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PRESS RELEASE

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Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve: Belize's Newest Marine Reserve Launched with Backing of Commercial Fishing and Tourism, But Still Faces Challenges, New Study Concludes

Washington, DC -- The Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) released today a study examining key issues facing Belize's newest marine park, the Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve. The Belize government officially designated the 325,000 acre Marine Reserve last November, marking the successful culmination of a highly participatory, two decade long effort to bring under protection the last remaining atoll in the Belize Barrier Reef System. Turneffe is the largest and most biologically diverse coral atoll in the hemisphere and is internationally recognized as a global "hot spot" for marine biodiversity.

The CREST study concludes that the new marine protected area helps ensure the longevity and sustainability of the destination, and its two main economic sectors, small-scale, marine-based tourism and locally-run commercial fishing. While in many destinations, commercial fishing and tourism compete, at Turneffe they have collaborated in advocating for the new Marine Reserve. The study, [*Turneffe Atoll, Belize: Balancing Sustainable Tourism & Commercial Fishing in a Marine Protected Area \(MPA\)*](#) states "that Turneffe's ecotourism and commercial fishing sectors share common interests in protecting the Atoll's natural resources" and that their ongoing "active involvement... will be critical to the long term success of the Reserve."

However, the CREST study, which was commissioned by the Turneffe Atoll Trust, notes that both economic sectors are facing challenges which, unless addressed, will likely undermine the new Reserve. Over the past decade, Turneffe's historically productive commercial fishing has declined dramatically, due largely to the illegal harvest of undersized or out-of-season conch and lobster.



Currently commercial fishing generates only about \$0.5 million per year, although its social benefits remain significant, supporting up to 200 fishermen. Commercial fishermen have backed the new Marine Reserve with the hope that improved patrolling and enforcement of regulations will reduce illegal activities and rejuvenate fish stocks.



Turneffe's tourism sector, centered around three small all-inclusive resorts located at the Atoll and daily boat excursions to the Atoll, offers high quality catch-and-release fishing, Scuba diving, and ecotourism which generates nearly \$37 million per year and provides over 1200 jobs. The new MPA will further enhance Turneffe Atoll's appeal to international adventure travelers. However, this type of sustainable tourism faces challenges from larger-scale developments, illegal cutting of large swaths of mangroves, dredging of sand from shallow waters, and other harmful activities. Currently under construction is a 96-room, 4-storey cement hotel, with an oversized swimming pool, marina, airstrip, condos, and a supermarket.



“Nearly everything about this project seems inappropriate for an environmentally fragile atoll,” concludes Dr. Martha Honey, the study's lead author, following a site visit. The findings challenge the commonly held assumption that high volume tourism -- larger resort projects and greater numbers of tourists generally -- automatically translate into more jobs and more revenue for the destination. According to Dr. Honey, “Given Turneffe's fragile ecosystem, only a handful of new resorts should be built at Turneffe and they all must conform to high internationally recognized sustainability standards for design, construction, and operations. The total number of operating resorts should probably not exceed a half dozen.”

CREST, a policy research institute based in Washington, DC and at Stanford University, has conducted a wide range of studies and field projects focused on coastal and marine tourism. As part of its research for this study, CREST visited Turneffe's tourism, fishing, research, and government facilities and conducted dozens of interviews. CREST also reviewed a wide range of pertinent scientific information from Turneffe, and elsewhere in Belize, as well as from other Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) around the world.

[Click here](#) to read the full report. [Click here](#) to read the Executive Summary.