

**Testimony of Dr. K. Anne Pyburn
Before the Department of State
Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Regarding the Proposed Renewal of
The Bilateral Agreement between Belize and the United States of America**

March 21, 2017

Chairman Sabloff and members of the committee, I am Dr. Anne Pyburn, and I submit this testimony on behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) in support of the renewal of the bilateral agreement between Belize and the United States for the protection of the archaeological heritage of Belize.

I am Provost's Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Archaeology in the Public Interest at Indiana University, Vice President of the World Archaeological Congress, and a member of various professional organizations including the SAA, AIA, AAA, RPA, and the EAA. I have worked in Belize for 30 years, where I have directed the excavation of three ancient Maya cities. I have authored 90 scholarly papers, two edited volumes and a monograph on my excavations at the site of Nohmul in Belize.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 7,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

Despite its relatively small size (8,800 sq mi) Belize's archaeological heritage is among the richest in the world. The region was a political force and an economic center of Maya civilization for over 2000 years and has been continuously occupied by Maya speaking peoples into the present day. Later periods are evidenced by the archaeological traces of buccaneers, missionaries, chicle harvesters, loggers, farmers, and ranchers. Barely an inch of the country is without some evidence of the region's heroic past. Settlers in the region even played a role in the American civil war, but the archeology of this era remains virtually unknown.

Belize's most vulnerable resources are the very visible ancient Maya sites densely distributed across the country, and even occurring offshore. These sites range from the remnants of ancient villages to the remains of huge urban centers with monumental architecture and magnificent carved stelae. Generally speaking, artifacts with the greatest value on the art market come from the monumental structures; when looters attack these giant ancient buildings they leave gaping holes that penetrate into the structural core, causing the buildings to implode. Illicit traffickers not only steal the portable artifacts of Belize's heritage, but destroy entire monuments.

It is difficult to estimate the extent of current trafficking in Belizean artifacts, but it is certainly the case that most sites in the country have been damaged by illicit digging. This artifact was for sale on eBay the first week of March 2017:



<http://www.ebay.com.sg/itm/Incredible-Mayan-Dagger-Spear-found-in-Belize-Precolumbian-/282222498070?hash=item41b5c59116:g:1DgAAOSwzaJYA7rp>

The seller identifies it accurately as a “Mayan Dagger/Spear found in Belize, Pre-Columbian;” the type dates to about 300 AD and is commonly found in with human remains in temples, so this artifact likely represents the destruction of a monumental building.

From a scholarly perspective, the loss of archaeological context destroys the majority of the scientific value of an object. Unless we know precisely where an artifact was discovered we cannot reconstruct its historical significance. Belizean looters erroneously believe jade carvings to be the most marketable objects and in their ignorance casually crush delicate bone carvings, human remains and polychrome ceramics, further wiping out archaeological context along with objects of much greater value to both scholars and art dealers.

Maya hieroglyphic texts can now be read, but they are extremely rare. Nevertheless, inscribed artifacts continue to turn up and provide us with an invaluable window on the past. For example, in 2015 a jade plaque with a lengthy text was found at the Belizean site of Nimli Punit; fortunately it was found by an archaeologist, but there is no doubt that texts are continually being lost to pillage.

The value of these small objects on the illicit art market cannot compare with the value of the archaeological sites of their origin to the Belize tourist industry. Tourism focused on tropical ecology and Maya ruins accounts for 25% of Belize’s GDP. Thus, the loss or archaeological monuments is a serious threat to the Belize economy.

Belizeans generally consider Maya ruins to be a part of their national patrimony, whether or not they have Maya heritage. However, the loss of material heritage is particularly serious for living Maya people, as it undermines their struggles for access to indigenous land.

It should not be gathered from this that Belize is not generous with its cultural resources; in fact collaborations between the US and Belize are extremely common. Belize has at least 30 US archaeologists working in country at any given time, and regularly loans artifacts for study and display in US museums. I currently curate study collections from four Belizean sites. The members of that nation’s Institute of Archaeology were mostly trained in the U.S. (one worked with me in Indiana as an undergraduate) and the current commissioner has a Ph.D. from UCLA.

Only 375,000 people live in Belize and the modest police force that can be supported in a developing nation of this size is hard-pressed to control trafficking. Maya artifacts are highly prized among art collectors and though there are licit and illicit collections of Maya art all over

the world, it is likely that most of the traffic comes to or at least through Belize's wealthiest neighbor, the United States.

Nevertheless, Belize does its best to protect its cultural resources and maintains a small but dedicated and highly educated staff in the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH). Belize trains its customs officials to recognize and confiscate artifacts from travelers, to halt looters and anyone interfering with archaeological sites, and educates public school children to respect the material past of their nation.

I believe that the existing Memorandum, which went into effect in 2013, has had a demonstrably beneficial impact. The draft of a new National Cultural Policy, which spells out Belize's commitment to the preservation of its archaeological heritage, was completed in 2014 almost immediately after the memorandum was signed; it may be accessed on the NICH website at <http://www.nichbelize.org/belize-resources/national-cultural-policy.html>.

New university training programs in archaeology and anthropology are now available at Galen University. Opportunities for Belizean students to pursue training in other countries have broadened, and the number of students taking advantage of these opportunities has increased. Participation of Belizean scholars in international scholarly activities has also grown, as has the participation of international scholars in collaborative programs and scholarly meetings in Belize.

In 2014 the U.S. Embassy and National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) co-hosted a workshop on preserving and protecting Belize's cultural heritage. In 2015 the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation, the Ministry of National Security, the National Institute of Culture and History and the Forestry Department opened the Caracol Conservation Post. The post, which cost \$50,000 US dollars, houses 12 soldiers, whose presence in this area is intended to curb looting. Belize newspapers reported in 2016 that the 14th annual Belize Archaeology and Anthropology Symposium was very well attended by both professional archaeologists and the public, and world class educational programs such as the Center for Engaged Learning Abroad (CELA Belize) are now available to train students from other nations, but especially the US, about Belize's cultural heritage.

These examples illustrate the point that the pace of activities that contribute to the protection of Belize's archaeological sites and cultural heritage has steadily increased over the past few years. Much of this progress would not have been made without the Memorandum. Nevertheless, conditions still meet the thresholds set forth in Section 303(a) of the Cultural Property Implementation Act. Many residents of the countryside, where most sites are located, are poor and find it easy to see prehistoric Native American artwork as simply a potential economic resource. Recent years have seen a serious increase in incursions of impoverished and desperate refugees from Guatemala and Honduras into Belize and satellite maps disclose the extensive environmental destruction and looting they have wrought. The Belizean army has attempted to curb the illegal activities, but political disputes with Guatemala continue to blunt their effectiveness.

As the gateway to the major market for looted archaeological materials in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. border is a critically important deterrent to artifact traffic. The existing Memorandum is vital to this effort. Without the Memorandum, I fear Belize would have little ability to stop trafficking, and the heritage of all the Central American countries that contain Maya heritage sites would be further jeopardized, as anyone stopped with artifacts in their possession could simply claim they were from Belize. Furthermore, as the traffic in artifacts is often perpetrated by the same criminals who traffic drugs, heritage protections also extend the enforcement of anti-drug laws.

In sum, the existing Memorandum has been successful. It has both encouraged and enforced substantial progress on a number of different fronts in the effort to control illicit traffic in cultural property, to preserve and protect Belizean cultural heritage, and to facilitate legitimate international access to it. The Memorandum, however, is still very much needed. There is every reason to believe that a renewal would help to maintain the momentum and lead to continued progress in the future.

I thank the Committee for this opportunity to submit testimony, and strongly urge renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding with Belize.