Enhancing the Stewardship of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area through Tourism.

Centered on Latitude 17° 47’ N and Longitude 88° 59’, Belize
Herbert Haylock
Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

The RBCMA is home to a wide cross section of biodiversity possibly not found as concentrated anywhere else in the country of Belize. The uniqueness of this area serves as a model for other protected areas that continue to strive towards the goal of self-sustainability in the management of the resources under a sustainable development theme.

Programme for Belize has been operating ecotourism services since 1990/1991. The primary focus of its ecotourism operations is to promote environmental education and nondestructive human/nature interaction. Through its ecotourism program, PfB also aims to provide environmentally-sound economic alternatives to the villages surrounding the RBCMA. ...
Your idea

This will be the address used to plot your entry on the map.

Street Address
Programme for Belize - RIO BRAVO CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT AREA

City
Centered on Latitude 17° 47' N and Longitude 88° 59'

State/Province
Orange Walk District

Postal/Zip Code
00000

Country

Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant
Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists, Quality of benefit to residents for the destination, Quality of tourism management by destination leadership, Quality of stewardship of the destination.

Organization size
Small (1 to 100 employees)

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Conservation/Preservation organization

Year innovation began
1991

Indicate sector in which you principally work

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Paste your code here

Innovation

What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.

Programme for Belize's mandate is to preserve the natural heritage and biological diversity of the RBCMA in Belize through proper management that yields sufficient income for its perpetual care.

Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This text will appear when people scroll over the icon for your entry on the map located on the competition homepage.

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Unicorns of this area serves as a model for other protected areas that continue to strive towards the goal of self-sustainability in the management of the resources under a sustainable development theme.

Programa for Belize has been operating ecotourism services since 1990/1991. The primary focus of its ecotourism operations is to promote environmental education and nondestructive human/nature interaction. Through its ecotourism program, PIB also aims to provide environmentally-sound economic alternatives to the villages surrounding the RBCMA. PIB is currently operating two different facilities that guests can take advantage of on the RBCMA, namely the La Milpa and Hill Bank Field Stations.

Thousands of visitors have come and gone after glimpsing a rare bird or even the elusive jaguar and seeing a crocodile or more on a night spotting tour. Many have woken up to the shrills and calls of birds and howler monkeys in the morning, watched the sun set rise and set across the New River Lagoon or simply enjoyed the tranquility brought on by being immersed into the solitude of the forest inside Programme for Belize’s flagship project, the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area.

PIB is now poised to take advantage of rapidly growing niche markets in the country by virtue of owning and managing one of the most biologically diverse protected areas in the country. Very few NGO’s can claim this and also have in place the infrastructure and relative development potential to generate the income streams required for its conservation and protection.

PIB’s most distinguishing characteristic is that it is the only conservation organization operating ecolodge facilities on a natural reserve and conducting educational nature-based and environmentally interpretive tours.

**Explain in detail why your approach is innovative**

It can be argued that most of the elements used in PIB’s ecotourism operation are not particularly novel but the innovation is embodied in utilizing so many concepts in a highly integrated manner. Elements of PIB’s ecotourism operation working in tandem include: Involvement of the Greater Rio Bravo area in ecotourism through community outreach and environmental education programs, direct employment and inclusion in visitors’ itineraries; Involvement of visitors in research activities being carried out on the RBCMA; Investment in ‘green’ technologies; Planned infrastructural development; Tourism development planning; and Investment in capacity-building of human resources.

Education and interpretation have been central elements of the development of tourism on the RBCMA. This has afforded PIB the opportunity to amass expertise in educational tourism products and natural history interpretation. PIB’s facilities on the RBCMA therefore serve as model sites for applied studies in areas of resource management, tourism, natural sciences, economic development, social studies and others.

In 1997, PIB’s ecotourism operation received British Airways ‘Tourism for Tomorrow’ Award, giving international recognition to PIB’s innovative approach to ecotourism. PIB also received the ‘Ecotourism Showcase 2000’ Award at the 2000 Non-Profits in Travel Conference for our demonstration of how ecotourism could be used as a sustainability development tool.

PIB received Honorable mention in the ‘World Legacy Awards 2002 Destination Stewardship Category’ for our protection of the overall natural and cultural heritage of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area. Programme for Belize received the ‘Educational Institution of the Year Award’ at the 8th National Tourism Awards Ceremony in 2008 sponsored by the Belize Tourism Board. PIB’s La Milpa Field Station also became a member of the Eco-Index of Sustainable Tourism in May 2008.

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**IDB/Fomin**

**Si perteneces a un país de Latinoamérica y el Caribe tienes la oportunidad de presentar tu iniciativa para acceder a fondos para innovaciones en turismo sostenible del BID/FOMIN (para mayor información leer la sección sobre la oportunidad BID/FOMIN en la página principal del Desafío).**

**Deseo postularme.**

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**Consumidores (viajeros), Prestatarios de servicios turísticos, Prestatarios de servicios no turísticos (proveedores), Grupos comunitarios autóctonos, Atractivos naturales y culturales.**

**Indica cuales de estas temáticas cubre tu innovacion (elige todas aquellas opciones que apliquen)**

- Planificación y Gestión de destinos
- Innovación y diversificación en el desarrollo de productos turísticos
- Profesionalización, buenas prácticas y certificación de servicios turísticos sostenibles
- Estrategias y herramientas innovadoras para la promoción y puesta en mercado de destinos y productos en turismo sostenible y geoturismo.

**Impact**

**Describe the degree of success you have had to date. How do you measure, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact on sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How has it transformed or contributed to the power of place or demonstrated the sustainability of tourism? How does your approach minimize negative impacts?**

PIB’s commitment to investing in green technologies has been an integral part of tourism development on the RBCMA. To date, PIB has installed over 20 kW of stand alone photovoltaic power, sustainable water supply systems, recycling waste treatment systems, composting toilets and two model sustainable dormitory and bath house facilities on the RBCMA. In addition, a Resource Conservation and Management program was developed to guide visitor orientation sessions as well as staff training on sustainable systems operations and maintenance. PIB’s investment in green technologies reflects its commitment to minimizing the negative impacts of tourism development on the RBCMA.

Scientific research plays a very important role on the RBCMA. PIB’s implementation of the first of seven globally approved Pilot Carbon Sequestration Projects in 1995 substantiates PIB’s involvement in cutting-edge research. This pilot project is being undertaken to demonstrate how forest conservation can assist in combating global warming. The project involves a combination of environmental protection, sustainable forestry and economic development. This project should serve as a model that can be applied throughout the world.

To minimize the negative impacts of its tourism operation on the environment, PIB has invested substantially in planning. The products of
PIB's investment in planning include: site plans which impose a physical rationale for development, designs for the optimization of 'green technology', a conceptual blueprint for innovative and environmentally-sound ecotourism development on the RBCMA, a visitor orientation guide to green technologies and staff training manual on sustainable systems operations and maintenance. These planning documents have guided management activities, thereby facilitating the minimization of negative environmental impacts. PIB also owns the RBCMA, together with access roads and accommodation facilities and has total control of visitor numbers.

In what ways are local residents actively involved in your work, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

PIB has utilized two key strategies: (i) inclusion of villages surrounding the RBCMA in its ecotourism operation and (ii) providing training opportunities in conservation and natural resource management to Belizeans to increase local benefits to the Greater Rio Bravo area.

The Greater Rio Bravo area includes Maya/Mestizo and Mennonite villages bordering the north and northeast of the RBCMA and Creole villages along the southeast border of the RBCMA. PIB’s ecotourism operation provides much needed employment to the villages surrounding the RBCMA. PIB has assisted in the establishment of several cultural groups in these communities. Handicrafts made by these groups are sold in PIB’s gift shops on the RBCMA and Belize City.

PIB also extends assistance to these groups in honing their craftsmanship as well as their skills by coordinating in-country training. PIB has worked with several villages to develop tourism attractions/ventures which are included in the travel itineraries.

How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

Programme for Belize’s ecotourism product aims to attract participants from a broad cross section of society spanning a wide age range and knowledge level and flexibility therefore has been built into the various programs to cater to the needs of the various target groups.

When you visit these stations, you become a part of the family and get exposed to the larger community of the area which include the Maya/Mestizo, Creole and Mennonite communities. At the end of your visit you would not only have been exposed to the ecology of the area and the conservation work on the RBCMA, but you will get to appreciate the rich history of the area and the culture of the people who inhabit it.

The quality of this experience is further enhanced by the highly trained and dedicated naturalists, educators and other staff members, and the knowledge that all profits are re-directed into conservation.

Describe how your work helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area’s cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues.

The commitment of future generations to environmental ethics can best be secured through directed environmental education programs which teach our children to respect their human and natural environments. To this end, PIB has implemented various educational initiatives. We have worked with the Government of Belize in the past facilitating the incorporation of environmental science into the curricula for elementary schools and visiting schools to conduct ecology-related educational lectures.

We continue to deliver these lectures today to various elementary schools in the greater RBCMA region and other presentations on environmental topics to secondary and tertiary level students from all areas of Belize. We also continue to host on site a number of local, secondary and tertiary level student classes throughout the year in furthering and expanding an appreciation of the sciences and ecology at the field level. There are more than 1,000 students visiting the RBCMA annually.

Sustainability

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others.

Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

PIB is committed to the goal of earning sufficient revenue from its economic activities to support the conservation of the RBCMA. To this end, PIB continues to conduct major research on the land and its resources. Due to our progress we were able to support a majority of the operating costs of the organization through ecotourism primarily and timber activities. PIB’s level of self-sustainability will continue to rise provided that adequate funding is available for the research and development of the following revenue-earning projects.

Programme for Belize's most recent audited statements ending June 2008 reflected an annual revenue budget of $1.6 Million Bze dollars or $0.8 Million US dollars. PIB employs approximately 35 full time employees at its main office and 2 field stations and approximately 20 additional seasonal employees for its ecotourism and sustainable timber extraction programs. PIB currently hosts volunteers and interns on a need basis.

PIB ecotourism operations are currently self financed through current revenue streams but a funding gap of Bze $400,000.00 or US $200,000.00 has been identified that is required for upgrading and expanding the capacity and potential earnings of this program.

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?

Having identified gaps and deficiencies in the product, services and infrastructure of its tourism sector, Programme for Belize is now channeling its complete effort at realigning key areas that include the product, the support structure for the product and the managerial and administrative support for these.

PIB is now seeking to fill these gaps through an investment strategy which has been developed. It elaborates on how Programme for Belize will be reorganizing its operations to ensure that its normal processes are enhanced where needed and will add value to this capital injection of funds.

The end result will be a very highly marketable product on the RBCMA and one that will expand the current levels and volumes of clientele visiting the RBCMA. The capital investment is intended to be used in three core locations, namely the Belize City Tourism Unit and the La Milpa and Hill Bank sites.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program
from having greater impact?

Programme for Belize, in recent years, began to assess its organizational state after changes in the senior management structure. PIB embarked on an objective to develop and ensure self-sustainability in light of the changing world economic environment. A significant part of the goal to further develop our sustainable activities involved the creation of more definitive long-term financial planning documents and business plans for our respective programs.

Programme for Belize has recently developed a tourism business investment strategy for its tourism activities to organize its lead income generating activity, tourism, into a more robust and dynamic product.

Although PIB’s tourism activities are opened for independent visitors, it has focused primarily on educational, high school and college student’s tourism. The effect of the US 9/11 event demonstrated how sensitive our tourism operation is to external events. While overnight tourism was increasing in Belize, the extended US alerts resulted in drastic last minute cancellations from our educational groups. Since then, and under the adaptive management of PIB, our tourism visitation and revenues have been increasing since 2004.

The growth of our tourism operations, however, is limited by the investments in the human resources, investments in the facilities and as well as in the products and services offered by the operations. Due to limited financial resources, PIB has not been able to revisit the maintenance and upgrading of its facilities and services on a continual and structured basis. This tourism strategy therefore calls for a significant investment in repairs and upgrades in the facilities and services at La Milpa and the Hill Bank Field Stations. This investment will not only ensure that the quality of facilities and services is provided but will also reposition Rio Bravo to attract higher paying clients such as the independent nature-adventurers.

What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

As an area rich in biodiversity, it is a major tourism attraction offering nature-based recreational and educational tourism. The facilities and services of PIB offers mature travelers various opportunities to enjoy nature and the highest chances of seeing endangered and charismatic species such as the Jaguar and Harpy Eagle.

Programme for Belize, through this investment strategy, will be investing into the areas of Management and Coordination, into the facilities at the La Milpa and Hill Bank Venues and into the Marketing of the Product and Services that PIB has to offer on the RBCMA and by extension in Belize. This investment will enable PIB to improve its tourism facilities and services, restructure its tourism management and aggressively market its tourism product and services, repositioning PIB to capture a greater segment of the nature-based travelers thereby increasing tourism revenues for supporting the management and protection of the Rio Bravo Conservation and management.

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.

The mission of PIB is to link conservation of tropical forest with the development of sustainable land uses which leave the forest and its environmental values intact. To this end, long-term programs implemented on the RBCMA include: land acquisition, resource protection, scientific research, community outreach, environmental education, ecotourism, sustainable timber harvest and harvest of non-timber products.

Of the several sustainable land uses which PIB is implementing on the RBCMA, ecotourism is given high priority because it has demonstrated the potential to contribute a significant source of operating revenue for the RBCMA and PIB, while simultaneously promoting the conservation mission of PIB by providing substantial opportunities and arenas for natural history and cultural education and interpretation.

PIB’s experience in ecotourism commenced in 1992 hosting educational groups through a partnership with a U.S.-based non-profit organization. Education and interpretation have been central elements of the development of tourism on the RBCMA. Every year, approximately 400 international students participate in PIB’s forest ecology courses and about 300 Belizean students and 40 researchers visit the RBCMA. These statistics substantiate PIB’s success in linking visitation with environmental education and on-going scientific research being carried out on the RBCMA.

PIB’s ecotourism operation has several objectives: (i) developing sustainable tourism which will provide a consistent stream of income that can be applied to the conservation, protection and management of the RBCMA; (ii) providing visitors with an exceptional forest experience which integrates visitation with environmental education, thereby facilitating a deepened understanding of the real issues surrounding conservation of the world’s tropical forests; and (iii) participating in the economic and social development of the greater Rio Bravo area by incorporating the buffer-zone communities in PIB’s ecotourism activities.

The primary reason for the existence of PIB was to enable the purchase, protection, conservation and management of the RBCMA. Since the inception of PIB in 1988, the RBCMA has grown to 260,000 acres of land. The RBCMA is the largest private reserve and the second largest single protected area in Belize. The RBCMA therefore plays a significant part in biodiversity conservation on a national scale in Belize.

The RBCMA’s linkage to neighboring protected areas creates a critical corridor connecting Belize with the forests of the Peten and south-east Mexico, thereby multiplying the returns to conservation. The RBCMA is bounded on the west by the Maya Biosphere Reserve (Peten, Guatemala) and on the north by the Agua Turbias National Park in Belize which is contiguous to the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (Campeche, Mexico). The Maya Biosphere Reserve and the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve form a single protected area complex covering over 1.7 million hectares. The RBCMA forms a natural extension of this area, extending coverage to over 1.8 million hectares and is therefore part of the largest protected area complex in Central American and one of the most important in the Neotropics.

The extent of the landscape, its connectivity with the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, through the Maya Biosphere Reserve and Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, and its management has made it possible for the RBCMA to have the highest density of Jaguars in Belize and perhaps the region. It was rated the best managed protected area under the recent assessment within the National Protected Area System Project. Due to its rich diversity, efficient protection and a healthy prey base, the RBCMA has been selected as the release site for the restoration of the globally threatened Harpy Eagle (Harpia Harpyja) in 2005.

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers’ marketing material.

The Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (RBCMA) is a private conservation area owned and held in trust for the people of Belize by Programme for Belize (PIB), a private, not-for-profit, national, non-governmental organization.

PIB’s original mandate on the RBCMA as established in 1988 is to preserve the natural heritage and biological diversity of Belize, generate
sufficient income through the proper management of the area for its continued perpetual care and to participate in the economic development of the wider RBCMA in furthering the national economic interest.

The RBCMA is home to a wide cross section of biodiversity possibly not found as concentrated anywhere else in the country of Belize. The uniqueness of this area serves as a model for other protected areas that continue to strive towards the goal of self-sustainability in the management of the resources under a sustainable development theme.

Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.

Programme for Belize’s mission is to carefully manage the resources of the Rio Bravo without compromising the biodiversity and environmental services of the forest, in order to obtain revenues to support its conservation efforts and to economically benefit the surrounding regional community.

Sharing the wonders of the Rio Bravo site with visitors has been one identified method for accomplishing this mission. PIB’s major attraction is being the largest private protected area, a 260,000 acre preserve of tropical moist forest in north western Belize. It’s connectivity with the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Peten Guatemala and Calakmul in southern Mexico makes it unique and a must for nature/adventure travelers.

It is comprised of 22 vegetation systems which is home to 200 species of trees, 390 species of birds (24% of conservation concern) and 70 species of mammals (15% of conservation concern) including the Jaguar, Puma, Margay, Ocelot and the Howler and Spider Monkey.

Belize is known to be occupied by the ancient Mayas as evidenced by the Mayan temples across the country and the RBCMA is no exception. Over 60 substantial Mayan sites have been located within the RBCMA with numerous Maya dwellings from simple house-mounds to elite dwellings and ceremonial centers. The La Milpa site, located in western Rio Bravo, is the third largest site in Belize and its ceremonial center was expanded to its full extent as one of the major sites of the Maya Lowlands.

The Rio Bravo also forms part of four watersheds and the head waters of the New River. The New River Lagoon offers an array of water-based activities including birding, canoeing, crocodile spotting and PIB looks forward to the introduction in the near future of fly-fishing.

Its flora, its fauna and the cultural sites, its facilities and services and its extensive trail system offers something for every interest.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

Programme for Belize, from its inception in 1988 has functioned as a Non-Governmental Organization, not-for-profit in nature and private entity registered under the Companies Act, Chapter 250 of the laws of Belize (Revised Edition 2000) as a limited company.

PIB has embarked on an objective to develop and ensure self- sustainability in light of the changing world economic environment. Programme for Belize has now created a tourism business investment strategy for its tourism activities to organize its lead income generating activity, tourism, into a more robust and dynamic product.

We are seeking individuals and organizations to make investments in our tourism products, enter into partnerships with us to help us provide for the sustainable management and enjoyment of the beautiful tract of land we call the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area for all those who have visited and the scores of others yet to visit this unique destination we call ‘Rio Bravo’.

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