

Executive Summary

In west central Belize, the Pacbitun Regional Archaeology Project (PRAP) is actively involved in the exchange of knowledge between those of us working at the ancient Maya site of Pacbitun and the Maya village of San Antonio, located three kilometers away. With support from the International Community Engagement Grant, we hope to raise the level and impact of our collaborations significantly. Since the inception of PRAP in 2008, we have attempted, on a small scale, to interact with San Antonians each summer as we conduct archaeological research, quite literally, in their backyards. This has usually taken the form of our archaeology students participating in a lunch visit with one or two families and playing against the best team in the village in our annual soccer match. (We never win, but soccer is a terrific way to engage with members of the community with whom we would not otherwise have the opportunity to interact.) During the 2013 field season, we expanded our collaborative efforts, and created a program solely focusing on knowledge exchange between the local and archaeological communities. At the request of the local community, the program focused on developing a heritage and Yucatec language preservation program, while exposing the community to the details of archaeology at Pacbitun. These events have had a lasting impact on the archaeology students as well as members of the community. We believe that through working, eating, and playing together, we become more than just those foreigners digging down at the ruins. Rather, we become friends of the community who are trying to advance and promote knowledge about ancient and modern heritage. By collaborating with local schools we give agency back to the community, allowing them to own their history. Instead of the foreigners coming in to “educate”, we become team members in the learning process. The knowledge gained flows in both directions. As we enter the current field season, we propose to expand this program beyond what we have achieved in the past six years. We have made a good preliminary start, but we have only scratched the surface of interaction with the nearly one thousand residents of this village. We hope to establish a long-term relationship with many members of this community, and the ICE grant would enable us to expand and sustain the knowledge exchange that began quite informally.

As we see it, this knowledge exchange will promote the preservation of Yucatec Mayan that is currently the native language spoken in many San Antonian homes, but strictly left out of the school curriculum. The young population is quickly losing the native language. This is a fact originally brought to our attention by concerned community members. It is common sentiment that younger generations have been shamed by outside social pressures into leaving behind their native Yucatec. Our preliminary research has confirmed this to be true of many young adults in San Antonio. However, the majority of community members, who were questioned during last season's informal interview process, say they wish to see their language used within the school system, and in public arenas. ICE funding could allow our collaborative team to create teaching tools to be used within the school system to reintegrate the Yucatec language into the regular curriculum.

Involving the community in the preservation of their own history and prehistory is incredibly important. Communities must be able to tell their own story. Time and time again history has been written from an etic perspective. Historians and anthropologists alike understand how much of history has been left out of text books because of this academic and politically-driven recording process of the past. The time has come for archaeologists to give back to the communities that have for so long supported their careers, and collaboration is a giant step in a positive direction.

We intend to use Pacbitun as a model site for community collaboration and preservation. The only way to create a sustainable project is to fully involve the community. It is our vision to have a full Yucatec language curriculum, locally supported and sustained within the next three years. Coupling this curriculum with archaeology and history lessons from us each season will help to drive interest. The larger community, made up of local academics, artisans, community board leaders, business owners, farmers, elders, and children have all shown great enthusiasm in this collaborative project. The National Institute of Culture and History in Belize has also vocalized support for our efforts. Because of local interest and involvement, we believe that within three years of funding, we will be able to call our project permanent and sustainable.