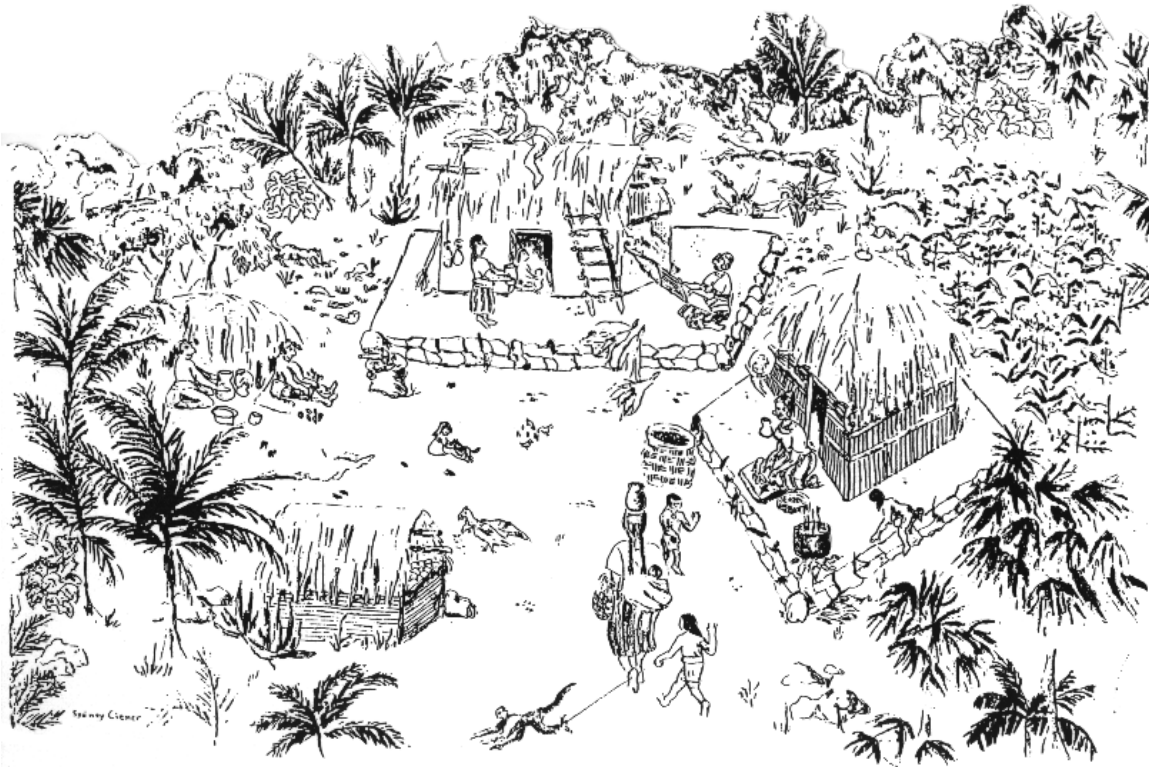


Anthropological and Archaeological Research



Regional settlement distribution, local community subsistence patterns, and individual household organization of the Ancient Maya provide material evidence for the evolution of sustainable economies, social interactions, and political relations in the Maya forest. Archaeological research of the ancient Maya, ethnohistorical research, and contemporary anthropological investigations of traditional communities underscore the complexity of interrelationships between cultural systems and their environment over time. These patterns and interpretations have important implications when we consider the future of the Maya forest and the people who occupy the area today.

The Belize River Archaeological Settlement Survey (BRASS) has compiled regional settlement data, identified local community patterns and investigated aspects of household organization evident in the archaeological record of the central Maya lowlands. The ancient Maya economic landscape reflects a continuum of land use strategies from densely settled, intensively used uplands, dispersed and extensively used transitional zones, to unsettled swamps. City centers, such as El Pilar, were surrounded with an average of 1 structure per hectare or 2 per acre, clustered around courtyard patios. These data elucidate the subsistence patterns that imply social interactions at the residential and community levels but do not include the civic realms. Directing attention to the civic components is critical for understanding the social and political integration of Maya civilization. As a representative major civic center, the monuments of El Pilar cover more than 100 acres or 40 hectares. The construction histories of El Pilar's temples, plazas, and palaces reveal clues to the development of Maya civilization, and the examination of surrounding residential components will help to elucidate the nature of the ancient economic landscape. The reconstruction of example Maya houses in their forest gardens along with the conservation of the major monuments will be a novel attraction for the ecotourist. The reconstruction of the ancient traditions of El Pilar will provide the context for a new perception of Maya prehistory, one that takes into account the complexity and continuities of the Maya forest and its peoples.



The BRASS/El Pilar Program is rooted in the anthropological study of the human/environment relationship. It draws on the foundation of cultural ecology, interpreting evolutionary changes in strategies for survival. The composition of the Maya forest today exhibits the imprint of ancient human habitation and resource management. This resource relationship is characterized in the Mayan language among contemporary farmers and underscores the subtleties and ranges of their economic and cultural alliance with the forest. For example, the Mayan word for climax forest, K'ax, is used in significant combinations which suggest complex adaptations and interactions with the environment. Kānan K'aax describes a "well cared for" forest, evoking a concept of stewardship; K'ax il kab refers to a forest with beehives; and Ka'kab K'ax indicates a forest with good agricultural soil quality. These linguistic terms describe a continuum of economic qualities of the forest and denote long-term human coexistence with the environment. The goal of the El Pilar Program is to evaluate continuities and shifts in the evolution of this relationship through time and across space.