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Identifying cultural attitudes and values in community landscapes

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Abstract

Understanding culture and its attitudes and values towards space, place and nature is a critical aspect in determining appropriate approaches to a wide variety of planning actions. Actions such as gaining support for protected areas, designing new developments, and integrating tourism facilities in existing communities all depend on an understanding of cultural norms and values for their success. But understanding the relationship between cultural attitudes and culturally defined space can be difficult, falling prey to the observer's own cultural norms and biases. This project uses a method based on individual interviews and expert observation of physical traces, to develop an understanding of cultural attitudes and values towards land, nature and proxemics.

This case study of three cultural groups in Belize compares and contrasts the village patterns and personal landscapes of three villages with widely differing landscapes. About the size of Massachusetts, Belize is home to a diverse population of ethnic groups with widely different cultures and visibly different development patterns. The Garifuna, descendants of African slaves shipwrecked on St. Vincent, inhabit villages on the coast in central Belize. The Mayan villages are predominantly two linguistic types, Mopan or Kechi and inhabit the highlands of southern and southwestern Belize. Many moved to these areas during periods of civil unrest in Guatemala during the 20th century. The third cultural group, the Creole, are descendants of African slaves brought to Belize to work in the logwood trade and on plantations, and include European cultural heritage descending from plantation owner-slave parentage. Creole communities proliferate through the

northern and coastal areas of Belize. This study observed the three predominant cultures as expressed in three different villages: Garifuna in the coastal village of Hopkins, Mayan in the southern highlands village of San Jose, and the northern lowlands Creole village of Crooked Tree.

Data was collected through participant interviews and expert observation of physical trace during two case study visits made during the month of March in 2007 and 2008 by two teams of students. The data illustrates two critical findings: first, how widely different the living spaces and personal landscapes of three cultures can be, even when located in villages located in close proximity, and secondly, how clues in the personal, home landscapes of community members give valuable clues to their attitudes and values with respect to nature, land and protected areas.

Keywords: proxemics; space and place; cultural landscape form

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