Slater Podgorny

Leadership and Sustainability in Belize

Dr. Kosempel and Dr. Olson

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It is no secret that sustainability is better for people, communities, nations, and most importantly the Earth, so why is it such a challenge to achieve sustainable living? The difficult aspect of sustainability is that it requires a balance between people, planet, and profit. The laws or actions that benefit the planet cannot be harmful to humans and they must not prevent economic growth. Because of this necessary balance, achieving sustainability has proven to be a very tall task and unfortunately there is a belief that sustainability has become a luxury. It has become something that people in developed nations place a premium on even when they are not faced with the challenges of sustainability themselves and it has become something that powerhouse companies use as a marketing pitch to attract like-minded customers. The most unfortunate piece of all of this is that sustainability is absent where it is needed most. This nonexistence, however, is not simply a matter of reluctance; there are many challenges and threats to sustainability such as, poverty, lack of adequate education, and government involvement.

Perhaps the most significant threat to sustainability, especially in developing countries, is the rate of poverty. Poverty is a notable issue because it directly correlates with deforestation. The communities that are living in poverty generally do not have the resources of large, metropolitan areas and as a result they rely on the resources of the land to provide for them. This leads to clear cutting not only for the resources of the rainforest but also for the space necessary for agriculture. Essentially their livelihood is entirely dependent on the forest which makes it very hard to convince them to live sustainably. Dr Colin Young, a leading advocate for sustainability in Belize, touched on this in his paper saying that “conservation must be profitable to local people” (Young, 2008). In class he elaborated on this idea and created the analogy that it is not easy to encourage impoverished communities to conserve the land because they are depending entirely on the resources provided by the land and telling them to conserve can be interpreted as telling them that the life of a jaguar is more important than their own.

This analogy makes it very clear that poverty is one of the greatest adversaries of sustainability but it has also reinforced the idea that a focus on people is at the forefront of creating a sustainable environment. It is not as simple as providing impoverished communities with new job opportunities, it comes down to attempting to “empower people by providing them with the necessary skills, know-how, and financial resources required to improve their conditions” (Young, 2008). People will not automatically accept sustainability because of some possible financial benefits. There are people living in poverty who have been farmers or fishermen all their lives and that is all they know; because of this people needed to be educated about sustainability and they need to realize that their lives will improve if they accept conservation. It is also crucial that these people realize conservation does not mean putting an end to what they are doing but rather it means simply being moderate and mindful when using the resources provided by the environment. Consequently, educating these people is significantly easier said than done and in a nation like Belize where “99 percent of their GDP is used to pay off debts” (The World Factbook: Belize). Finding the resources needed to aid this transition is incredibly difficult

On the other side of poverty there is another threat to sustainability in the form of greed. In a Caribbean nation that is quickly developing into a tourist hot spot, the demand for beach front resorts is growing and this once again threatens sustainability. As Dr. Young described, when resorts develop beach front property, they generally remove mangrove clusters that line the coast; these mangroves are an essential filtration system for fresh water that is heading for the ocean (Young, 2008). When the filtration system is absent, the water entering the ocean is polluted and therefore contributes to the ongoing problem of polluted oceans. In his book *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait of a Paradigm Shift,* author Andres Edwards stresses the necessity of respecting limits when it comes to achieving sustainability. Edwards describes limits as the “threshold of living systems” and stresses the importance of respecting these limits saying, “violating these limits has devastating effects ranging from species extinction to global warming” (Edwards, 2005). When corporations begin to develop successful businesses they lose sight of these limits and eventually end up significantly violating them, which poses a massive threat to sustainability.

The contrast between economy and environment is a significant part of Edward’s book as he discusses the concept of three E’s plus one. In brief, this concept refers to the balance between economy, environment, and equity that is necessary for achieving sustainability and the plus one discusses the need for adequate education. In Belize, and all nations struggling to achieve sustainability, there is an added emphasis on the idea of education. Although the education rate in Belize is not bad, the education kids are receiving is only loosely related to sustainability. Children are learning the basic skills associated with math, and language, and history, which are all necessary, but they seem to be missing out on education that relates to the importance of the environment. In Belize especially, kids complete the basic levels of schooling with little knowledge of the significance of features that are in their own back yard such as the Chiquibul Forest, Half Moon Caye, or the Blue Hole. These are both environmental treasures and educating people about them is a necessary step in preserving them. Dr. Young touches on this idea saying, “Educating local people on the importance and necessity of education is prudent” (Young, 2008). If people are willing to learn about their environment they may begin to value it and then they will be a lot more dedicated to trying to preserve it.

Education beyond the natural environment becomes increasingly important in nations where there is very little value placed on a quality education. In nations like these, education becomes less important as it directly relates to conservation and more important as it relates to knowledge itself and poverty. Generally speaking, the countries with the highest levels of poverty also have very low education and literacy rates. Since poverty is a direct threat to sustainability and lack of education corresponds with poverty, education is an equal challenge. As discussed earlier, sustainability is reliant on a focus on the people. This concept also applies to education because if there is a focus on ensuring that everyone receives a quality education then poverty will likely begin to decline. Providing an education to everyone who is willing to learn may be the first step in moving away from poverty and towards sustainability.

The third and final challenge of achieving a sustainable environment is the level of government involvement. This is especially relevant in Belize because there is very little room for significant government spending due to the large amount of debt the country carries. Since the vast majority of the country’s GDP is dedicated to paying off debt that means the government has very little money to dedicate towards conservation efforts. They do not have the resources to provide armed guards that survey every inch of protected land or water and as a result, illegal activities such as poaching are able to occur. This is an ongoing obstacle for Belize and similar nations and there is no simple solution.

Despite the many challenge associated with sustainability, there are plenty of methods to encourage sustainability and perhaps the most important is providing effective leadership. In a situation where sustainability is a priority, it is especially important for the leaders to be excellent role models in everything they do. Throughout the entirety of the trip we were exposed to multiple examples of this kind of leadership whether it was Blake Ross and his impact on Long Caye, or Sharon Matola’s creation of the zoo, or Belize Natural Energy and their commitment to the Belizean people.

One of most obvious examples of effective and impactful leadership is Blake Ross and his part in transforming Long Caye. When Blake established ownership in the island he helped preserve a very clear vision for what the island was to become. There was no debate about what the ultimate goal was and that was to ensure the preservation of the majority of the island. He stepped in at a time when this vision was potentially threatened by another partner and bought him out. Ever since then he has worked to make sure that the island is a model for sustainable living. Now the island is an excellent representation of multiple principles introduced by Andres Edwards. The first principle is stewardship which “emphasizes the importance of establishing an ecological ethic for managing and preserving the biological integrity of ecosystems” (Edwards, 2005). Long Caye is an example of this principle mainly through the strict building codes established by Ross and his partners. The codes include aspects like a requirement for all buildings constructed on the island to be raised off the ground to ensure that the water flow and the animal life are not disturbed and another limiting the amount of space an individual is able to develop. By enforcing these codes, Ross has created a method that allows the island to be developed without having devastating effects on the island ecosystem.

The island is also a model for adhering to the principle of respecting limits. Despite having over 600 acres easily accessible for development and potential beach front resorts, the owners of Long Caye have decided to keep the majority of this area relatively untouched. They have already dedicated a protected area that covers over 200 acres and Ross discussed plans for expanding that area. It would have been very easy for the partners to turn the island into a tourist hot spot with a landing strip, multiple resorts, and beach front property lining the coast but the owners chose to venture down another path and that has proven very beneficial for the ecosystem on and around the island.

Long Caye has developed into a representation of every one of the seven principles and they have even embodied a focus that is similar to the triple bottom line as it refers to conservation, community, and commerce. They have embraced the commerce aspect by creating the Itza Resort which attracts tourists and provides financial stability for the island. Contrary to actions of many other resorts, they have established a very good relationship with local fishermen, which places a focus on the community feature. And they have been advocates for conservation by establishing protected areas and they have even expressed interest in creating research facilities on the island to further promote conservation. This was all achievable because of the superb leadership from a small group of people. These leaders all committed to a vision and then inspired this shared vision with everyone involved with the island. They committed to sustainability and set examples of how to achieve sustainability. Without the leadership displayed by Ross and his peers, Long Caye would be far from what it is today and it is likely that the community and ecosystem around the island would suffer.

Another example of outstanding leadership is Sharon Matola and her role in forming the Belize Zoo. What is most evident about Sharon’s style of leadership is her level of passion. With everything she does she displays a level of excitement and commitment that is not always evident in businesses. She knows every animal’s name and I would not be surprised if she could recite every animal’s birthday and maybe even their favorite color too. When talking to other zoo employees it is evident that Sharon’s attitude is contagious. Each member that we met at the zoo displayed some level of passion that was similar to Sharon’s and the Belize Zoo benefits greatly because of this feeling. With the primary goal of the zoo being to educate and inform the Belizean people about the species in their own backyard, it is especially important for all the members to be passionate about what they are doing and to share that passion with everyone who visits. Sharon’s attitude about the zoo and about education has created an environment where visitors begin to establish relationships with the animals and their experiences are greatly enhanced.

In the case of Belize Natural Energy (BNE), the effect of leadership and the leadership’s commitment to a set of values is especially apparent. The oil industry is a very established sector and there seems to be certain set of trends or unwritten rules that focus on profit more than anything. Since BNE was established they seem to be challenging these trends by placing a focus on the people of Belize and the employees of their company. This was something that was very clearly initiated by the leaders of BNE. Before BNE the oil industry in Belize was essentially non-existent which would have made it very easy for the company to bring in experienced workers from foreign countries. Instead, BNE chose to hire almost exclusively Belizean people because they realized how much it could benefit the nation’s economy. In referring to the seven principles once again, BNE has been instrumental in economic restructuring. Edwards describes this principle as “expanding job opportunities while safeguarding ecosystems” and says that “these new practices also call for government and commercial ventures to support the needs of local communities” (Edwards, 2005). BNE is essentially the epitome of this principal. They have done everything within their power to ensure that their drilling practices are as friendly as possible while also providing programs that benefit the local community. For example, BNE provides basic reading, writing, and math classes to employees who did not receive elementary education because they recognized the lack of such opportunities in local communities. Likewise, while driving down Belizean highways it is not uncommon to see signs that describe projects that were funded by BNE. Both of these actions directly address the needs of local communities and BNE is able to follow through on these actions because of their stellar leadership.

In a sense similar to the zoo, BNE was able to accomplish these feats because their leadership was passionate about creating a company that benefits the people. Each member with leadership capabilities recognized a common goal and they began working towards that goal. This seems to be a familiar theme in just about all of the activities and people we encountered. When organizations, businesses, and people were successful in the sustainability realm it was because the leaders of those groups shared a similar vision and they all were passionate about making strides towards that vision. With Long Caye the vision was all about creating an environmentally and people friendly island, with the zoo it was about creating a collaborative environment for people to learn more about the animals of Belize, and with BNE it was about creating a successful business that benefits the people of Belize. At some point in their development, each of these examples were faced with the challenges that were previously described but their leadership did not let that slow them down. While all of these obstacles are significant and should not be taken lightly, the organizations in Belize are proof that the simplest solution to each barrier is to find a leader that is notably passionate and committed to the idea of sustainability.

References

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