in conserving these areas;
- 1.77. Develop a national integrated financing strategy for forest management in Belize;
- 1.78. Set out in law the rights and obligations of forest beneficiaries for investments made in the protection of ecosystem services;
- 1.79. Create new or extend current institutions, with the requisite capacity and competence, to monitor, distribute and account for all payments for ecosystem services;
- 1.80. Articulate a clear legal framework for the incorporation of carbon rights as new registered land interests to provide a firmer basis for investment in forest conservation by way of REDD+ and other similar mechanisms.

Policy Statement 14: Adaptation and mitigation to climate change will be mainstreamed into the management objectives of government’s national forest program

Climate change is considered to be one of the major threats to sustainable development because of its impacts on health, infrastructure, settlements, agriculture and food security, and forest ecosystems. An increasing frequency of extreme events such as increased temperatures, drought conditions and intermittent floods are expected to stretch natural systems. Climate change constitutes an additional burden on top of poverty, disease, illiteracy, weak institutional capacity, poor infrastructure and other environmental change issues (such as land-use change, land degradation, and biodiversity loss). The Government will mainstream climate change adaptation and mitigation into its national forest program as an initial step towards the incorporation of climate change considerations into forestry and forest management.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.81. Systematically assess the potential impacts of climate change on Belize’s forests and the extent of the vulnerability of forests to these impacts and actions for adaptation;
- 1.82. Develop a comprehensive monitoring system to evaluate changes in forest cover, carbon stocks and forest biodiversity, and use this information for further planning in respect to climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- 1.83. Identify policies, governance conditions and payment mechanisms that lead to effective implementation of REDD mechanisms;
- 1.84. Address the political economy and barriers to adoption of policies for efficient, effective and equitable REDD regimes.

Policy Statement 15: A platform for information sharing will be provided to serve as a basis for reliable data on national forest conservation status, management and the forest products market

Accurate and accessible scientific information on Belize’s forests is crucial for assessing the state of the forest estate, but also for planning and evaluation. There is already a substantial body of information and a clearing house mechanism would allow for its easy access and dissemination. While there have been some efforts to create such a mechanism for biodiversity information, the process is not complete. The Government will establish an expanded and functional clearing house mechanism for the benefit of management of the national forest estate.

Strategies for implementation of this Policy Statement will include:

- 1.85. Provide accurate and updated data on forests and forest management that is easily accessible and in a user friendly format;
- 1.86. Encourage research to generate data needed for evidenced-based decision-making for the improved management of forests;
- 1.87. Develop and implement a communications strategy aimed at enhancing public awareness about forests as central to wildlife, ecosystem and climate stability, and human welfare.

SECTION III: SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTING THE FOREST POLICY

This section sets out the key elements of support for the implementation of the Forest Policy.

1. SECTOR-WIDE PLANNING

A National Forest Program (NFP) will provide a strategic framework for the development of the forest sector, and will be regularly updated to keep pace with changes. The NFP will be a framework for turning the Forest Policy into action, with short-, medium- and long-term goals and programmes for sub-sectors and regions, which address critical issues in order of priority. Organizational and institutional roles and responsibilities will be redefined to conform to the new sector vision, and the changes reflected in a new governance framework under which different initiatives can consistently operate and contribute towards sustainable forest management. This will include amending the Forest Act and subsidiary legislation to conform to the Forest Policy and to support achievement of the strategies.

2. SECTOR INVESTMENT

The implementation of the Forest Policy will require significant financial and human resources. The government will develop a long-term investment programme for the forest sector, through the National Forest Program processes. This will require a coordinated programme of support based on four types of investment:

Private sector: A positive investment climate will be created for the private sector. This will include new financial incentives, the creation of a Forestry Fund, and the development of more transparent and accountable systems of administration and regulation. This new climate, coupled with active investment promotion, will encourage a range of private investments in commercial forestry.

Public sector: A public sector investment programme will be developed using economic values for forest resources, including analyses of the different impact of costs and benefits in forestry development. This will include conservation and environmental protection, and wider social and economic development issues. There are several areas where the government can increase its capacity to generate revenues:

- Boost the recovery of dues to government, which is currently low;
- Rationalize the existing royalty rates that have historically been well below the true economic and environmental values.

Development partners: Support from development partners will be needed for forest sector development during the transition to sustainable national funding. The government with donors will move towards coordinated funding mechanisms to support a sector-wide forestry development programme, as set out in the NFP. Improved coordination of this support will be a responsibility of new forest sector coordination structures as set out in the NFP.

International funding: Further sources of funding for sector development will be actively pursued, including carbon credits or international funds to support biodiversity conservation and adaptation to climate change.

3. SECTOR COORDINATION

A forest sector coordination structure will be developed to provide a forum for sector-wide planning and coordination. This will require representation from government ministries involved in the forest sector, local governments, the private sector, civil society, and indigenous peoples. Such a structure will ensure that a coordinated and balanced sectoral approach is maintained, as government's direct involvement in the sector is redefined and reduced, and the role of the private sector and civil society is increased. This coordination structure will be supported by a professional body, which will be developed using resources drawn from the sector's stakeholders. Its staffing and operations will reflect the evolving needs for sector coordination.

A national consultative forum will be developed to allow the public, international partners and all interested parties to contribute to a regular debate on the forest sector, to improve sector coordination and inform national priorities.

4. INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The institutional framework for the forest sector will be strengthened to implement the Forest Policy. This will be based on:

- The reform of Governments' roles and responsibilities;
- A greatly increased role for the private sector, local communities, and non-government organizations in service delivery;
- Improved regulation of the sector;
- New approaches to the development and strengthening of civil society through local community institutions and associations;
- Redefined relationships between organizations in the sector, and the establishment of a better legal basis for these through contractual or service agreements, tendering, and partnership agreements between state and civil society organizations.

This strengthened framework will help to drive changes within organizations and sector institutions, and will reflect the new multi-stakeholder, multi-objective, people-friendly approaches to forest sector development.

5. FOREST LEGISLATION

The Government will review and revise the legal framework for the forest sector. An amended Forests Act will provide an enabling legal framework for the Forest Policy and the National Forest Program. This will replace the current Forests Act (Rev Ed 2000). The review will also consider the National Parks System Act, the Wildlife Protection Act, the Environmental Protection Act, the National Lands Act, the Village Councils Act and other relevant laws, with a view to harmonizing these. The review and revision will also seek to support international agreements, conventions and treaties, and updating the sectoral legal framework.

6. INDIGENOUS LAND RIGHTS

In 2004, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued a report recognizing Maya people's collective rights to land traditionally used and occupied in Toledo. The Maya Leaders Alliance and Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), on behalf of 38 Maya communities, brought domestic actions challenging the Government.

In 2007, the Supreme Court of Belize ordered the Government to recognize indigenous land rights, demarcate and title their land, and cease and abstain from interfering with their right to property. The Government never appealed this decision. In 2010, the Supreme Court clarified that the 2007 judgment applied to Maya throughout Toledo and issued an injunction prohibiting concessions throughout Toledo. The Government appealed this decision to the Court of Appeal.

On 25 July 2013, the Court of Appeal affirmed indigenous land rights. In a 2-1 decision, the Court found that Maya of Toledo possessed rights to land and resources in Southern Belize based on their longstanding use and occupancy. The Court further concluded, however, that the Supreme Court erred in finding that the Constitution of Belize imposes a positive obligation on the Government to adopt affirmative measures to protect the rights of the respondents. Based on this conclusion, the Court of Appeal struck out the Supreme Court's injunction against Government interference with Maya land.

In light of these Court decisions, it recommended that:

- The Government delimit, demarcate and title Maya ancestral land in southern Belize;
- The Government enter into a framework agreement related to extractive industries on traditional Maya lands in southern Belize; and
- The Government adopt the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) on all matters pertaining to forestry and forest management.

While these were the recommendations of the domestic Courts, the matter is now before the Caribbean Courts of Justice (CCJ) where it will be finally and fully ventilated. The ruling of the CCJ will then be binding on the Government of Belize and representatives of the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA).

7. GENDER AND EQUITY

The Government will ensure that women, youth and poor people are particular beneficiaries in the development of the forest sector. It recognizes that there are sections of society that are often marginalized in development processes, and that these groups are frequently the most dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods.

The government will ensure the integration of gender concerns and issues into the development of the forest sector. Strategies for implementing the Forest Policy will specifically account for gender differences in the perceptions and uses of forest products. This will include efforts to:

- Encourage active participation of women and youth in decision-making, resource management and sharing of benefits;

- Promote changes in attitudes and organizational cultures, to break down gender barriers and to provide mutual respect and dignity for all people irrespective of social group, gender or background;

The government will also support poor people in the development of:

- Skills and access to employment and livelihood opportunities;
- Security of access to forest resources;
- Active participation and sharing of benefits in forest management.

8. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

Belize has signed a number of international agreements that influence the forest sector and is party to other non-legally binding instruments. The government will meet its obligations to these agreements and instruments, through national legislation and action. Belize will participate fully in these developments where they can help to meet national objectives.

Key agreements that affect the forest sector include obligations and opportunities to:

- Manage forests sustainably (The Lepaterique Central American Process on Criteria and Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management);
- Conserve and manage wetlands (Ramsar Convention) and biodiversity (Convention on Biological Diversity);
- Control the wildlife trade (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species);
- Combat the spread of land degradation and desertification (Convention to Combat Desertification);
- Store carbon through forestry (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change).

9. SECTOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The government will evaluate the impact of the institutional reforms and strategies developed under the National Forest Program by establishing a Monitoring and Evaluation System. Impacts will be measured in terms of the following policy performance indicators:

- The sustainable use of the resource base;
- The maintenance of vital ecological services and conservation of biodiversity;
- The growth of the economy in forest-related business; and
- The alleviation of poverty amongst the rural populations who depend on forests for their livelihoods.

Well-defined information systems will be established, with reliable data on agreed indicators. All forest sector investment programmes will set out plans for monitoring and evaluation, and develop specific indicators to show progress and impact. The results of this sector monitoring and evaluation will be published regularly in reports on the state of the forest sector.

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