

Defeating Deforestation Through Rum, Chocolate, and Ecotourism

The Copal Tree Lodge in southern Belize wants to transform what sustainable tourism looks like.

By

Fact checked by



The Maya Golden Landscape (MGL) encompasses two protected areas in Toledo in southern Belize. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Punta Gorda is a tranquil, sleepy coastal town in southern Belize that attracts fishermen from around the globe for its deep, offshore waters and the massive [Belize Barrier Reef](#), which is home to a plethora of rich marine life. It is also the permit capital of the world, which probably doesn't mean anything to you unless you're an avid fisherman.

But when retired financier-turned-marine conservationist Todd Robinson was on a fishing expedition more than 15 years ago, he noticed the once-plentiful fishing had dropped off. Upon questioning

locals, he learned [deforestation and illegal logging](#) were destroying the ocean habitat.



The used sugarcane is later turned into biomass to power the distillery.
Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Inspired, Robinson purchased roughly 22,000 acres of land in southern Belize to be protected as a nature reserve. Additionally, he bought a fishing lodge, now known as the [Copal Tree Lodge](#), an eco-hotel nestled in the rainforest preserve within the Maya Mountains of Punta Gorda. Robinson's goal was to not only protect the tropical rainforest from deforestation but to also provide new, sustainable jobs for locals, along with creating a marketplace for Belizean-made products like organic chocolate, coffee, and rum made right on the property.



Chicken tractors, free-ranging sheep, and heirloom crops make up the 3,000-acre farm. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Today, there is a 3,000-acre, USDA-certified organic farm (the first of its kind in Belize) bursting with heirloom crops that provide produce for the hotel while also promoting permaculture practices through agritourism. On a recent summer visit, Elon, a Copal employee, was planting a medicinal garden, based on his grandmother's homeopathic remedies. Neem, turmeric, ginger, and soursop were just a few of the plants he was growing.



Waluco Maheia, Copalli Rum's global brand ambassador, is a fierce advocate for Belize's rainforests. Courtesy of Copalli Rum

The name “Copal” comes from the Copal tree, which is revered in Mayan cultures. “Its sap is burned at ceremonial events and rituals,” explains Waluco Maheia, a native Belizean and global brand ambassador for Copalli rum, to Treehugger. His love for protecting the environment and Belize’s precious rainforest runs deep, as his father, Wil Maheia, is a renowned activist who stood up to the logging industry for years.



The farm's vanilla crops must be hand-pollinated due to climate change wiping out native pollinators. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Copal also works closely with the Belizean NGO [Ya'axché Conservation Trust](#) to preserve Belize's forests. Ya'axché, which is Mayan for “plant a tree,” works to protect a range of threatened lumber species. Said Gutierrez, the protected areas program director for Ya'axché, explains they “take a holistic approach to conservation” by also creating sustainable livelihoods for local communities that live near the protected areas. It's not an easy balance to achieve some sort of harmony between human development and nature, but it's one that Copal and its partners strive for.



Joeseph, an expert gardener, explains the permaculture practices at the 3,000-acre property. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Many of the workers at Copal have personal experience with working for or fighting against the logging companies in Belize. In the early 20th century, the demand for mahogany decimated much of its lush forests. Illegal logging still continues today, with a never-ending demand for Honduran rosewood (*Dalbergia stevensonii*), a luxury timber.



Maynard, a former logger, now crafts artisanal chocolate from bean to bar at the factory. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Maynard, the chief chocolatier of Copal, recalls his career change from logging trees to crafting artisanal chocolates from bean to bar. He laughingly recalls: "I know Waluco's father well because I used to be the guy working for the companies he protested against!" Today, the three ventures of Copal make up the largest non-government employer in southern Belize.



The cacao trees flourish under the lush forest canopies of Copal's 3,000-acre organic farm. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

While "shade-grown" cacao and coffee might seem like pricey marketing terms when you're shopping for sustainable goods, Elon explains this farming method not only produces better chocolate but has the added bonus of protecting the rainforest. Cacao trees grown in the shade and humidity of a forest produce far more pods than plantation-grown trees. The lush undergrowth also provides a safe, humid home for a variety of insects.

"Their pollinators are the insects that live right below the leaves. These midge flies are the primary pollinators of the cacao tree," explains Elon. "We like to say that cacao and coffee can save the rainforest."

And the science backs it up. A review of 16 studies from Africa and South America showed that shade-grown cacao also promotes biodiversity, provides habitat for native animals, enhances soil diversity, and even sequesters carbon better.¹



Dustin checks on the cacao beans in the open-air setting, which allows the warm Belizean air to naturally reduce its acidity and bitterness. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

The distillery, located just down the road from the lodge, is also part of the company's long-term sustainability plan. Copalli rum was set up to be donated in trust for the benefit of the people in the Toledo District. Profits from the distillery are delivered as grants for various educational and environmental activities; if the distillery is sold, the proceeds from the sale of the distillery will stay in the trust to provide income in perpetuity.



The leftover shredded cane fibers (called bagasse) from the freshly harvested sugarcane powers the boilers. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

Most commercial rum today is made from molasses, an industrial residual from commodity sugar production. Copalli, however, already had established acres of heirloom sugar cane, thanks to an ancient distillery that had shut down in the 1970s. Their single-estate rum is made from just three ingredients: certified organic sugar cane, canopy rainwater, and yeast.

Very little goes to waste. Ed Tiedge, the master distiller, explains: "The leftover shredded cane fibers (bagasse) powers the boiler, and the resulting ash is returned with the spent rum wash (vinasse) that goes back to the fields. All of this was specifically created to support the full-circle conversion of waste, and allows the distillery to minimize its negative environmental impact."



The distillery is owned by a trust that supports philanthropic efforts in the Toledo District of Southern Belize. Treehugger / Lindsey Reynolds

The excess water from the distillation is also used as liquid fertilizer on the farm. “We operate on a closed production system,” explains Tiedge. “Within two hours of being hand-harvested, the cane is juiced and the remaining fiber is dried and used to fuel the stills. The ash returns to the fields as fertilizer.”

While [ecotourism](#) is the fastest-growing sector of the tourism industry, it’s certainly not without its faults. A 2015 paper published in *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* stated that “tourism can be deleterious for wildlife because it triggers behavioral changes in individuals with cascading effects on populations and communities.” In the simplest terms, sustainable ecotourism should be guided by three core principles: conservation, communities, and education.²

But conservation advocates remain hopeful. Through careful oversight and regulation, vulnerable areas of the world can be both appreciated and conserved. Copal’s protected rainforest preserves, relationships with local conservationists, and community building certainly have them on the right track.

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