The Natures of Ecotourism in Crooked Tree

by

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In this paper, I investigate the ways in which the human relationship to the natural world is negotiated and contested in tourism encounters that are centered on "nature," and the ways in which local and global processes intervene in these negotiations and contestations.[1] Tourism provides a rich space in which to consider the mutual constitution of the 'local' and the 'global,' and the kinds of cross-cultural encounters, and the structures in which they are embedded, that characterize the 21st century. Encounters between tourists and hosts in ecotourism settings have the possibility for creating moments of critical reflection on the part of both tourists and hosts about their relationship to the natural world, and potentially, about the state of current environmental conditions. While the specific outcome is contingent, there is a hopefulness here in these creolizing moments of tourism—spaces where hegemony becomes even more incomplete than usual, spaces of rupture and possibility.

I argue that typically white middle class tourists from the U.S. and rural Afro-Caribbean (or Creole) people in Belize who live within the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, a prime ecotourism destination, negotiate meanings of nature in their encounters with one another: that the meaning of nature and the human relationship to this category are in flux, and that they are in effect performed and staged in the tourism moments that occur there. And, like both theorists of creolization (eg. Brathwaite 1971, cf Sheller 2003) and cultural critics like Tsing (2005) and Agrawal (2005) argue, there is the potential for a range of possible new cultural forms, structures of feeling and relationships to emerge out of these encounters, even as the possibilities for what emerges are shaped by conflict, contestation and inequality. What constitutes "nature" and one's appropriate relationship to it, has become a global structure of common difference—the categories in which debate can happen have been set by the those who have developed the industry of ecotourism; but

[1] Although there is a great deal of debate about what specific kinds of tourism can be, or should be, called "ecotourism" (eg. Honey 1999, Fennel 2003), I am using the term more broadly to simply denote tourism that is centered on visiting 'nature.'

within that arena contestation can occur (Wilk 1995). Each party puts forward one (or more) particular perspective(s) on what nature is and performs one (or more) particular human-nature relationship(s) in these encounters. These encounters create possibilities for liberation and fresh compromise on "environmental" issues, as well as for critical reflection on cultural identities. At the same time, ecotourism interactions may reinforce both pre-existing, and problematic, relationships to the natural world and ideas about cultural identity rooted in racial, class and rural-urban differences

Ecotourism, Political Economy, and Nature

That tourism happens at all is of course a function of a larger political economy, in which there is differential access to mobility (Sheller 2003), and in which mobility means different things to different people –while both tourists and emigrants may move, they do so for different reasons and with different expectations in uneven fields of racial, class and gender relations (Kaplan 1996). Furthermore, tourism is also a part of a longer history of travel—that is racialized and includes the forced movement of enslaved African, as well as the growth in leisure travel of primarily white northern Europeans and Americans to places inhabited by the descendants of enslaved Africans (Stephenson and Hughes 2005). In many ways, tourists are the new form of colonial officers and explorers; and tourism has been analyzed as a new form of imperialism by many (Nash 1996, Kincaid 1988). Yet, like forms of colonialism that have preceded it, tourism is not quite so neatly packaged, nor understood (Chambers 2000, Mowforth and Munt 2003). Tourism, like other transnational flows of which it is a part, provides an entry point into understanding the cultural dynamics of transnationalism—provides a window into the encounter between local and global.

Tourism is considered by some economic analysts to be the largest industry in the world. In 2000, for instance, tourism accounted for $3.6 trillion in economic activity, and one out of every twelve jobs, worldwide (Mastny 2002: 37).. Ecotourism is the fastest growing sector within the

tourism industry (Mastny 2002; Roberts 1998, Mowforth and Munt 2003), and has been heralded, from a variety of quarters, as a positive development, a way to bring goals of both biodiversity conservation and local level community well-being, typically glossed as 'development,' together. The excitement around this possibility has not only generated academic interest—articles, books, and a new academic journal, but also a UN declared "year," international associations, and a burgeoning industry, with facilities ranging from the famous King Ranch in southern Texas to small Amazonian hamlets advertising the eco-tourism possibilities they are able to provide (Butcher 2006). While this flurry of activity has been as powerfully critiqued as celebrated (eg Duffy 2002, Fennel 2003), most analyses focus on environmental degradation and economic injustice (Stonich 1998). Relatively few analyses of ecotourism have focused on the cultural dynamics of the encounter between nature tourist and the members of the communities that nature tourists visit (though see Norton 1996, Bandy 1996, Stronza 2001, West and Carrier 2004).

As with conventional tourism, ecotourism typically entails the traveling of white middle class Europeans and Americans to poorer less 'developed' parts of the world, typically inhabited by non-whites. Nature tourists are attracted not only to the affordability of these "southern" tourist destinations, but also to the "unspoiled nature" that they are able to see in these out-of-the-way places; nature that is unspoiled precisely because these parts of the world are not yet "developed." Tropical nature has long especially captured the attention of the north (Sheller 2003, Grove 1995, Slater 2002; Casey 2005) and has been a particularly fertile place for Northern travelers, writers and theorists to imagine 'perfect nature'). Thus tourism to tropical nature builds on tropes with long histories in European and (American) thought and imagination and serves a white EuroAmerican gaze (Urry 1990, hooks 1992). What is new today is that travel to these formerly very distant locales is accessible to it that a large number of members of the middle classes of the global north today can

travel to these locations themselves, rather than reading about them, or viewing paintings, photos, and documentaries.

Thus, as a variety of critics and commentators have argued, ecotourism allows places which have been otherwise marginal and inaccessible to be fully incorporated into circuits of capital (Bandy 1996, West and Carrier 2005, Escobar 1995). Furthermore, both the inherent nature of tourism, and of postmodern capitalism, entail a re-valuing of *places*—each place is reconfigured and re-asserted into a global playing field in order to attract as many tourists as possible. As people and capital move increasingly freely across borders, "place" becomes increasingly significant (Harvey 1989), one of the main markers of post modern flexible economies is the increasing competition between places to attract capital. In the political economy of ecotourism growing numbers of marginal locations compete for their piece of the ecotourism pie.

Within the arena of ecotourism, which is centered on the touristic consumption of "nature" (whatever might be included in this category for the nature tourist), places compete with each other to deliver a better "nature product" to the nature tourist. Yet these nature products are constructed within cultural, political and economic contexts which are typically very different from those in which tourists live their daily lives. Therefore, the ecotourism industry is marked by constant negotiations of what "nature" might be, negotiations engaged in by "host" communities and visiting groups of nature tourists, within global circuits of capital, information (advertising and other media), and people (both tourists and migrants moving back and forth across the borders which ostensibly separate the nature tourist and host communities).[2]

In this paper, I explore how people's relationships to the natural world are socially constructed and contested in ecotourism encounters in the small rural Creole (Afro-Caribbean) village of Crooked Tree. The Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, which surrounds the village, was

[2] The movement to certify authentic ecotourism sites nicely exemplifies this contention and competition (Medina 2005, Honey 2002).

established by the government of Belize in 1984 to protect a wide variety of waterfowl that frequent the sanctuary's extensive shallow water lagoon and river system. Nature tourists visit Crooked Tree to see the rare and endangered jabiru stork as well as roseate spoonbills, wood storks and a variety of herons. The typical nature tourist encounter in Crooked Tree occurs between a monied white middle class professional from the United States and a rural Afro-Caribbean villager who knows how, when and where to find the "nature" that the nature tourist seeks. These encounters occur within a context framed by post-industrial consumer culture, transnational conservation efforts, local disputes over natural resources in Belize, and emerging debates about Belizean nationalism and Creole identity.

My analysis is based upon ethnographic research (including participation-observation, interviews and household surveys) in Crooked Tree and neighboring villages, between 1990 and 2005, including an intensive two-year period of field research between 1993 and 1995, as well as six shorter periods of research between 1998 and 2005; extensive research in the national archives, perusal of newspapers and NGO newsletters and websites, and interviews with key figures in the conservation initiatives that affected these communities. My positionality as a white middle class woman from the U.S. shaded my ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of complicated, and contradictory ways, which became even more complicated when I married a man from a village neighboring Crooked Tree in 1996. In many ways, I share the positionality of the tourists; although, typical of an anthropologist, I did and still do--all that I can to mark myself as separate from 'them' and closer to people of Crooked Tree (see Bruner 1989, Errington & Gewertz 1989).[3]

Crooked Tree as Ecotourism Site

While ecotourism may be new at a global level, in Belize it is simply the latest manifestation of tourism's long presence in this swampy stretch of the Caribbean coast. Belize has always been out

[3]This is an important topic worthy of a paper-length discussion on its own; I do not have space to reflect in depth on it here; but this context is important for the analyses I put forward below.

of the way, and has attracted adventure tourists who came for sport fishing and big game hunting in the interior and for the exceptional diving opportunities on the coast. Likewise, the capitalization that critics claim as a hallmark of tourism development has long been a part of Crooked Tree, and is the historical context in which tourism in Belize sits.

Both Crooked Tree villagers and the place itself have a long history of involvement with tourism, a relation marked by feelings of ambivalence from the perspective of villagers. Several villagers have worked as guides, chambermaids and cooks for the main lodge on the Belize River that has catered to sportsfishermen, particularly those interested in the legendary tarpon, since the middle of the century. A big game hunting lodge, known locally as "tigah cyaamp" and run by an American, was situated for about 15 years in the 1960s and 70s just north of the village, and attracted wealthy U.S. sportsmen interested in a guaranteed catch of a jaguar. This camp guaranteed its patrons a trophy jaguar, and was able to fulfill its promise by having the Crooked Tree guides catch and pen jaguars which were later released for the sport hunter to "chase" and "catch"…this also speaks volumes about the social construction of "nature." Approximately 15 older men in Crooked Tree, worked there at various points in the 1960s and 70s,. Other villagers also have worked elsewhere in Belize in the tourism industry. In general, villagers described their experiences as workers in unfavorable terms: stories of poor pay, long hours and blatant racism were common in my conversations with villagers who worked in the tourism sector. Even the rural Creole men who served as guides for the hunting lodge, whose skills and knowledge made the lodge a profitable enterprise, and who really enjoyed their work, recall being belittled and paid poorly.

Indeed one of the impetuses underlying villagers support of the sanctuary emerged from their desire to eliminate certain mobile white bodies from their midst. In the years before the sanctuary was established; the village had become a popular location for a group of white male Texan hunters to drink liberally and hunt whistling ducks; their behavior towards the community not

always respectful. A number of villagers welcomed the idea of the sanctuary as a way to limit the presence of these hunters, and others like them.

At the same time, the potential of the sanctuary to generate income from tourism for Crooked Tree residents was central to the deliberations in the 1960s and 70s that led to the establishment of Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, By the mid-1980s Crooked Tree began to be a key destination for tourists who wished to simply view "unspoiled nature" and an ecotourism industry began to thrive in the village. By 1995, everyone in Crooked Tree was exposed in some kind of way to the ecotourism industry, if only through seeing tourists come and go,[4] and this situation has not changed significantly (Haddle 2005). For this size community (roughly 700 people in 150 households) a substantial number of households were involved in the ecotourism industry in 1995.

Although not perfectly ideal, Crooked Tree is as close to a model ecotourism, perhaps even ecotourism, community, as one is likely to find, and has been so since the initial creation of the wildlife sanctuary and development of the first ecotourism enterprise, over 25 years ago. All of the associated enterprises have been small scale and if not fully locally owned, then fully Belizean owned and locally managed. Since 1995, three locally owned "resorts" have predominated in Crooked Tree. Resorts consist of sleeping accommodations and some kind of restaurant facility combined into one business. As of 2005, one of these was a cement block building containing both guest rooms and dining facilities, another was a more traditional/historical Creole wooden structure with rooms upstairs and a kitchen and dining room below, and the third consisted of a number of thatched cabanas, and a separate building that served as kitchen, dining area and meeting space. There have also been between two and four year-round full time restaurants since 1993. Monies coming in from transnational or return migrants have provided the start-up capital for some of these businesses. Each of these enterprises employed people from the community as cooks, chambermaids and

[4] One of the first studies of tourism in Crooked Tree (Enriquez 1993) is entitled "Birds Come Touris Come" based upon a comment a villager made to Enriquez.

laundresses, and tour guides. In addition to these larger businesses, between 1995 and 2005, there have been between three and five "bed and breakfast" accommodations, which typically consist of rooms within peoples' houses which are let out for the night, the guests eating meals in the home-owners kitchens. In 1995, two businesses, one much larger than the other, specialized in running boat tours of the sanctuary. The larger of these had close connections with several U.S.-based ecotourism companies, however the owner died in the mid-1990s, and the business closed. Each of the resorts ran their own guiding services even for tourists not staying the night in the village. By 2005, one of these resorts had developed an extensive clientele and was an extremely successful enterprise. To varying degrees over the past 15 years, villagers have supplied food and other goods to the various tourist businesses, so that fishermen, some farmers and hunters, and some local women who have cooked lunches for tourist groups were able to make small amounts of additional income in this way. There have been small groups of handicraft artisans (woodcarvers, doll-makers) and some food producers (people who make and sell tamales, process cashew seeds, make jams and stewed tropical fruits, or make cashew and other local fruit wines) who have modestly augmented their incomes by selling their goods to tourists.

An intermittent stream of student groups and researchers (like myself) have stayed with families in Crooked Tree for varying lengths of time over the past 15 years, attracted by the sanctuary and its relationship to the community. There have been annual Cashew Festivals in the village since 1993, sponsored in part by a U.S-based ecotourism company, and, since 2003, annual Tilapia Festivals. While these festivals have not always guaranteed great revenue to the community, they make both tourists and other Belizeans more aware of Crooked Tree. In 1993, at least 25% of Crooked Tree villagers reaped some direct, significant, economic benefit from the ecotourism industry. While I am certainly arguing that ecotourism is a significant economic feature of Crooked Tree, I also must stress that in 1995, no one depended entirely on ecotourism in Crooked Tree for

revenue, and that by 2005, only a few individuals depended primarily on ecotourism. For most people, involvement in the tourist industry is a sideline, an additional source of income in a place in which individuals engage simultaneously in a variety of economic endeavors to make ends meet (see Comitas 1964). Critically to the points argued in this paper, villagers have a positive feeling about tourism and the tourist industry at least partly as a result, of the revenues generated by the industry (also see Haddle 2005). Furthermore, every villager at least sees ecotourists, and many have extensive interactions with them.

Crooked Tree's Nature

Nature tourists come to experience Crooked Tree's nature, and villagers facilitate and mediate this experience, yet in every encounter different understandings of what the natural world is and what values should be attached to it come into play. What does "nature" mean to the people of Crooked Tree? How do villagers understand and value these things that nature tourists come to experience? While there is variation within the community in these arenas, there are some general ways in which ideas about the natural world are shared.

The village of Crooked Tree was settled over two hundred years ago by a few English or Scottish woodcutter and subsistence householder men, and small numbers of enslaved women, men and children of African descent who were owned by these men. From this mixture emerged the rural Belize Creole population—people who identify both with their Scottish and English ancestry and their pan-Caribbean blackness.[5] Since its establishment, the community of Crooked Tree in particular has been a place of rural settlement on the margins of Belize's main economic activity.

[5] For a comprehensive discussion of the emergence of a Creole identity see Judd 1990, 1992 and Johnson 1998.

The economic base of the community has been a mix of fishing, hunting, wood-cutting, small scale agriculture and animal husbandry, and wage labor in the forest industry.

For the people of Crooked Tree, the items which Westerners put into the category of nature are understood to be tightly tied to both social relationships and senses of cultural identity. Rural Creole people's direct dependence on the natural world weaves that world into everyday interactions with other community members and into what it means to be a rural Creole person. By the same token, the people of Crooked Tree are as quick as anyone to economically exploit natural resources as commodities for exchange. Since the area was settled, the economics of villagers' relationship to the natural world has fluctuated back and forth between the capitalistic commodification of natural resources (e.g. the sale to the metropole of logwood and alligator skins) and a subsistence-oriented economy (e.g. the everyday sharing of home-grown plantain, beans, and freshly caught deer meat and fish). These two modes of exploitation have long co-existed, with fluctuations in which one was most important.

The natural world is literally and figuratively the stuff of everyday economic and social life in Crooked Tree, and is a critical part of Creole culture and identity. Sharing the spoils of the hunt or the catch of the day, or simply selling these scarce items to one's neighbors rather than people in Belize City, are important ways in which the social ties which constitute the community of Crooked Tree are maintained. Furthermore, knowing how and where to hunt and fish, knowing the habits of bush animals and knowing the lagoon studded pine-savanna landscape that surrounds Crooked Tree are critical features of Creole male identity. Similarly, knowing how to cook game meats and how to prepare "bush" medicines are critical features of Creole female identity.

Both sharing the bounty of Crooked Tree's natural environment and being competent in this environment are widely shared points of cultural pride for the rural Creole people of Crooked Tree. This kind of knowledge, and the way that villagers share with one another are proudly on display at events like the Cashew Festival--events that allow both tourists and other Belizeans to gaze upon Crooked Tree and its cultural identity. Increasingly, people from Crooked Tree are using their relationship with the natural world to mark themselves as different, to claim an authenticity for rural Creole livelihoods, so that rural people are the "real," "authentic," and "traditional" Creoles.

However, elements of the natural world bear other connotations that complicate the sense of cultural pride I describe above, and reflect the ambiguities and ambivalences that characterize Afro-Caribbean cultures more generally (Reisman 1970, Abrahams 1983, Wilson 1973, Burton 1997). One important set of meanings are those associated with the terms "bushy," or "kroffy." These ideas are part of the nearly ubiquitous oppositions of country vs. city (Williams 1973), or in short-hand colloquialisms: "rural bumpkin" and "sophisticated urbanite" (Ching and Creed 1997). The racialized manner in which this opposition is manifest in Belize has interesting ramifications for the ecotourism encounter (cf Khan 1997).

In Belize, rural areas are frequently referred to as "bush" in opposition to urban or town centers (such as Belize City, Orange Walk, Dangriga). Historically, the connotation "bush" has had negative undertones, though increasingly this label has been acquiring positive associations. "Bush" does not merely denote unsophisticated bumpkin, but also has a racial component—people with "bushy" hair are those whose hair is less "white" and more "African;" the word "kroffy" sometimes used synonymously for bushy, means African in Belizean Creole.[6] The picture evoked in the joking epithet "bushy" is of someone who is dark complected, with raggedy clothes and kinky, unkempt hair who lives far from the city and who may only be able to speak the "rawest" Belizean Creole and

[6] The word is simply an African name, a surname common in West Africa. (Young 1988)

unable to speak English. These metaphors build on British colonial racial stereotyping which depicted Africans, and particularly African slaves, as not quite fully human, as closer to animals than to humans of other "races" (Johnson 2003). Thus "bushiness" –or the "wilder" part of the natural world is conflated with blackness, and ignorance, with denigrated racial and social statuses.

All of these meanings congeal to make being connected to the "bush"—i.e. coming from or belonging to a place like Crooked Tree—(and even moreso for more isolated and remote communities) somewhat shameful. This point is compounded by the fact that Belizeans are well aware that their country is small and marginal and the entire country itself was long a backwater of the British colonial empire.

On the other hand, "bushiness" also connotes a whole host of other more positive meanings. Rural Creole people frequently make reference to an opposition between "haad" and "soff." "Haad" denotes "tough," able to handle oneself, independent. "Soff" denotes the opposite: dependent, helpless, tender-footed. People from Belize City and the U.S., for instance, are considered to be "soff"—unable to take care of themselves in the natural world. As one man put it to me, when a nuclear war occurs, only the strong folk "back-a-bush" will be able to survive. Thus, there is a certain pride of independence and toughness in coming from the "bush," and as much as some people might be ashamed of their unsophisticated "bushy" roots, others are fiercely proud of their independent and strong "bushy" heritage.

This sense of pride in being "bushy" has been woven into the national emergence of a Belizean Creole identity. What it means to be a Belizean Creole has become a key point of cultural debate and expression in Belize and rural Creole people are eagerly entering into that debate, claiming a Creole authenticity that is based upon their connection to the natural world. The people of Crooked Tree in particular assert their own particular version of rural Creole identity by highlighting natural features of Crooked Tree, of their everyday lives, that are highly valued

throughout Belize: cashews, which grow abundantly in the sandy soils of the village (and are scarce elsewhere) and crana, a highly sought after freshwater fish common in Crooked Tree Lagoon, but hard to find outside of the area. Crooked Tree's centrality to the creation of a national creole identity is attested to by the relatively recent publication of several volumes of recipes, short stories and folklore by The Belize Kriol Project in recent years (Di Belize Kriol Project 2004, Wade 2005) and the importance of stories about 'the bush' in these volumes.

An additional element of Crooked Tree villagers feelings about the "bush" has relevance to making sense of how nature is both constructed and refracted through the ecotourism encounter. Villagers have very strong feelings about where "bush" should be found within the village, and take great pride in how "clean" their yards and the village are. They note that Crooked Tree, with its naturally sandy soils, pine savannahs, or, in other words, with its lack of a "jungly" appearance is far superior to other villages where the soils support denser growth, where the paths tend to muddy and mosquitoes are plentiful. And in many of the village council meetings I attended, a hot point for discussion was any yard, or common village area, that had grown up "bushy." Some villagers would like to fine others who do not keep their yards "cleaned down," or free of "bushy" growth, and nearly all agree that the village council should keep public areas free from weedy undergrowth.

Nature is thus, literally, the "stuff" of community, and villagers knowledge of and competence in the natural world, cornerstones of their Creole identity. On the other hand, the "bushiness" of rural places like Crooked Tree complexly and ambivalently striates rural Creole ethnicity and identity with racialized overtones.

The Nature of the Tourist

If "nature" is the warp and weft of social ties for the people of Crooked Tree and importantly, if ambivalently, tied to rural Creole cultural identity, it is something altogether different for the nature tourist. The ecotourist is produced in the metropole, in over-developed consumer

societies in which identity is derived primarily from consumption, and therefore in which the environment is predominantly a commodity (or set of commodities) to be consumed.

In an industry which has been identified as one of the final frontiers of the commodification of nature (Bandy 1996), nature tourists purchase an experience-in-nature, a momentary sense of the sublime, and a feeling of epiphany as they join "as one" with the beauty and awesomeness of nature in the temple of wilderness (in a human-defined sanctuary). This experience and tourists' desire for it hinges on a temporary break from the nature-culture split underlying everyday Northern understandings of the natural world, only to doubly reinforce that dichotomy. Theorists have argued, compellingly, that tourism is a response to the great social changes brought on by modernity: alienation from one's labor, one's community, and ultimately from nature itself (MacCannell 1992, 1976; Urry 1995, 1990). Through tourism, the privileged classes can temporarily escape the mundaneness of everyday life and the uniform monotony of modernity. Ecotourism has blossomed, arguably not coincidentally, at the same time that the threat of global-scale environmental destruction has become a central trope in everyday life in the "global village," and at the same time that the privileged classes' everyday lives primarily contain "nature" only in the commodity forms of late capitalism: Tyson's chicken thighs, lawn fertilizer, bottled water, Sierra Club calendars and National Park screen savers. Ecotourism breaks free from this everyday alienation of nature, promising real, authentic, unmediated, engagement with the natural world. Just as early travel consisted primarily of pilgrimages to sacred sites, icons and personages, today's ecotourism is travel to the temple of nature, for a moment of the sacred to punctuate the vast amounts of time lived in the profane. Yet because ecotourism promises only one relatively brief moment of union with nature, the nature tourists' everyday existence in a world where nature and culture are radically separated is underscored and emphasized by this very epiphany. Furthermore, the institutions which enable the nature tourist to have this experience-in-nature (e.g. the airline

industry, global commodity markets) cause ecological destruction, deepening the socially constructed chasm between human and nature. The very process of ecotourism itself fragments and constructs the natural world into a set of objects that can be purchased and enjoyed by the nature tourist (Bandy 1996, Wilson 1992), at the same time that in its overall economic structure it destroys the environment. Furthermore, ecotourists are able to remain blind to the their damaging ecological footprint, and thus construct themselves as ethical and moral people through their discourse of engaging in environmentally oriented and responsible tourism to directly connect with the natural world.

One other critical, and related, dimension of ecotourism is the way in which the nature tourist also acquires cultural capital through partaking in ecotourism. Partaking in this relatively elite kind of tourism marks nature tourists as members of a certain social and economic class both globally, and in their home community (Mowforth and Munt 2003: 115-140).

The Context for Ecotourism Encounters in Rural Belize

A wide array of global and national discourses and processes shape the encounters between Crooked Tree villagers and nature tourists. These include media and advertising, the global conservation movement, Belize's national development agenda, global migration patterns, and Crooked Tree concerns over land rights, economic well-being and cultural identity.

A desire to experience tropical "nature" is cultivated in citizen-consumers of the global north through a steady stream of articles and photographs in travel and nature magazines, television programs, and travel advertisements (Ryel and Grasse 1991). Belize, in particular, has been the subject of numerous travel articles in a wide range of venues, ranging from Sunday newspaper travel section articles (from the *New York Times* to small town newspapers) to magazines and television shows. These publications and productions, along with the advertising brochures produced by both ecotourism companies and Belizean resorts, generate a particular set of expectations about what the

nature of Belize is like, what tourists can expect to see and experience when they come to visit the "jewel," as the country calls itself. The expectations are focused on vision—tourists expect to "see" different natural items, and the sights are anticipated to be peaceful, harmonious and orderly (Sheller 2003, Casey 2005, Norton 1996, Peace 2001). Absent from these expectations are odors, litter, cockroaches, etc.. Instead, potential tourists see a sanitized, and hence thoroughly modern, "wilderness" scenery.

It is not simply that nature tourists have certain expectations, but rather there is an underlying, unspoken idea the "nature" of this tropical location is as much the ecotourist's as it belongs to the people of Crooked Tree. This sense, among the elite classes of the global North, of privilege and of ownership of the global commons of nature has a long and sinuous history (see Shiva 1993, MacDonald 2005). In the 1960s and 1970s, adventure tourists' sense of privilege meant that they felt it was their right to bring home as many trophy jaguar skins as they could, or as many stuffed 10-foot tarpon as they could fit on the plane. Today, ecotourists' feeling of ownership of the "global commons" of nature is cast within conservationist discourse. A conservationist-oriented ecotourist is likely to feel personally affronted if they see a jaguar being skinned by a villager (and villagers are likely to ensure that this kind of ecotourist does not see this), or even a freshly killed deer slung across the back of a villager's horse. The irony of this about-face on the part of wealthy white U.S. "tourists" is not lost on villagers, who note the similarities between the attitudes of trophy hunters in the past and tree hugging tourists in the present.

The assumptions that underlie global conservationist discourse also underlie ecotourism and the nature tourist's experience. These include the notion that nature is in need of preservation, and that "nature" and "human" are, and should be, fundamentally separate: preserved land is land with no human access. Recently this last notion has been revised. Popular conservationist rhetoric now holds that the ecologically noble savage (or certain "indigenous" peoples) belongs in nature because

of their purported special spiritual connection to the natural environment which allows them to live sustainably and harmoniously in and with nature. Hence, humans can be part of the nature upon which conservation, or ecotourism, is predicated, but only if they behave in certain ways.

The Belizean government's position on conservation, tourism and "nature" also helps to shape the ecotourism encounter. Belize became an independent nation in 1981, as conservation organizations which had been based in northern countries began to extend their influence into lesser developed areas. As Belize has sought to find a place for itself in the international arena, its previous status as a colonial dead-end and backwater has started to become its greatest asset: the Belizean landscape contained great tracts of relatively unspoiled forest and wild lands.[7] What had been Belize's mark of shame, has now become its set of crown jewels: the "bush." Belize now asserts itself, fairly successfully, as a top ecotourism destination (Wheat 1994). There is an irony and tension here, for just as rural Belizeans sometimes view their bushy roots as shameful, so do prominent Belizeans (the same government officials who, in the international arena, laud these tracts of unspoiled land) still have ambivalent feelings about the "bush." Medina relates a story about a rural development officer who commented during a radio interview: "When I travel along the highway from the villages to Belize City, I see bush!" The implication is that this bush is unproductive, wasted land, evidence of Belize's "backwardness" (Medina 1997: 9). So, while Belize's pristine environment makes this small nation the poster child for ecotourism, it also is a sharp reminder of Belize's long time status as a colonial backwater. And just as the nature tourist can be blind to the environmental havoc wreaked by the plane they traveled, as Medina relates, the Belize government's bottom line is short term economic gain, not environmental preservation.

On the local level, Crooked Tree's prominence as a ecotourism destination within the green tourism country of Belize provides villagers with yet another contradiction. If one of the points of

[7] This is the party line. In truth, many of the so-called pristinely natural lands of Belize have been modified extensively by a variety of populations: Maya, Colonial wood-cutters, Colonial agriculturalists to mention a few.

pride of coming from the "bush" is a certain independence from the economic mainstream, ecotourism places Crooked Tree right smack in the middle of that stream, and makes villagers precariously dependent on that most unpredictable of economic activities, tourism.

Likewise the floodlight of conservation interest that has descended on Crooked Tree since the 1980s makes many villagers cautious. The people of Crooked Tree are well acquainted with the main tenets of the global conservation movement, and fully understand the precarious position in which this movement places them. They are not indigenous peoples, and they live amongst populations of endangered and rare birds, in lands that appear to be "wilderness." Conservationist thinking makes many villagers nervous, and the increasing numbers of prohibitions in Belize on hunting, fishing, and clearing land do not sit well with many community members.

They point to what has happened in Africa--whole villages removed from their tribal lands to make way for national parks and conservation--and urge their fellow villagers to stand up for their rights against the conservationists. Both ecotourism and conservation threaten villagers sense of the security of their land rights. And both are reminiscent of earlier large scale structures in which the poor rural and black have suffered at the hand of the wealthy, metropolitan and white. One prominent social critic in Belize, Adelbert Tucker, has called the conservation movement in Belize the latest missionization effort in the country.

Conservation laws restrict what villagers are allowed to do in the lands and waters that surround the village, and ecotourism has increased the value of lands surrounding the village, so that competition is stiffening for the few spots of government held land that remains in the village. Yet at the same time, ecotourism has become an economic mainstay for some villagers. So, while nature tourists and their yankee dollars are welcome, there is a background of tension that surrounds the ecotourism industry; a background that merges into the foreground in some of the nature tourist encounters.

Finally, the Creole sense of what it means to be "Creole," or to be "Belizean" is tangled up in the advertising images the nation presents of itself, global conservation discourse, and the ecotourism industry. The government of Belize puts a great deal of energy and effort into campaigns designed to instill in their citizens a commitment to and excitement about tourism in general, and in particular ecotourism. In the summer of 2004, the slow season for tourism, the Belize Tourist Board ran a substantial campaign encouraging Belizeans to visit and explore the nature sites that the country is famous for. Each night a 15 minute segment on one of Belize's 'treasures' would air. The rural Belizeans I was staying with watched the program faithfully—right after the evening news—and enjoyed viewing the beautiful natural sites of their country. The programs also each covered to some degree some of the environmental problems that Belize is beginning to face (coral reefs dying, a sky-rocketing growth in the production of garbage, increasing use of automobiles, etc.). The message was clear—to encourage Belizeans to both protect their environment and to celebrate the touristic appeal of its natural beauty.

As Belize is struggling with its double-edged identity of colonial backwater and pristine jewel, Creole people struggle with a similar contradiction: country bumpkins, yet stewards of a highly sought after commodity: tropical nature. Positioning Creole identity becomes even more complicated as more and more rural Creole people visit or live in the U.S.—typically in Chicago, New York or Los Angeles—at some point in their lives. Although estimates vary, there are probably about half as many Belizean Creoles in the U.S. as are in Belize (Babcock 2000; Woods, Perry and Steagall 1997); and many Creole women work as household help for the exact same kind of person who is likely to be a nature tourist in the village from which they hail. Belizean Creole villagers walk between the worlds of the rural village they come from and the United States of the nature tourist. Yet the discursive construction of Belize as a nature tourist destination centers on tropes of the exotic, of the remote, of the 'end of the earth;' and the idea that the people who live in

rural Belize, at the end of the earth, might be familiar with the U.S. surprises many tourists. Furthermore the global political economy of color (Trouillot 1996; Harrison 1995; Bhattacharyya, Gabriel and Small 2001) mediates each and every interaction, evaluation and judgment that occurs in these encounters—these encounters that typically occur between white middle class tourists from the U.S and 'black' rural Belizean Creoles (who do not necessarily primarily define themselves as 'black').

The Tourist Encounter

In the encounters between tourists and hosts, it may be possible for both the tourist and the host to refract their own understandings of the world through each other's eyes. This possible refraction may be more potent for the tourist, who has traveled between two environments precisely to see new places, and inevitably to compare them to what s/he already knows; but can also powerfully affect the 'host,' who in many cases has spent siginificant time in the U.S., sometimes working for, and living in the houses of, people who are very similar to the tourists.

Besides allowing for reflection on nature, tourism events also potentially encourage the interrogation and reformulation of cultural identities (Van den Berghe 1994; Volkman 1990; Bruner 1999; Stronza 2001). In the case of ecotourism, the human relationship to the natural world, a culturally defined and specific relationship, is up for negotiation, and is foregrounded as a key component of ethnic or cultural identity.

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss four specific tourist encounters within the framework that I have laid out above. In one instance, a tourist took a photograph of a bushy area in the community, causing an uproar at the next village meeting. In another instance, the decision of what meats should be served at a cultural festival in Crooked Tree pitted conservationists and villagers against one another in the context of tourism. In the third example, tourists refused to stay

in Crooked Tree when they noticed wood roaches in a thatched cabana and in the final example a tourist haggled with a local guide over the cost of guiding.

The Encounters

I. Photographing the Burying Ground

Crooked Tree is one of the larger and more prosperous and also lighter skinned Creole villages in Belize, yet it is and has been very "out of the way." If places are metaphors for status and class, Crooked Tree sends out mixed messages—it is bushy, yet relatively wealthy; kroffy, yet clear skinned. Within the national hierarchies of place, class and color, Crooked Tree occupies a somewhat elite status, certainly an elite status for what it means to be rural Creole. Perhaps, because of the contradictions that inhere in Crooked Tree, and its popularity as a place for a weekend's relaxation for Belize City's Creole middle class,[8] questions of rural Creole identity and the rural Creole relationship to nature are that much more charged.

Close to the Baptist Church, in the center of the village, is the community burying ground, in which there are a number of graves and tombs, and over which hang branches from an ancient tubroos tree. The ground at the edges of the cemetery between the tombs and graves rapidly becomes overgrown with "bush," and the cemetery is often identified as one of the community spaces which people should work together to chop down and clear out the growing vegetation. With the ancient tubroos tree, the tombs and even the scraggly bush, the cemetery is "picturesque." A white student-tourist woman from the United States who had been staying in the village stopped one day to take a photograph of the burying ground when the bushy areas within

[8] Here, like tourists, middle class Belizean Creoles temporarily appropriate village life in their leisure time—in some ways then almost underscoring their different and superior class status while simultaneously re-affirming rural Creole culture—their "roots."

and around it were especially high and unkempt. One particularly vocal community leader noticed and was horrified by this. He brought it up at the next village council meeting, describing how the burying ground was so "bushy" and then telling the assembled villagers that a tourist had scandalously taken a photograph of this scene. He said "dis da pappy show," meaning that this picture taking was an almost purposeful shaming of the village.

The student-tourist who took that photograph found the picture aesthetically pleasing, another way in which the village is charming and beautiful, the wispy inroads of "nature" into the cemetery reminiscent of her brief incursion into the natural world on her boat-trip. The scene fitting into a Northern discourse of fading rurality, old barns, and wooden bridges—of backwardness; of the ways in which rural areas can be places out of time. She was proud of her (considerable) talents as a photographer and provided me with a copy of the photo. For Fred, the man who recounted this story to the village, this scene was not 'charming,' but rather -- he saw a tourist taking a picture of "the village at its worst." What meanings were encoded in the image that Crooked Tree-ers might object to? This image appeals to the ecotourist arguably because it illustrates an exotic and authentic connection between humans and nature, reminiscent of the U.S.'s own "bushy" past. Yet it is this same assumption that upsets the people of Crooked Tree, who want the community to be admired, but not in a way that makes them look "bushy." They do not want to be seen as unkempt and, ultimately, ignorant and blind to the ways of the world, or in other words, far down a globally recognized social scale which places metropole far above periphery (cf Wilk 1999). That tourists are more enamored of the bushier landscape is indicative of how "Third World tourism participates in a voyeuristic consumption of poverty" (Hutnyk 1996:11, cited in Mowforth and Munt 2003, p. 76), and reflects the self-affirming gaze of the white middle class tourist (Urry 1990, hooks 1992). Tourists' temporary appropriation of the symbols of poverty thus ultimately re-enforces of their superior class status.

This point does not go un-noticed by Crooked Tree villagers, who whenever possible, claim their own class status as cosmopolitan by offering tourists rides in Range Rovers between resorts and the boat launch site on the lagoon edge, or vistas of neatly manicured yards with flowering trees. When tourists reject this mediated relationship to nature (so akin to that in their everyday lives in the U.S. or Europe), villagers can feel belittled—objecting to the status placement that this rejection entails.[9]

Ironically, when villagers lament the "bushiness" of village public spaces and people's yards, the rationale for keeping these areas "clear" of bush is nearly always framed within the logic of the tourist industry. Villagers claim that tourists want to see the village free of bushy growth. In this framing, villagers are claiming a particular class status for the place of Crooked Tree. They do not want Crooked Tree to symbolize backward bushiness to this "audience" of nature tourists who hail from the U.S., a place where many Crooked Tree residents have visited, lived or plan to visit or live. And yet that is exactly what Crooked Tree symbolizes for the "bush"-starved tourist.

In these kinds of ruptures, the tourist in the Range Rover, or the villager outraged at the graveyard photo shoot, may lie the possibility for compromise and discussion. The tourist traveling through the village in her guide's Range Rover after photographing the graveyard may briefly be reminded that there is no mythic, authentic, human-nature relationship, that instead this relationship is mediated, both for a rural Central American and a tourist from an urban area in the U.S... The villager, in trying to make sense out of why this photograph would be so appealing may understand, if only for a moment, how powerful the sense of alienation from the natural world is for the tourist. People in Crooked Tree already know, and frequently talk about how beautiful their village is, how it

[9] Similar tensions in ideas of bushiness and modernity are suggested by Belsky's discussion of tourism in Gales Point, a coastal Creole village south of Belize City. IN this community two different individuals have had competing ideas for how to attract tourists. A woman involved with the "grassroots" bed and breakfast organization in the community wants to portray a "traditional" village, with its bushy edges. She is in some ways more in tune with what the tourist longs for. The other individual is a returned migrant, who wants to recreate suburban America in the landscape of Gales Point, and who therefore suggests clearing down bush, planting flowers and creating a "modernized" Gales Point that will seem like home to the U.S. tourists who visit (Belsky 2000)

is a harmonious, peaceful, place to live—that people have freedom here—and for these reasons welcome the admiring ecotourist's gaze.

Hicatee, Gibnut and the Crooked Tree Cashew Festival

In the early 1990s, a U.S.-based ecotourism enterprise which had been bringing tourists to Crooked Tree on bird-watching expeditions for many years decided it would "give something back to the village." Crooked Tree is famous for its locally grown and processed cashews, and the ecotourism company decided to capitalize on this by co-sponsored and fully financed a "Cashew Festival" during the peak of the cashew season, which coincided with the ending of the tourist season. An integral part of festivals in Belize are the food booths. Women prepare food to sell to festival go-ers, and thus make some much-desired extra cash. Belizean festival go-ers expect to be able to buy plates of "dinner;" or a relatively substantial mid-day meal; purchasing and eating food are some of the main treats of going to a festival.

As the ecotourism company was organizing this festival, representatives of the company made clear to the village that part of what was being celebrated was Creole culture, and in particular that aspect of the village which makes this community an nature tourist's haven -- the Creole relationship with nature. Logically, the women who planned to sell foods decided to cook "fi wi food" (our food), the real "back-a-bush" Creole food. They planned to make dinner plates of hicatee, the endangered Central American river turtle, which is an Easter treat, and gibnut, or paca, a large rodent which is Belizeans' overall favorite game meat.[10] For village women, cooking these popular Belizean meats was not only a point of cultural pride, it was also a safe bet. Although the women had been promised that hundreds of U.S. tourists would visit, they were cautious, and knew

[10] Gibnut is otherwise known as the "Royal Rat" for it was served to the Queen of England when she visited Belize in the mid-1980s. Belizeans' interest in making tourists and other outsiders taste gibnut also has partially to do with the events which unfolded as a result of offering the Queen this meat, see Wilk 1999 for a discussion of this.

that if they had plenty of gibnut and hicatee they would be able to sell these plates to Belizeans who were sure to come, as well as to tourists from the U.S. and Europe. Many of the Belizeans likely to attend the festival would be coming from Belize City, and would be coming specifically in order to celebrate (rural) Creole culture. As the day grew closer, the ecotourism company got wind that the women were going to cook turtle and paca, and did not like the idea. The company's representative, who had been working on organizing the festival with villagers, told the villagers that they could not sell game meat, especially the endangered hicatee, at this festival. They would have to cook chicken instead.

From a western environmentalist perspective, this appeared to make sense. This ecotourism company did not want to encourage the hunting and eating of hicatee---hunting an endangered animal would seemingly constitute an ecologically unsustainable practice. But there were other more insidious maneuvers at work here. The ecotourism operator's goal was to support the village, celebrate Crooked Tree, and highlight villagers' relationship with nature -- the sustainable cashew processing and ecotourism industries in particular. But the company also needed to turn a profit, and so Crooked Tree had to fit what ecotourism advertises; it had to be what nature tourists expect it to be. Freshly killed and cooked turtle and soft-furry-rodent do not fit in with nature-alienated nature tourists' desires. While the ecotourist wants to go to the altar of nature, the villager is more content at the kitchen table. The situation was made worse because very few U.S. tourists showed up to buy the hundreds of chicken dinners that had been made. Belizeans bought some, but if the dinners had been hicatee and gibnut, the Belizean festival go-ers may well have bought all! This story illustrates that only certain parts of Creole culture, and in particular certain aspects of their relationship with nature, are of value, are to be celebrated through tourism; those which can become the commodity the nature tourist desires. Other aspects of villagers' everyday relationship with nature then must logically be hidden from the ecotourist's view.

The possibilities for rupture and reflection here are also many. Future cashew festivals, which have since been run by the village itself, have allowed hicatee to be offered; tourists who visit can then take a harder look at what might cause endangerment of particularly species. Likewise the continued questioning and discussion about what might constitute a sustainable harvest of turtles, fish, deer or gibnut; and the presence of ecotourists as interlocutors in those conversations encourages villagers to reflect on those issues as well. In some instances, avid hunters and fisherman have given up hunting and fishing, and other individuals forsworn eating game meat at least partially as a result of these continued conversations (see also Vivanco 2001).

Tourists and the "real" Nature of the Tropics

Some tourists have been bothered by the insects and other creatures that inevitably live in the thatch-roof cabanas of some of the Crooked Tree resorts. This in and of itself poses an interesting contradiction—tourists have the choice of accommodations in a cement-block house, a larger thatch roof wooden building, or small thatched roof cabanas. The small thatch roof cabanas are the most 'old fashioned'—and are reminiscent of the kinds of dwellings that many older villagers lived in as children—they have a feel of 'authenticity.'[11] While these dwellings are particularly appealing to tourists seeking a 'different' experience (Mowforth and Munt 2003), they also offer tourists some unexpectedly close connections to the natural world. Ridding a small wooden thatch-roof building of all evidence of insects and bats in the neotropics is a near impossibility, and the presence of these surprise the ecotourist who is expecting a primarily visual, and orderly experience of the beauty of tropical nature.

[11] By using this word I step into a very large, complicated and interesting debate in the literature on tourism (see Cohen 1988, MacCannell 1976) I do not mean to argue here that any of these things is truly "authentic"—but rather that a certain architectural style fits neatly into a particular discourse of tropical nature; tropical retreat, tropical paradise (which, of course is why the resort owner smartly chose to build these cabanas)

Once during my longest period of residence in Crooked Tree, a seemingly middle class white couple from the U.S. examined one of the resort cabanas to determine whether or not they wanted to stay overnight in the village. After checking out the cabana for a while, the couple left and said that they would not take it. The resort owner asked why, the couple muttered something about the insects. Later that evening the resort owner's family indignantly laughed at the tourists, one woman commenting that the U.S. is not so free from insects, and recounting how a house she had stayed in when she was visiting a city in the U.S. had plenty of cockroaches. The villagers clearly sensed the social class evaluation that was being made of them by the white couple from the U.S., and countered this evaluation with a remark noting that all of the U.S. is not so "perfect perfect"—that cockroaches abound there as well. Yet in their discomfort were interstices in which they could reflect on their relationship to the natural world and on what it means to be a Creole person—that being 'tuff' and not 'soff'; and understanding the natural world for what it is (rather than denying that wood roaches and cockroaches exist and share our lives) are hallmarks of Creole identity.

Likewise, most nature tourists who visit Crooked Tree and stay in the cabana, do not complain about the wood roaches. In this way, ecotourists are choosing to hide aspects of their own alienation from the natural world: they do not show how these kinds of things make them uncomfortable, when they do. Their discomfort may provide them the opportunity to reflect on their own relationship to the natural world, and in conversation with villagers, to come away with a more expansive understanding of what nature is, one which may include humans, not in some mythic harmony, but in an everyday, natural sociality (Descola 1994).

Guiding and the Political Economy of Place and Race

The final encounter I relate in this paper concerns the commodification of rural Creole people's knowledge of nature and the political economy of place and race. Tourists frequently complain about the high prices that villagers charge for the services they offer. There is an

assumption that because they are in the "third world," and in a rural area, prices should be lower than they are. Prices for tourism commodities in Belize are relatively high compared to neighboring Mexico (different histories of colonialism and Belize's Caribbean orientation partially explaining this difference). Yet rates in rural Belize are much cheaper than similar services cost in the United States. In one case, a white European tourist was looking for accommodation and guide services. He asked a local Creole resort owner what the cost would be, and expressed shock at the price he was quoted. He began to try to haggle, saying he could not believe the price could be so high. An avid birder and naturalist, he wanted to go on a boat trip through the lagoon system so that he could see waterfowl and other wildlife. For quite some time, he bargained with the Creole resort owner and the Creole guide employed by the owner, the session ending when the Crooked Tree villagers became annoyed, stood by their final offer, and finally walked away from the still complaining and haggling man. The man returned the next day, finally breaking down and agreeing to pay the guiding fee. But what was most interesting were his comments upon returning from the birding trip. He recounted that he had been utterly amazed by the guide's knowledge of nature, and returned to the village singing the guide's praises, perfectly satisfied with the cost of this trip. In fact, he paid to go out again on the following day. In this instance, the tourist did not believe that the Crooked Tree guide would be worth what he was charging, and did not think he should have to pay top dollar for someone from "the bush," and I would argue, someone with dark skin; rurality in the tropics inevitably racially coded. Yet after his trip, and the realization that his rural Creole guide was indeed an expert in nature, he became a fan and no longer was bothered by the cost. Villagers continually face the undervaluing of their services by tourists, an undervaluing that has a long history, as evidenced by the $4/day pay Crooked Tree men received for leading jaguar hunting trips in the 1960s and 70s,. Rural Creole reaction to this is one of bemused indignation: bemused because of the tourists' ignorance, indignant because of the implication that they and the place of Crooked Tree

are somehow worth less, that they occupy an economically (and by implication culturally/socially) inferior place in the global scheme of things.

The commodification of the guide's knowledge of nature has ambivalent outcomes. The way that this commodity, culturally and racially tagged as it is, enters the market with little value, but gains value through time, and ultimately can earn the guide more economic benefit than that knowledge does in a subsistence economy sends mixed messages to villagers. On the one hand, cultural pride and economic benefit ensue from this recently re-valued ability. On the other hand the initial reception that guides and their services receive from tourists serve as continual reminders of the peripheral status of the place of Crooked Tree and the contours of the political economy of racism. In many ways, the underlying social relations are little changed from the late 18th Century when the slave trade was at its peak.

The tourists' surprise at the quality of the guiding, of local knowledge, challenges tourists' fundamental assumptions, which include the unspoken idea that only (mostly white) people highly trained and educated at metropolitan institutions of higher learning can really be scientific experts. Again, here is a rupture that might offer the potential for tourists' understanding of the world, and of the human-nature relationship to expand and provide fertile ground for compromise and the potential for productive dialogue between the north and south on environmental issues. Likewise, villagers have an opportunity to revalue their natural sociality and their detailed knowledge of the natural world.

Conclusion

In each of these encounters, the human relationship to the natural world is up for negotiation and contestation, and the connection between that relationship and people's cultural identities and status are highlighted. And in each encounter lies the possibility that both tourists and

hosts may better understand both one another's and their own relationship to the natural world, and so be able to productively contribute to the global debate about conservation and the use of natural resources.

Hope lies in the margins—when the tourist eats hicatee at the kitchen table, and is forced to deal with the everyday necessity and pleasure of Crooked Tree's natural sociality. Likewise the villager abandoning their vehicle and walking with the tourist from the cabana to the lagoon edge may question at least for a moment what has been lost in the transition from a walking- to an automobile-oriented existence. The little boy who is admonished to stop killing birds with his sling-shot because "da sin" (it's a sin), and the tourist won't like it, may reconsider his role in the natural world. At the same time, as the wood roach in the thatched roof episode undoubtedly did, tourist-villager encounters can further alienate tourist and host from each other and more deeply entrench each in their own conceptions of the human-nature relationship, obviating any possibility for further conversations about nature and conservation across cultural boundaries.

In the moment in which tourist and host meet, and in the global flows of images, money and people that frame these meetings, not only are understandings of nature up for grabs, but so are cultural identities. In the moments of rupture I describe above, and in through the growth of ecotourism in the small community of Crooked Tree, rural Belizean Creoles are reformulating their cultural identity, and incorporating into that reformulation their relationship to the natural world. Confronted with these strong yet newly configured assertions of cultural identity on the part of their hosts, tourists, too, are encouraged to re-examine their identity and status. They are presented with the possibility of empathetically understanding a people, and a place, that the global political economy defines as inferior.

In the best possible outcome, both tourist and host walk away from their encounters with a broader understanding of the range of relationships between humans and the natural world, and of

the hollow legs on which the global reckoning of status and place stands. In the worst possible outcome, villager and tourist initial assumptions about the world and the "other" are only doubly re-enforced. From my long experience with tourist in this community, I would argue that the positive outcome is more common than the negative, and see in these often humorous encounters some glimmers of hope for more fruitful conversations about people's role in the natural world, and people's relationships with one another across profound lines of difference.