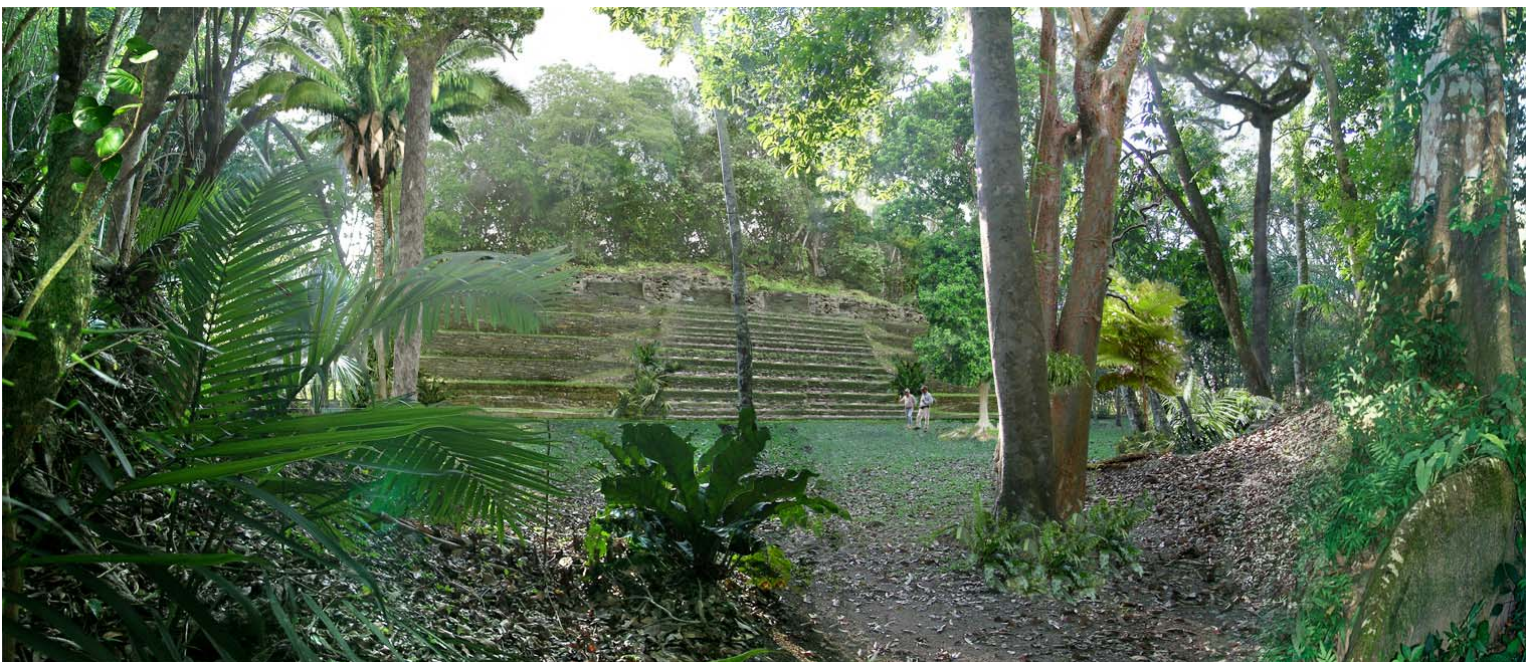


CULTURE & NATURE IN THE MAYA FOREST

A REPORT ON THE 2005 FIELD SEASON ~ EL PILAR

by Anabel Ford, Exploring Solutions Past: the Maya Forest Alliance
& ISBER/MesoAmerican Research Center UCSB

with contributions from Christian Egerer, Kelly Moore, and Erik Stanley
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INTRODUCTION

The El Pilar Program promotes applying lessons from the past to today's conservation and development agenda. Recognizing that contemporary communities of the Maya forest have pioneered lands and adapted to environmental conditions that have a long and dynamic tradition stretching back millennia to the ancient Maya civilization, the 2005 BRASS/El Pilar field season worked on this link by completing the ceramic analysis of the El Pilar excavations and identifying aspects of traditional conservation practice that help to account for ancient Maya settlement patterns. Essentially these two parallel tracts allow for feedback in the field research setting. One track is that of the investigation of the past chronology, land use, and development of the ancient Maya. This has incorporated archaeological survey and mapping, excavations and field cataloging, and ceramic and other artifact analyses. These are essential in the interpretation of the ancient Maya land use. The other track has focused on the local community, their residential traditions and land use practice, as well as their interests and involvement in the conservation of their cultural heritage. These contemporary data contribute to our understanding of the Maya forest as a garden and the importance of forest management as a garden.

Our efforts of the 2005 season reflect the continuum of investigation that has typified the BRASS/El Pilar Program. Consequently, the field research and laboratory activities of 2005 were divided between the finalization of the ceramic analyses for the El Pilar excavations at the Tzunu'un house site adjacent to El Pilar, along with the promotion of "Archaeology Under the Canopy" working with local traditional forest gardeners adjacent to El Pilar Archeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna. The results of the seasons base work was 1) the completion of the ceramic analysis and

coding for the El Pilar excavations and 2) the collection and inventory of forest garden practices that can support the conservation management of the environment at El Pilar. The ceramic analysis is the culmination of the data compilation for the ceramics from 1993 to 2004. The work with the El Pilar Forest Garden Network is part of the process of bringing intangible heritage practices of the traditional farmers to the fore, increasing their visibility of their native conservation strategies. These basic forest garden data are now part of a web site: mayaforestgardeners.com. Our work is always accomplished by a collective team working to bring the importance of the Maya culture and nature to greater recognition.

BRASS/EL PILAR CERAMIC ANALYSES

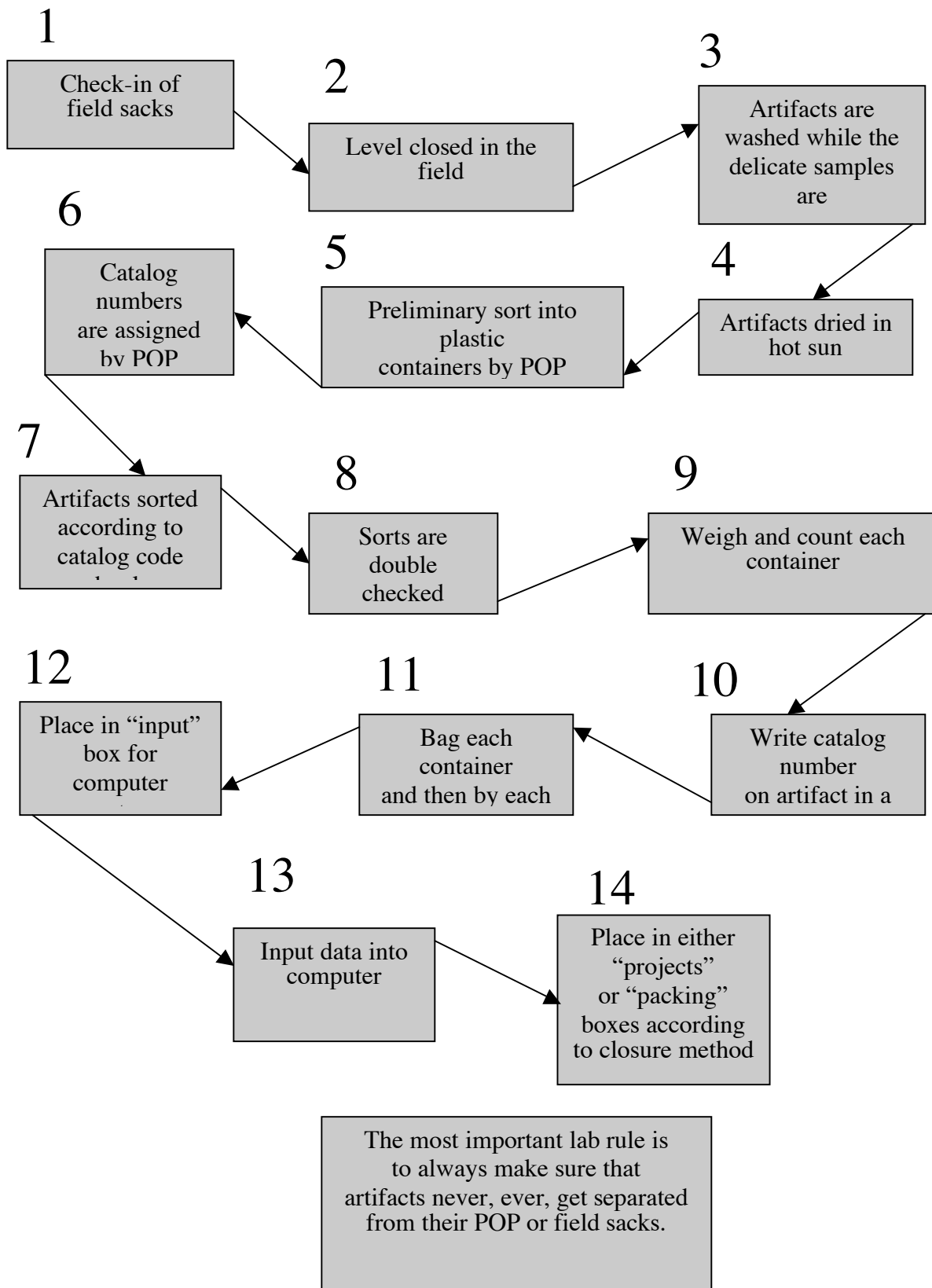
The BRASS program has worked in the region since 1983, with a focus on the development of El Pilar since 1993. Our field methods of collection have been consistent and standard through the entire program. The data collected from the El Pilar excavations at the core monuments and in the surrounding residential area were gathered to understand the chronology and development of this ancient site and center, to tie the events of El Pilar to the growing chronological data from the Maya region, and to develop the site specific evidence to interpret the significance of El Pilar among the great major Maya centers. Over the course of the years of research, we have documented the immense size of the site with monuments covering some 50 hectares, over 120 acres, comparable to the area extent of neighbors 50 km distant such as Caracol and Yaxhá. El Pilar is the largest center of the Belize River area, and today it straddles the Belize Guatemala border, with an extensive and varied residential zone in the surrounding continuous and binational protected area.

Our effort to assess El Pilar's place in Maya prehistory requires the detailed examination of the collections. Ceramics are the fundamental basis of this inquiry both in the assemblage of forms and styles and, more importantly in the chronological information that they bear. Excavations at the site cover more than 10 years up to last excavations in 2004. This laboratory season was scheduled to complete the analytic assessment and at the close of our lab session in 2005 we successfully met this goal. We have now the coded data ready for computer analyses and interpretation.

We have developed a description strategy for the ceramics based on a standardized rim shape listing developed by long time ceramic analyst Sydney Ciener. With her artistic vision, we now have a comprehensive catalog of shapes that are associated with the descriptions of the ceramics of El Pilar. This shape catalog serves to provide additional data on the ceramic assemblage that augment the basic chronological data, provide characteristics that are difficult to code, and help in the assemblage comparisons. We now have the 12 years of ceramic data sets coded and ready for the interpretive analyses.

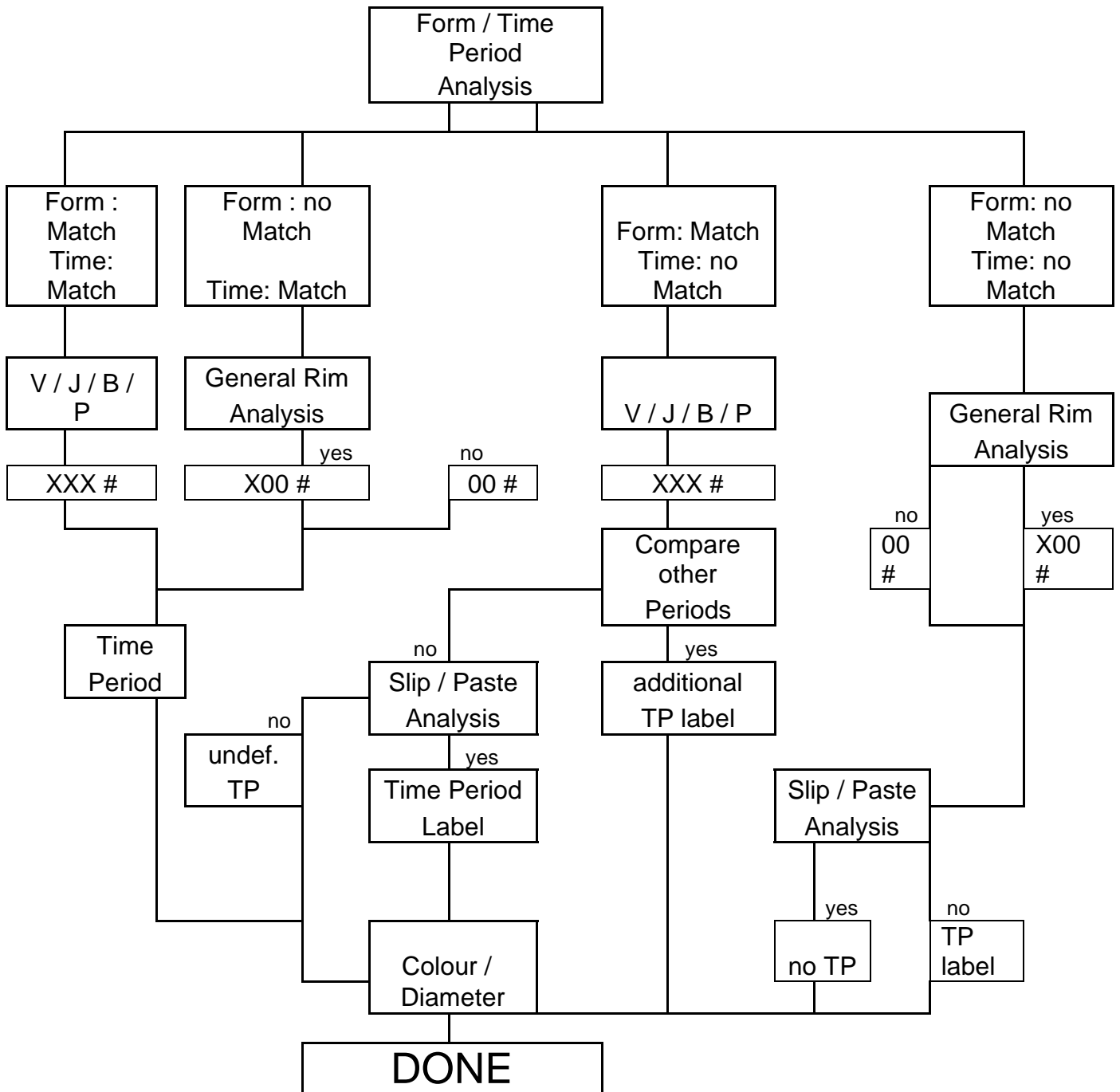
Our procedure for all the collections was to process them as the excavated materials were removed from the field. Field collections sacks were inventoried and checked into the field land and when the excavation levels were closed, the artifacts were processed. Each individual collection locus, called a level, was assigned on catalog number, equivalent to lot numbers in other systems (Figure Secret life). This number was assigned sequentially to completed levels and one number was used for all artifacts in one provenience. These data were compiled in a master catalog for each year (included in the CD at the end of this report) and form the basis of the general artifact assemblage descriptions.

THE SECRET LIFE OF AN ARTIFACT



Each artifact class and type was coded in a provenience catalog and those diagnostic ceramics were subjected to more detailed individual analyses. The ceramic analyses began with the chronological comparisons with reports and collections from the Maya area. The specific data collection focused on the ceramic form and paste composition. The following diagram charts the strategy.

The Journey of an Artifact to its Temporal Destination



The final compilation for the El Pilar peripheries projects: Tzunu'un house site excavations and the Grinnell excavations. We have now incorporated these data into two types of folders related by the year of the excavations from 1993 to 1997, and then by the year of analysis for the excavations from 1998-2004. Our aim now is to reformat the analyses conducted in 2003-2005 by year of excavations and integrate them into a relational database together with the provenience data. The result will be an accessible compilation of the ceramic catalog.

FOREST GARDENERS AND THEIR GARDEN INVENTORIES

With contributions by Kelly Moore

The El Pilar Program has combined a strong archaeological field research program with an interdisciplinary design. This season our work with agricultural development and traditional forest garden practice has helped to understand how the Maya civilization mastered life in the Maya forest. Our work with the traditional farmers has been a collaboration with the NGO *Help for Progress*, dedicated to improving the welfare of the rural farmers of the Maya forest.

Our hypothesis is that the settlement patterns of the ancient Maya are a legacy that lives on in the contemporary forest gardeners of the region. Understanding the traditional land use patterns has the potential to help in interpreting ancient patterns and in the conservation of the Maya forest for the future. The more we know about the traditional Maya forest garden practice, the better we can interpret the land use of the ancient Maya. Moreover, the same forest gardeners that hold the secret of how the Maya balanced conservation and cultural prosperity. With the inclusion of the traditional forest gardeners in the development of El Pilar, we believe we can demonstrate their practice is a way to show the forest as a garden at El Pilar. This would enhance the environmental quality of El Pilar and promote an innovative collaboration between the managers of the archaeological reserve and the neighboring villagers. The result would be the wonderful, changing dynamic product of the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna.

The work included the compilation of c. 20 gardens around El Pilar to demonstrate: 1) the combined biodiversity exceeds 350 plants that are known, named, and nurtured; 2) the average garden has at least 75-100 plants named and used in daily life; 3) the top 10 and 20 plants found in the native Maya forest are also found in the forest gardens. The significance of these data is dramatic. Rather than reducing the biodiversity of the Maya forest, a forest increasingly at risk, these forest gardeners are managing and maintaining it. They recognize their contribution to the environment and are motivated to conserve. They see the expansion of the pasturage and plow, the replacement of native seeds with hybrids, and the lack of incentives to practice traditional farming as a tragedy that will destroy the Maya forest and their gardens. We argue that this is how the ancient Maya were able to promote their civilization.

Our basic results have been compiled to promote the traditional practices with a new web site at www.mayaforestgardenrs.org. We have featured the importance of the forest garden practice, and provided introductory information on its qualities and values. In addition, all plants that a gardener uses are linked to the individual, so that one can see their differences and similarities. It is our intention to make this an interactive site for the gardeners and to use the computer web development for training youth interested in understanding the forest garden practice.

THE EL PILAR FOREST GARDEN HISTORY

With contributions by Eric Stanley

To understand traditional forest gardening in the El Pilar area, we need to understand the nature of the population and their connection to the Maya forest. In many ways, the history of the traditional farmers is a reflection of the wider colonial experience. Distant from the central Petén and coastal Belize, much that transpired in this sector of the Maya forest was below the archival radar. But as it turns up, we become aware of the importance of the movements and interrelationships of the people. We look at that colonial history, the changes over the period of independence from Spain, and how these events have influenced the traditional forest gardeners of the Belize River area.

The history of the village communities of the upper Belize River is complex as result of the interwoven history of the region where five centuries of both Spanish and British colonialism drastically impacted the Maya. Relegated to the margins of the major colonial incursions, the greater Petén, including areas of modern day southern Campeche, Quintana Roo as well as Belize, was largely outside of colonial interest for the initial centuries after contact. In fact, the Spanish conquest of the last Maya kingdom was not concluded until 1697, and even then there was minimal interest in the difficult tropical forests, its dispersed population, and no gold. With independence from Spain by 1821, along with expanding regional interests in the value of the natural resources of the forest, the Maya forest became a focus of targeted development. First logwood became important to the British textile industry, and then the immense mahogany and cedar, once a significant part of the prehistoric Maya forest gardens, were harvested for lumber. And later, the chicle industry flourished for U.S. chewing gum. Still, up until the late 20th century, there was little population growth in this Maya forest. The mobile, itinerant, and seasonal attention to the Maya forest did little to either centralize or increase local settlement. Relations across the region underscored the common economy and heritage. The following narrative draws on the colonial studies of Grant Jones and Nancy Farris, the postcolonial research of Norman Schwartz and Don Dummond, and the more recent ethnographies of Marcella Mazarelli and Paul Sullivan.

In ancient Maya times, the El Pilar area was at the margins of the major developments of Tikal, and later, in the Postclassic, it was the location of subsistence farmers with family cacao orchards, as noted in the early chronicles. As Mesoamerica came under the influence of the Spanish, the greater Petén was of the least interest. Traversed by Cortez in 1525, the area was not subdued until the late 17th century. In the two centuries of neglect, few incursions were managed, and most with little success. The Itzá kingdom that dominated the central Petén area managed to maintain its isolation but at the same time was well informed of regional events. Their claim of origins from the north has been disputed, but the Maya ability to move around the whole Yucatan Peninsula is legendary. They maintained an effective and efficient information exchange documented during the early Colonial period. Little of significance happened in the north, and particularly Merida, without the knowledge of the Itzá in the south. So that later, with the Caste War of the Yucatan in the mid 19th century, it is not surprising that the Maya then turned back to the south and reoccupied the familiar domain.

Considering the changes of habitation in western Belize and eastern Petén, it is easy to see how it has fallen in the cracks. Some 90 km from the Flores center and an equal number from the Belize coast, this was an area beyond the strong hand of local colonial seats. Spanish and British, unfamiliar with the terrain and the landscape, were not vested in the wider scopes of their domains.

Through the 18th century, interests in the Flores area were aimed at reducing the numbers of settlements to reduce administrative costs. The small population of Spanish administrators limited the nature and impact of exploration forays. Scattered Maya populations, residing in the hills and ridges where the traditional farming practices were successful, kept them easily out of the reach of the Spanish mission of *reducción*, consolidating dispersed populations and villages in to larger towns. The British interests in the region were always linked to raw resources that would serve the manufacturing industries in Britain. The first incursions into the Central American territories were to extract logwood or *tinto*, as it is known in Spanish. This period spanned a considerable time frame. Logwood extraction is mentioned through the 1800s, and was prominently mentioned as part of the treaty following the 1812 war. Logwood sap provided a base that was a critical component of dye prior to the development of synthetics and anilines.

Later, the resources extraction focused on lumbering large mahogany trees. Both Spanish and British interests expanded their commercial enterprises and focused on the abundant lumber resources of the Maya forest. In discussions with anthropologists and economic botanists working in the Maya forest, it has come to the fore that the large mahogany stands were likely remnants of ancient Maya plantings that were tragically abandoned with the dramatic population demise that followed the spread of European disease in the first half century after contact. Mahogany today is on the CITES list not for its numerical scarcity, but for the absence of the large trees that were systematically removed for lumber in the last 150 years. The days of the mahogany giants are unlikely to be seen again.

The next phase of extraction was that of chicle found to be a superior chewing gum by U.S. companies after their Civil War ended in 1865. Curiously, chewing gum had become a fad by soldiers but the gum source, a pitch pine from New England, had been lumbered out. Spearheaded by the Chicago based producer, Wrigley, explorations were launched to find a substitute gum for the US market. The Maya forest chicle was discovered to be the best, better than the original pine. Extractors were set up in all of the greater Petén from southern Campeche and Quintana Roo into the Petén and western Belize. Because adaptations to the “bush” were the norm and using the forest as a garden was customary, the Maya forest was ready made for chicle harvest. Operators supplied mules from Texas and main stations were set up at intervals of a days walk. Feeder camps shifted the chicle by mule back to the main stations and exchanges the chicle for supplies in the field. At Uaxactún, it has been reported that more that 500 mules were circulated to maintain the production.

Not only were the *chicleros* reliant on the bounty of the Maya forest garden left by the ancient Maya, but so were the mules. Mules were fattened on *ramon* leaf, known commonly by its Spanish name for fodder. *Ramon* became an important food source for those relying on draught animals. So good was *ramon* fodder and so vital to the success of the chicle operations, that when confronted with no *ramon*, as has been reported for the case of the Toledo District, *chicleros* with out supplies of grain for their animals could only watch the mules weaken and die.

The European patterns of land use in the greater Petén rarely overlapped with those of the Maya. One can imagine that the indigenous Maya undoubtedly gained a comprehension for the European goals and plans, with the Spanish forays focused on population relocation and the British forays focused on slavery. In each case this would mean abandoning the known for the unknown, hardly a welcome choice. The Maya lifestyle, living with the forest garden and understanding the nature of the forest, could easily manage to elude these forays simply by focusing on their traditional

subsistence and land use practices: the forest garden. All reports during this time and into the early lumbering period indicate that there were no Maya. But what if they could not see them? Early Spanish colonial documents referred disarmingly of the local population as materializing from the jungle and melting into the woods without warning or announcement. Recall, these reports were either from the early Spanish, usually traveling with horses and a large military retinue, wanting to force relocation or from British buccaneers on the river systems wanting to capture slaves. It is little wonder the Maya were not seen. The land use strategies of each group were distinct and did not have common characteristics. This lack of recognition is succinctly put by the ethnobotanical works of Ralph Roys when he discusses the official Spanish view of Maya land use in the Yucatan:

“Therefore I order that all the natives ... construct houses *close to one another* ... And they should *not sow any milpas* within the town, but it shall be very clean. There shall *not be groves*, but they shall cut them all...so that they shall be clean, without sown land or groves; and if there were any, they should be burned.” (quoted in Roys emphasis mine)

Clearly the colonial system had no empathy for the life style of the indigenous people and for traditional subsistence strategies that were native to the Maya forest. It is obvious they did not see the eclectic forest gardens as vital to survival in the tropics. Indeed now, as more in depth scientific studies have been undertaken, it is clear that the adaptation of the traditional Yucatecan farmer is an important clue to sustainability in the Maya forest region in the past and for the future.

While western Belize has a deep history of occupation stretching back into prehistory when the great cities of El Pilar, Xunatunich, and Cahal Pech were the social integrators of their times, today’s Yucatecan Maya inhabitants trace their heritage in two distinct directions: to the west to the Mopan and Itzá of the greater Petén and to the north the Yucatec of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. While the Yucatecan family of Maya language share linguistic and economic traditions, the most recent southern migration of the Yucatec into Belize dominates the current setting. While this may be perceived as an immigrant population, they likely share ancestry that can be traced back into this region at some time in the past.

At the time of conquest, the majority of the Yucatecan Maya, known in colonial times as “Masewal,” lived in the northern third of the Yucatan peninsula. The movements of small groups of Maya from north to and back again over the course of centuries made these lands familiar. With the centuries too, political boundaries, one fluid, became more defined and eventually the mobile Maya settled in Belize River villages, like Bullet Tree Falls and Santa Familia. Their story is linked to events of the larger world stage.

The name “Masewal” is of central Mexican Nahuatl origin and originally meant “peasant.” Brought to the Yucatan at the time of conquest with indigenous warriors fighting under the Spanish banner, by the beginnings of the Caste War of the Yucatan in the mid 19th century, this word had been adopted by the Yucatecan Maya to mean “us” as opposed to the Spanish speaking colonials. Today, the term persists in the villages of western Cayo, where it is known as an ethnic term of Maya identity”

In response to civil turmoil and oppression following Mexican independence in 1821, the Masewal people of the Yucatan began a series of uprisings against the Mexican government to regain their

autonomy. This is known as the Caste Wars of the Yucatan. After initial victories by the Maya that pushed the colonial government back to the capital of Merida in May of 1848, the tide turned against the Masewal and they were forced to retreat back into the lands to the south and east. In response to this conflict, the Mexican government suspended the rights of the Indians, attempted to confiscate their firearms, and began an open military campaign against the Caste War rebels.

By 1850, the Mexican Government was making regular incursions into lands where the Maya had fled, causing great hardship. Consequently, some of these Maya began to migrate into the dense forests of the southern peninsula to escape the harassment of their enemy. Over the course of the last half of the 19th century, these Maya would continue the southern migration. Forest gardeners of the El Pilar area speak on this topic and others in the following section. Information on these traditional farmers is provided in the appendix.

“Like everything else, the Spaniards tried to enslave the Maya, but they couldn’t enslave all of them. And one particular group managed to live by themselves, apart from the Spanish. And so they knew there was civil war among the Spaniards and one group called upon the Maya to help them. So they promised people things, much like politics today. Offered them a part in the government, but nothing happened. The Mayas learned to fight because at that time they were not allowed to use guns. But when they took part in that thing they learned how to hold a gun and how to use it. They realized what you can do with it. In the mean time, they got hooked into the civil wars of the Spaniard and then the Spaniards turned against them. And that was how the Caste War began in 1847. A lot of the Maya didn’t really want to fight; they were obliged to fight... If you didn’t fight you still lost your life because it was a fight to the death. And so many of them opted to leave. Whether they left by agreement or by some scheming... I think scheming took place. They left their country and since they were very skillful forest people, they didn’t need any roads. And they knew the routes and they left their country. They came slowly. There are a lot of stories about their adventures. I think they went as far as into Guatemala on the way to Belize.” –A.T.

In 1853, more than half of the southern Masewal, now along the northern border of Belize, signed a peace agreement with the Mexican government. During this time, increasingly frequent population movements occurred. These migrations resulted in the creation of new villages. Icaiche was formed in 1863 and it is from this village we find some of the earliest memories and legends by the Maya of western Cayo. Although the land to the south of Ixcaiche was cleared by British forces in 1867 with the destruction of San Pedro, by 1875 there was resettlement. It is during this era when the villages such as Chorro, Yaloch, San Jose, and Kaxilunuc were likely settled and it is from these now abandoned villages that modern forest gardeners of the Cayo district trace their heritage.

“When they [the old people] came from the Yucatan over to this side here, maybe we had divisions, but we never knew where the border was. So the people had problems over there, I think they had a war over there, the people escaped from over there... And when that war started and seems they couldn’t take the licking, they escaped and they came over this side through the jungle and they settled somewhere in Kaxilunuc area, that’s in the jungle, one side of Gallon Jug, that’s near the boarder of Guatemala. He settled right there and they began to live there.” – L.O.

By the turn of the century, a number of settlers from Chorro had moved down from the northern hills and settled nine miles to the south along the Mopan River at what eventually became the village of Bullet Tree Falls. Bullet Tree Falls slowly grew during this time as Maya migrants became increasingly drawn to work opportunities in the local logging and chicle operations. The village also grew as a result of its close proximity to the legislative and economic center of the district at Cayo, approximately 3 miles away. In 1917, hostile native groups attacked Chorro and many more families fled to Bullet Tree Falls, although el Chorro was not completely abandoned until the 1930's, and one solitary man stayed there until his death in the 1980s.

In the northern hills east of Cayo, the village of San Jose, which was prosperous until the mid 1930's, ran afoul with the Belize Estates and Citrus Company over the destruction of valuable lumber due to their practice of traditional milpa farming. In response to this destruction of company land, in 1937 the village was burned and was officially disbanded by the government. While most families were sent by train to the village of San Jose Palma in the north, four families, the Quewell, Cano, Ortega, and Tun traveled south to find a new place to live. Although originally planning on settling in the town of Succotz, on the fourth day of traveling they stopped to rest by the shores of the Belize River. Because the land was nearly uninhabited, the owner offered to let the refugees settle at the place that would eventually become the village of Santa Familia.

“My family was among the first people to come to Santa Familia [in 1937]. One day, they had a bad experience because of the type of farming that they did. They used to slash and burn. One year they do it here and the next year they moved and so on. And the company that owned most of Belize's land [The Belize Estate Company] didn't like that because they were destroying logs and all kinds of good trees... And they actually burned their village down so they had to run away from San Jose Yalbac. And my family was in that group so they decided to (go south)... Some friends (of his mother's family) knew San Jose Succotz, so they were moving San Jose de Yalbac to San Jose Succotz. I think it is a five-day walk and on the fourth day they arrived in Santa Familia. And the owner of this piece of land gave them permission to rest for the day. Since he was farming alone, there were very few people, four or five. So the owner said that if they like, they can stay there. They have land and everything. And since they loved the river because right over there they stayed, where my house is. Around that area they stayed and they decided to stay there. And that's how they came to live here. And from then, they forgot the idea of going to San Jose Succotz.” R.T.

While settlers to the riverside villages maintained their forest garden traditions throughout the twentieth century, company holdings only allowed the tenants to grow corn and other seasonal crops for fear that permanent cultivation might someday strengthen the Maya's claim to the lands they worked.

“Bullet Tree and Santa Familia and all those lands were owned by people who had money. And then those people had somebody who is watching the land. All like we people, you can only plant corn and something that you will harvest [annually], no fruit trees or permanent trees. First, you have to continue doing in that, cannot continue doing this, you cannot fell wood, you cannot do this, and you are not free. You are under that man and if you don't follow the policy the landlord give you, well

you have to, you have to stop doing.” –M.M.

By the early 1960’s, villagers began to agitate for land reforms and by 1967; approximately 25 families under the leadership of the village council banded together and petitioned the government for these lands. Despite opposition by families who maintained links to the company, the government acquiesced to the majority’s demands and appropriated 100,000 acres for redistribution. This land, which included the villages of Bullet Tree Falls and Santa Familia, was divided up and families were granted leases on lots of approximately 10 to 15 acres.

“We get it started by seeing that our own people were suffering, when I say suffering is because they didn’t have the right to own land. And we saw it was necessary that we should ask the government to acquire the land and to subdivide the land to give it to the people for their home lot and for agriculture lot. That’s what we did. For saying that only me and Mr. M.M. couldn’t do that. We had to have the support of the people, because without the support of the people, we were nothing. We have the experience of how a group works. We had a hard time, but we did it... So we made the government to acquire this side first [with 10,000 acres] and then we went to the next side of the river. But the next side of the river, we had some people that were against the acquiring of the land. But it was not the majority. You know the majority rules. So we had the majority and the government acquired ninety thousand acres (90,000)... But the majority of the people supported us and the land was acquired. Including Santa Familia. We had a good group in Santa Familia also because we joined both communities. So we had a good one. And everything was acquired. The Santa Familia people had their land subdivided and the one that didn’t get land at that time; they are the people that worked against [us]. So they are the division. It’s not because they didn’t want the land. They didn’t want the land to be reacquired. And so they put their selves apart. In the mean time the land was approved and they came back, one by one to get their land. We fight for everybody. We were not only for our party, we were for everybody. – H.C.

The history of the Belizean Masewal has created a unique relationship between these communities and external centers of power that is quite different from those social structures they left behind in their ancestral homeland of Mexico. The Yucatecan Maya who’ve settled in western Cayo lack many of the social mechanisms for maintaining cultural identity. In Belizean communities, sources of cultural synergy have become increasingly fractured throughout the course of the twentieth century as these once largely autonomous indigenous people have been brought into tighter integration with colonial, and later, global centers of power. The most dramatic changes within these villages has been the loss of the native tongue, the splintering of the local religious community with the coming of protestant evangelical missionaries and the diversification of rural livelihood away from a concentration on subsistence farming. These changes have all occurred primarily within the last two generations and older farmers often speak of life in these towns before these dramatic upheavals.

Although the Yucatecan language is still present in Bullet Tree Falls and Santa Familia, its usage follows a gradient that corresponds with the age of the speaker. Among the oldest surviving members of the community, some of whom were small children during the last phase of migration from the northern villages, the Yucatecan language remains an important component of social

identity. Although often fluent in Spanish, Yucatecan Maya is their birth language and remains in use within these households, especially in the more traditional village of San Antonio. Speakers who retain the Mayan language inhabit one end of a linguistic and generational continuum that reflects the changing social interactions between the Belizean Maya and the outside world.

Among middle and late middle aged Maya in these towns, (between the ages of 45 and 70 years), a mixture of Mayan linguistic repertoires are maintained in varying degrees of competence and performance abilities. This group, who formed the primary focus of our ethnographic inquiry, uses Spanish as the home language, though they are often proficient in English and Belizean Creole due to demographic factors and the colonial history of Belize. Although some of these speakers retain the use of Mayan, the extensiveness of their ability is highly variable, ranging from daily usage to merely rudimentary words and phrases. Among the youth (including some of the younger farmers in this study), many are highly bilingual or often trilingual in Spanish, English, and Creole, as the ethnic groups within Belize have become more closely interconnected through development of transportation and media. Although some youth have an interest in holding on to their native tongue, the language is fragmentary among young people and remains for them only a scattering of ancestral words, its vitality linked to the traditional practice and the Maya forest.

As these communities have increasingly undergone linguistic, religious, and economic integration, there is a reinterpretation of the Maya social identity emerging in the context of this fragmented social landscape. Within this ambiguous social landscape, different people among the rural village communities envision their cultural identity through the lens of their particular social circumstances. Among the subculture of traditional Maya farmers, the act of cultivation provides a context from which they are able to manifest their expressions of cultural value and promote the Maya heritage they share.

SUMMARY

The efforts at El Pilar are focused on promoting an integrative and adaptive model for conservation and development of the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna. This model is based on a strong government commitment to the preservation of the site, an equally dedicated research dedication, and a participatory management design with support of local and international community through education. Our work is highlighting the value and importance of cultural preservation by widening the scope of that concept to include the ancient Maya archaeology, the legacy of the forest as a garden, as well as the traditional forest gardeners who have maintained the uncataloged heritage of information that is expressed in their environment. The endorsement of the El Pilar Management Plan of 3 Feb 2006 celebrated our collaborative accomplishments and support to date.

The El Pilar Program team will utilize the completed ceramic catalog and the documentation on the Maya forest gardeners of El Pilar to advance an alternative conservation vision than that of the traditional tourism design, one that engages the visitor, supports the rural heritage of forest gardening, and promotes “Archaeology Under the Canopy.” Leveraging on the adventure of archaeology, on the increasing sense of responsibility of a select tourism sector, and on the community as the ultimate caretakers as well as beneficiaries, we have created an institutional framework for the appreciation of different visions of the Maya. The promotion of the concept of the forest as a garden around El Pilar will insure the long term preservation of our world heritage at El Pilar and in the Maya forest Garden.

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APPENDIX: EXAMPLE FOREST GARDENERS

The traditional forest gardeners of the El Pilar demonstrate the variety of traditional strategies that are used and how they can be combined and expanded upon with contemporary strategies. Each individual is very experimental, sometimes taking different ways to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, these farmers share with each other their knowledge, skills, and seeds. Working with them, you realize that these farmers have an intimate knowledgeable of their domains. They are part of the world treasures and we urgently need to gather in the wealth of their knowledge to share with the forthcoming generations.

This map below shows where the El Pilar Forest Garden Network home gardens are located. Each have distant outfields that they work periodically and where they maintain plants that are needed for roofing, construction, and fruits. They are a magnificent group of people and provide a window into how the Maya know the forest as a garden.



Figure 5: Selected town plots – Image courtesy of Google Earth 9/15/2005