

Position of the Association of Protected Areas Management Organizations (APAMO) on the proposed cruise tourism in Placencia

The Association of Protected Areas Management Organizations, APAMO, considers that the proposed cruise tourism for Placencia is neither an environmentally or economically viable strategy for Belize.

Our tourism industry continues to be of significant importance to the economy and to the development of the country. Belize has successfully established itself as an “eco-tourism” destination, catering for small-scale, nature and culture stay-over tourism. Internationally recognized as an environmentally friendly destination, Belize has been described as “Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret”, the “Jewel of the Caribbean”, “Bird-Watcher’s Paradise”, among other similar terms due to its rich natural and cultural heritage. Belize is unique in so many ways, offering a variety of natural and cultural experiences. It is home to the second-longest barrier reef in the world, Mayan temples that span across the country, the world famous Blue Hole, spectacular cave systems and a rich living rainforest, habitat to hundreds of species of flora and fauna. All these attractions make Belize the perfect "do it all" destination.

Expanding cruise tourism, particularly in the southern part of the country, one of the most ecologically rich areas, can have detrimental and irreversible impacts on the ecosystems and biodiversity of the marine protected areas and other sensitive areas in that region. A port large enough to accommodate cruise tourism will disrupt the migratory patterns of many marine aqua fauna such as the prestigious whale sharks which come in annually from March to July to feed and which alone generate millions of tourism revenues every year. This area also supports the largest variety of fish spawning aggregations. It has been recorded that as many as 20 different fish species aggregate to spawn in this general region at the Gladden Split which is located within the Gladden Spit and Silk Cayes Marine Reserve. Sea turtles also migrate long distances to nest on the beaches of nearby islands such as at the Silk Cayes. The area also supports many mangrove islands that are vital to nesting and migratory birds. The seagrass beds are ecologically vital to nursery fish populations that support the fishing industry. The Placencia lagoon supports fish nursery populations and the impacts of a port can have ecological imbalance to the flow of nutrients, water quality and general stability of this estuary region. Our coast is also very sensitive with mangroves and seagrass beds which support our fish, manatee and sea turtle populations. The Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, including its atolls is invaluable to the tourism and fisheries sector and for the protection of coastal communities. Declared a world heritage site in 1996, it is presently at risk of losing this status due to the current threats it faces. Cruise tourism will only increase the pressure to this system from the waste and pollution produced by the industry, which experts have classified into 7 types: black water, gray water, garbage and solid waste, hazardous waste, oily bilge, ballast water and diesel exhaust emission.

In addition, APAMO does not consider that cruise tourism will benefit the majority of Belizeans in the long term but rather only a very few in the short term. Cruise tourism will not solve the economic problems of these respective areas. The November 2006 study conducted by the INCAE Business School in Costa Rica with the support of the BTB and PACT, found that on average cruise passengers spend \$44 for the 1 day they dock in Belize while the average stay-over visitor spends \$96 per day and on average stays 6.8 days in Belize representing an average

of \$653, almost 15 times more than what a cruise ship passenger spends in Belize. In 2005, prior to the global economic recession, BTB reported 800,331 cruise passenger arrivals compared to 236,573 stay-over arrivals, if we use the average that each spends, the stay-over visitor still spent \$119,267,605 more than the cruise ship passengers who only spent \$35,214,564 while stay over passengers spent \$154,484,169, almost 4.4 times more. We would therefore have to attract 3.5 million cruise visitors a year to obtain the same revenues. Imagine what 3.5 million visitors a year would do to our natural resources. Also, in terms of employment, again this study indicated that cruise tourism contributes to only 1 of every 10 jobs while stay over tourism contributes to 9 of every 10 jobs. Stay-over visitors usually decide on their destination for the "experience". Expanding cruise tourism, may result in these stay-over visitors changing their destination to avoid the massive numbers of cruise passengers both at the marine parks and at the other sites resulting in the successful branding of Belize as "Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret" being tarnished and significant revenues to the local economy lost. The so-called benefits to the local communities are miniscule to what the cruise lines make. Studies show that world cruise lines make over 70% of their profits in the Caribbean, and that they purchase virtually nothing from the region. Belize is no different. While cruise lines can change course on a whim leaving behind only a trail of economic and environmental disaster, stay-over tourism provides for a more long term sustainability of our natural resources and stability of our economy, provided that the very core of what draws them to Belize is not put at risk.

This Government committed to developing the tourism industry in a responsible manner that is environmentally sensitive, supports the protection of the country's cultural and natural resources and provides tangible benefits to the people and local communities of Belize. However, Belize's global reputation as an eco-tourism destination can be seriously jeopardized by the unrestrained growth of Cruise Ship Tourism, an industry that has historically shown little respect for environmental and cultural conservation. The National Protected Areas Policy and System Plan endorsed by Government, aims to safeguard the natural resources found within protected areas. However, the integrity of these natural resources can be degraded by carelessly implemented development projects that do not address sound environmental management.

The eco-tourism industry in Belize is by far too precious. Eco-tourism, unlike Cruise tourism, has been proven that it can co-exist with maintaining the integrity of our Protected Areas which in turn supports the very same eco-tourism industry. Our marine protected areas, reefs and cayes, already ecologically sensitive areas are currently under significant stress. Replacing eco-tourism with mass tourism will further increase the pressure on these areas as it is already difficult to monitor and enforce the carry-capacity limits where they exist placing them at unacceptable risks.

The environmental, social and economic cost of cruise tourism is too high and the benefits too little. Rather than investing in expanding the cruise sector, APAMO, calls on the Government to invest these funds in building the stay-over tourism sector.

The Association of Protected Areas Management Organizations (APAMO) therefore express its solidarity with BTIA Placencia and the Placencia Community and does not support any activity that would compromise the protected areas and the ability of our natural systems to maintain a healthy environment that is critical to sustaining the population and economy of Belize.