

# SPELEOLOGY IN BELIZE: AN INTRODUCTION

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Belize is a small, little known, and somewhat eccentric country; a pocket of Creole, Mayan, and British heritage surrounded by countries of predominantly Spanish origin. It measures only 300 km from its southern rainforests to the savannas of its northern border with Mexico. From the nation's eastern Caribbean coast, site of the world's second longest barrier reef, Belizeans look nervously 100 km westward to their border with Guatemala, which only in 1991 reluctantly relinquished its claim that Belize was in fact a Guatemalan state.

Despite its small size, Belize has world class caves, including some of the world's largest rooms and passages, perhaps the greatest concentration of archaeologically significant caves, and a diverse cavernicolous fauna that is still largely unstudied. The country's rich speleological potential has been explored with increasing frequency over the past 25 years. This theme issue was prepared to blend summaries of past work with reports of recent efforts to bring you up to date on caving and speleological research in Belize.

Formerly British Honduras, Belize received its independence from Great Britain in 1981. In its struggle to develop its economic independence, Belize has relied heavily on increasing tourism, which has also increased the notoriety of its caves and archaeological sites. Several caves are routinely visited by adventure tours, and new caves are being sought. As caves are discovered, many are quickly looted of ancient Mayan archaeological remains, which are sold on the black market. Consequently, another purpose of this issue is to help coordinate future caving in Belize by providing information on what caving and research has already been done, encouraging special caution and responsible behavior in the potentially sensitive caves, and offering the following tips on how to cave in Belize and minimize damage from looters:

Permission to cave or conduct cave research in Belize must be obtained from the Department of Archaeology (DOA), and, in some cases, the Forestry Department. Coordinate your efforts with them prior to arriving in Belize.

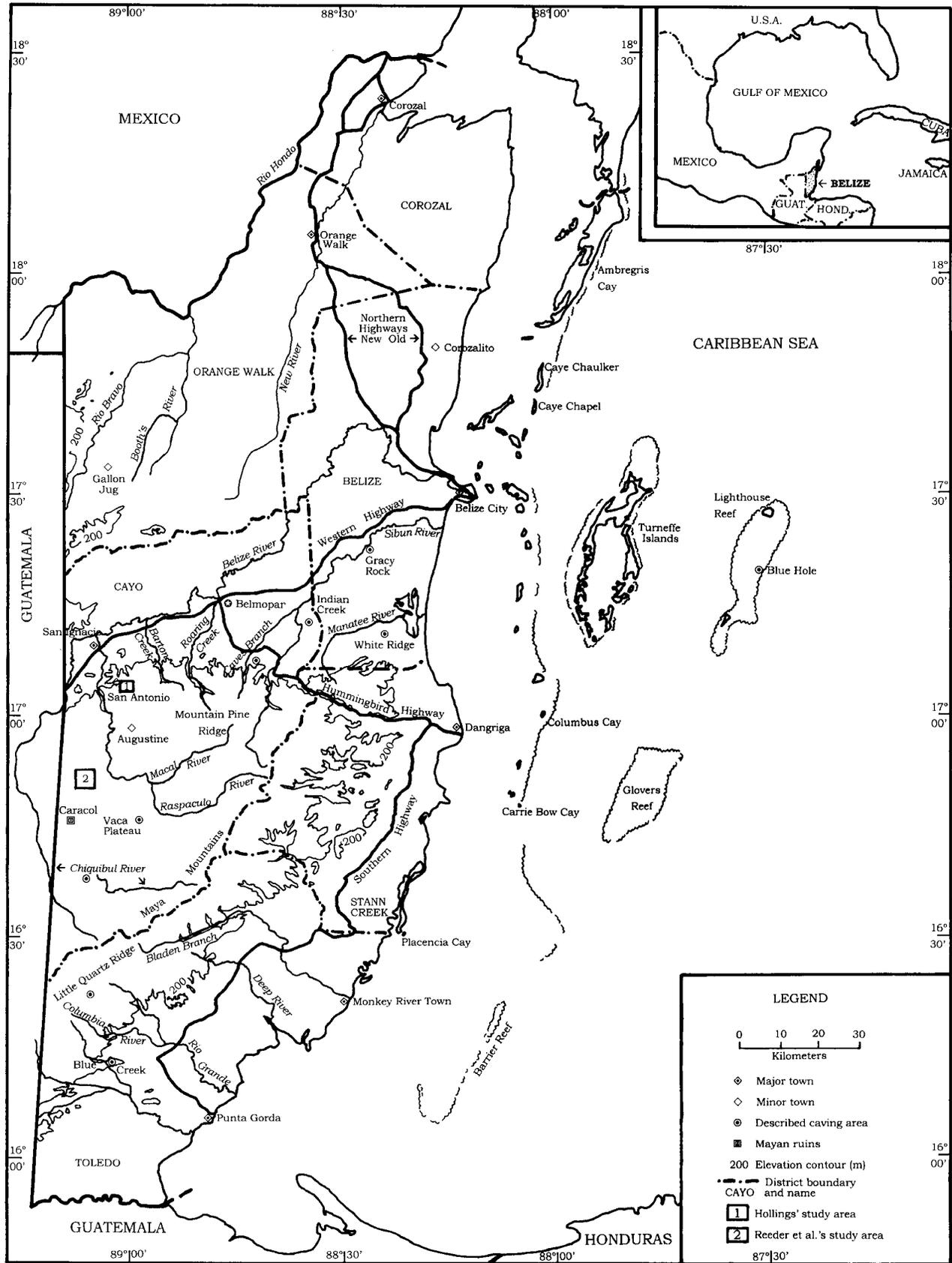
Survey and photograph archaeological materials in place. Do not handle the materials yourself! Provide the information to DOA as soon as possible, and, if feasible, accompany them to the site so they can properly handle, document, and remove the materials for safe study and storage.

Do not discuss the discovery of archaeological materials outside of your group and DOA. Belize is a small country where word travels fast—and often reaches looters.

Be patient and generous. Belize is a poor country with very limited resources. Officials will often be even more frustrated than you at their insufficient funding, personnel, time, and equipment to handle the many problems and opportunities that arise. Please provide them with copies of your notes or summaries of your findings, and don't forget to send copies of the final maps and reports you produce after arriving home. It makes their job of protecting the caves easier, and insures that you'll be welcome to go caving again in this friendly land.

The seven papers in this issue were prepared by some of the most knowledgeable people in Belize speleology. The papers refer to a "location map" which follows this introduction, or to Miller's Figure 4 of Belize karst areas. The location map provides general information on major physiographic and cultural features in Belize, plus the locations of major caving areas, research activities, or other sites discussed in the papers.

I'd like to thank the authors for their contributions to this first-ever compendium of Belize speleology, past *NSS Bulletin* editor Andy Flurkey for agreeing to publish this special issue, current editors Louise Hose and Jim Pizarowicz for guiding this effort to publication, the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and again to the authors for reviewing each others' papers for Belize-specific glitches that other reviewers would miss. On behalf of all of the authors, I want to thank the government and people of Belize for hosting us in their wonderful country, supporting our research, and working hard to protect their priceless underground heritage.



Location Map of Physiographic, Cultural, and Speleological Features of Belize.