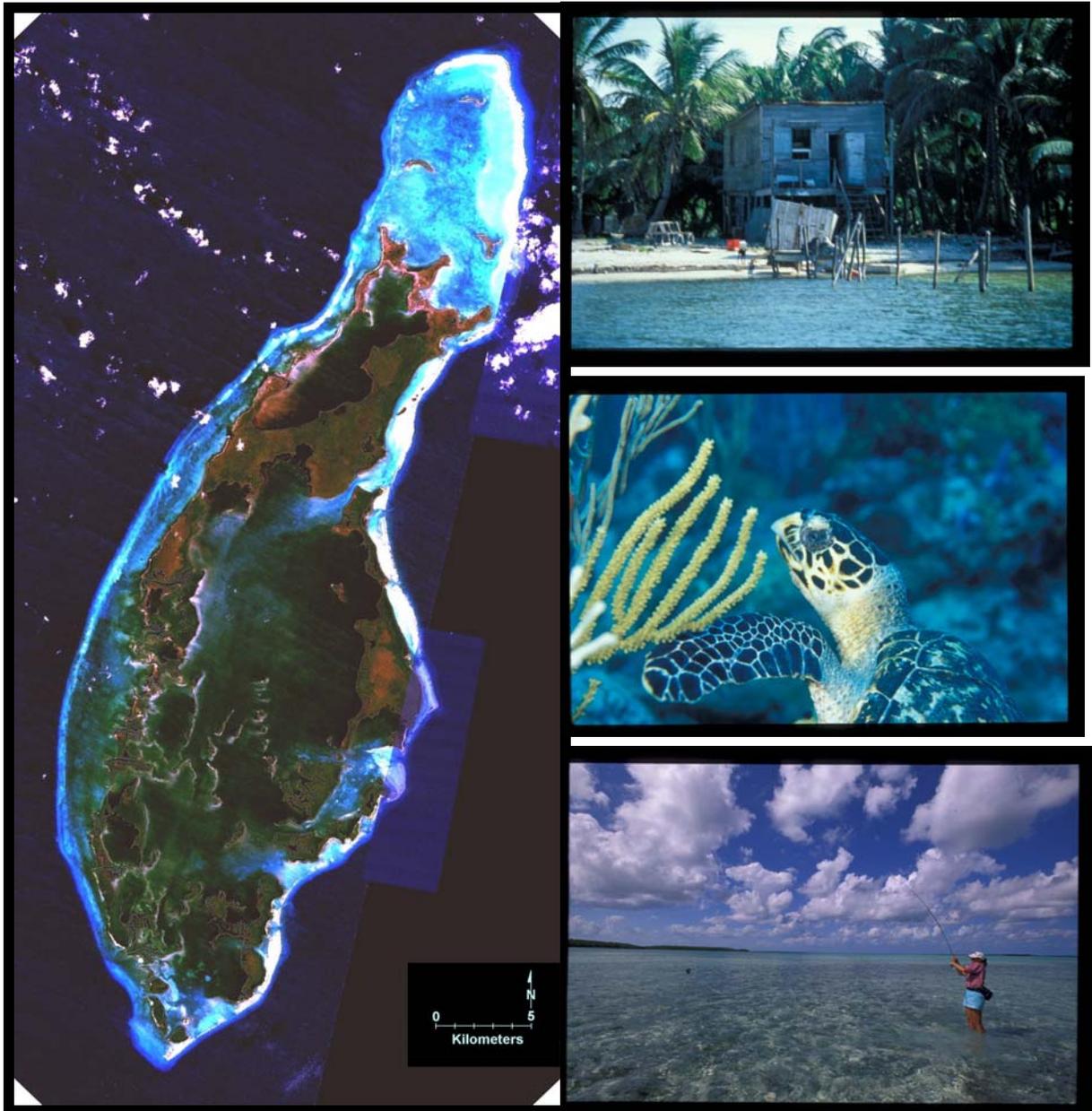


TURNEFFE ISLANDS, BELIZE

General Information and Conservation



INTRODUCTION

Located 25 miles east of Belize City, the Turneffe Atoll is a discrete group of Cayes surrounded by its own living coral reef. Approximately 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, Turneffe is the largest and most biologically diverse coral atoll in this hemisphere. It supports a number of threatened and endangered species, including the American saltwater crocodile, Antillean manatee, and several species of sea turtles. It is also a substantial contributor to the commercial harvest of conch and lobster in Belize. The atoll is also known worldwide for sport fishing and scuba diving, and is a growing center for marine research in Belize. At the same time, development pressures are increasing. A brief history of the atoll is provided in ANNEX 1.

The Turneffe Islands constitute one of the nine (9) Planning Regions as described in the Coastal Zone Strategy for Belize, 2001. Each Planning Region containing unique social, economic, geographical, and administrative factors. The Turneffe Islands Coastal Advisory Committee (TICAC) is composed of Turneffe Island stakeholders, implementing governmental agencies and relevant non-governmental agencies. As there exists no town council or other governmental entity representing stakeholders at Turneffe, the TICAC fills a vital and previously unavailable role for stakeholder input and representation. A priority of the TICAC has been the review, revision, and updating of the Turneffe Islands Development Guidelines, with the overall aim of achieving true sustainable development. The history of these guidelines (first drafted in 1996) is provided in ANNEX 1.

These development guidelines thus represent broad-based recommendations, which are presented in a general sectoral basis in Section 3 to assist regulatory agencies and potential developers in decision-making and planning. The general implementation strategy for these guidelines are presented in Section 4. The current TICAC membership and primary implementation agencies are found in ANNEX 1. ANNEX 2 contains a summary of the current land tenure situation for Turneffe. The provisional development site tables with specific recommendations and maps are presented in ANNEX 3.

Conservation

Turneffe is unique in that it is one of the few atolls in the Caribbean containing excellent reef development around its margins as well as intact mangrove and seagrass habitat in its interior. It is also the largest of the four atolls in Mesoamerica. The reefs and hard-bottom communities support a diverse assemblage of corals, sponges, and fish. Critical fish spawning sites are also known to exist off both the northern and southern tips of the atoll, including sites for the endangered Nassau grouper.

Turneffe contains some of the best remaining American salt-water crocodile habitat in the Caribbean, with perhaps the largest population in Belize of this endangered species. Sea turtles also nest on the sandy beaches of the eastern cayes. In respect to marine mammals, dolphins and the endangered Antillean Manatee are also regularly found in the interior network of mangrove cayes. Several species believed to be endemic to Belize, including Belize's atoll gecko and the rare and cryptic white-spotted toadfish, are found here.

Turneffe also has the distinction of being the only atoll in the Belize Barrier Reef System with no protected areas, although recommendations and justifications for such areas have been made since at least the mid 1990's.

Recommendations:

1. The Turneffe Islands Committee Plan (in the early 1990's) and the Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute in 1999, identified a number of areas to be reserved due to their high conservation value. These recommendations are endorsed by the TICAC.
 - Soldier Caye (nesting site for the roseate tern and white crowned pigeon);
 - Grassy Caye Range (nesting site for turtles and the roseate tern); flats for bonefish and juvenile conch;
 - Blackbird, Deadman's and Calabash cayes (important nesting sites for the endangered American crocodile); Calabash also a turtle nesting and ancient Maya site;
 - Vincent's (or Northern) Lagoon, Freshwater Creek area, Pelican Caye, the Crayfish Range / New Bight area in Central Lagoon, Sheg Caye Bluff / Cross Caye, Cockroach Bay Caye, Douglas Caye, mangrove cayes east of Calabash, and Calabash Lagoon;
 - Mauger Caye (site of a historic lighthouse)
2. National land lying outside of the identified provisional development sites should not be developed pending further studies.
3. It is recommended that Turneffe atoll be established as Belize's first Biosphere Reserve, emphasizing a multiple use (conservation, fishing/ tourism and education/research) zoning scheme. As an initial step in establishing the Biosphere Reserve, Vincent's Lagoon and the associated Cayes are recommended as a core protected area (National Park/Marine Reserve).