

**Testimony
of Patricia A. McAnany**

On Behalf of the Society for American Archaeology

**Before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Regarding the Request by the Government of Belize
For a bilateral agreement for import restrictions
Under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention**

November 1, 2011

My name is Patricia A. McAnany and I am testifying in support of the request by the Government of Belize to enter into a bi-national agreement with this nation that would restrict the illegal importation of Belizean antiquities into the United States. I am very familiar with the archaeology of Belize and have participated in archaeological research in that country since 1981. For the past thirty years, I have actively promoted heritage conservation and public education programs in Belize and other nation-states of the Maya region in order to meet the threat of heritage erasure that has resulted from decades of looting. Although the import restrictions sought by the Government of Belize will not completely stop the flow of illicitly-procured artifacts into the U.S.—which is a primary market for Maya antiquities—it will significantly decrease the rate of importation.

I am Kenan Eminent Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a member of the Society for American Archaeology, a Fellow of the American Anthropological Association, and external faculty of the Santa Fe Institute. I have authored or edited nine books, including *Ancestral Maya Economies in Archaeological Perspective* (2010) and relevant to the matter before you, *Prehistoric Maya Economies of Belize* (1989).

The archaeological heritage of Belize is among the richest in the world. Located along the Caribbean seaboard, the land that today constitutes the modern nation of Belize was an extremely wealthy portion of the ancient Maya world and an area in which highly valued items such as marine shell, jade, cacao, and salt were actively traded. The largest piece of worked jade ever excavated within the Maya region—the 9.7 lb. head carved in the likeness of the sun god, K'inich Ajaw—was found in Belize at the archaeological site of Altun Ha (Figure 1). Supporting a thriving Maya population from 1000 B.C. until the arrival of Spaniards and British privateers during Colonial times, Belize contains archaeological remains of both large political capitals such as Altun Ha—with massive architectural remains—and also thousands of small communities and resource-specific extraction locales, such as salt-processing stations. The number of recorded sites in Belize tops 2600 within an area that is roughly equivalent to the state of New Jersey.

Since the 1980s, the Government of Belize has worked aggressively to thwart looting practices through the circulation of educational materials and the cultivation of social networks. A country with a population of 333,200 the current Director of the Institute of Archaeology, Dr. Jaime Awe, once famously gave out his cell phone number over national television to encourage people to place a call if they observed looting activities. Every protected archaeological site that has been restored for tourism bears prominent signage at the site entrance stating that the laws of Belize forbid illegal excavation and exportation of artifacts. For decades, the Institute of Archaeology has supported programs of public education in the schools of Belize and the two universities within Belize (UCB and Galen University) support professional degree programs in archaeology. But given the large number of unprotected sites within the country, and the ancestral Maya custom of residential burial (which means that mortuary items such as aesthetically appealing ceramics and jade can be found within small house mounds), it is impossible for the Government to monitor all illegal activities that might take place in remote and heavily forested areas.

During the thirty years that I have conducted research in Belize, I have been shown astounding evidence of destructive looting activity (see Figure 2). Such illegal excavations are destructive on many levels. They severely compromise, if not destroy, the research potential of archaeological sites because contextual information is permanently lost. With this loss of structural integrity, Belizeans are further impoverished because the potential attraction of an archaeological site for heritage tourism is lost and, in the long run, they are also robbed of their rightful heritage.

There is no question that the heritage of Belize is under severe threat because of looting, which is fueled by the market for Maya artifacts in North America and Europe. Although it is difficult to quantify the scale of looting or the number of archaeological sites that have been destroyed by such destructive activities, my firsthand knowledge of the situation and that of my colleagues leaves no doubt as to the epidemic proportions of the problem. The economic situation in Belize further exacerbates the situation. People who live in rural communities are visited regularly by middlemen and offered a pittance for a carved jade artifact or a painted pottery vessel. Given the lack of economic opportunities in these places, this demand-driven black-market trade (increasingly linked to narcotics trafficking) can prove tempting to impoverished people living in the countryside who need cash for school books for their children or for medical treatment.

The looting continues to this day – while preparing this testimony, I received word from Dr. Jaime Awe, Director of the Institute of Archaeology in Belize, that a series of caves in which human burials had been interred recently has been despoiled during illegal harvesting of the palm *xate*, which is highly desired by the North American floral industry. Despite continued destruction, many unrecorded sites still exist—perhaps 40% of the archaeological heritage of Belize has not been documented. The threat to these places, which contain valuable information about the past, lends urgency to this request for a bi-national agreement.

The Government of Belize has a strong and uninterrupted tradition of international scientific research. Currently, the Institute of Archaeology issues about 15-20 permits per year to foreign researchers and most of these permits go to archaeologists affiliated with universities in the U.S. The Government of Belize allows the temporary exportation of study materials to the U.S. and other countries. For the most recent Maya museum exhibit—*The Fiery Pool*—the crown jewel of Belizean artifacts—namely the jade head from Altun Ha—was loaned to the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem, MA. A bi-national agreement would not adversely impact this exchange of scientific information and, in fact, will probably enhance it. Another positive outcome of this bi-national agreement is the cessation of the illicit flow of artifacts from Guatemala to the U.S. through Belize. Although the U.S. and Guatemala signed a bi-national agreement in 1997, artifacts still can be smuggled overland across the Guatemalan-Belizean border and from there imported illegally into the U.S. This agreement will help to choke off that conduit.

The consequences of looting are well known. As an archaeologist who has researched Maya ancestor veneration and mortuary practices, I am appalled by the callous way in which human bones and fractured pottery vessels are thrown to the side of a pit when a burial is looted. Nothing recognizable remains and our ability to decipher the identity of the person(s) placed within that burial context is forever lost. The most spectacular burial contexts occur in tombs placed within monumental shrines but ancestors placed under the floors of modest dwellings also are prey for looters. When archaeological evidence is destroyed by illicit excavation, we lose our chance to understand the social differences and identities that existed within Maya societies of the past. Perhaps more importantly, the people of Belize—and the world in general—lose an important part of the human story. The U.S. is unquestionably a major market for looted artifacts from Belize, particularly those crafted from jade. U.S. borders represent an important point of restriction at which this illicit trafficking can be interdicted.

I thank the committee for this opportunity to testify, and urge you to recommend approval of the request from Belize for a bilateral agreement with the United States in order to promote the conservation of Belizean heritage.



Figure 1. Jade Head weighing 9.7 lbs. excavated from Altun Ha, Belize, and indicative of the large and extraordinary pieces of jade-working that are the target of looting activities.



Figure 2. Looter's trench at the Classic Maya archaeological site of Fireburn in northern Belize. Note how destructive illegal tunneling has gutted the center of this pyramidal structure, revealing daylight on the opposite side of the building.