



One of Turneffe Atoll's largest backreef flats—a place called Big Flat near Deadman Caye—is the site of a proposed over-the-water resort. A network of floating docks and cabanas here would harm a critical part of the atoll's reef structure and turn this fragile ecosystem into a tourist attraction.

RISING TIDES

BRIAN IRWIN - PHOTO

FLATTENING THE THREATS

TURNEFFE ATOLL IS A STRIKINGLY BEAUTIFUL RING OF CORAL REEF, SITUATED 28 MILES EAST OF BELIZE CITY. THE ATOLL IS 30 MILES LONG AND 10 MILES WIDE. ITS FRINGE REEF ENCLOSES THREE LARGE LAGOONS, COUNTLESS COVES, AND HUNDREDS OF MANGROVE ISLANDS. IT MIGHT BE THE FINEST HABITAT FOR BONEFISH, TARPON, AND PERMIT IN THE HEMISPHERE. AND IT'S IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF MANY THREATS THAT COULD IRREVERSIBLY CHANGE THE ATOLL FOREVER.

From climate change to commercial development and more, this vulnerable haven would likely already be decimated if it weren't for the efforts of a relentless advocate. Fortunately, Turneffe has one. And his name is Craig Hayes. He founded the Turneffe Atoll Trust, and led the effort to form the Turneffe Atoll Marine Preserve. He is the founder

and primary stakeholder of Turneffe Flats resort on the eastern side of Turneffe Atoll, which has stood for almost 40 years as arguably the best grand slam flats-fishing lodge in the world. And Hayes treats his island delicately and carefully, making expensive, responsible operational decisions to protect the environment in which he operates.

A PROPOSED OVER-THE-WATER RESORT WOULD OVERRUN ONE OF THE BEST FLATS ON TURNEFFE ATOLL

BRIAN IRWIN

Turneffe Flats is about as green as is possible. A solar farm provides almost all the power for the resort. Rainwater is collected in cisterns, providing 250,000 gallons of fresh water annually. Sewage is double-processed to make it suitable and odorless for irrigation. Broken glass is ground down and repurposed for cement aggregate. Even the condensation from the air conditioners is collected and reused. Quite simply, Hayes's model of operation is just one more shining example of how much he cares for the atoll and its resources.

Hayes and some friends started the lodge at Turneffe in 1985. Over the last 38 years he's seen environmental challenges pop up at a frightening pace. So, when it became apparent that the atoll

could become a free-for-all in terms of development, he acted. In 2002 he founded the Turneffe Atoll Trust (TAT), a nonprofit which would protect Turneffe's special and unique habitats and significantly mitigate improper development. Since he's only one voice, however, some development occurred despite his valiant efforts. Perhaps the most appalling was Belize Dive Haven, which began before TAT was fully functional.

Belize Dive Haven is a dive resort on Ropewalk Caye. Construction began in 2004, but the resort didn't open until after the Covid-19 pandemic. Hayes softly explained why: "They just don't seem to know what they're doing. And they don't appear to care if they damage this place."

ACCORDING TO THE BONEFISH & TARPON TRUST: “THE DEADMAN CAYE GROUP RESORT IS SEEKING TO BUILD OVER-WATER STRUCTURES THAT WOULD DAMAGE BIG FLAT—TURNEFFE’S LARGEST BACKREEF FLAT—AND IMPACT THE COUNTRY’S ECONOMICALLY AND CULTURALLY IMPORTANT FLATS FISHERY, WHICH GENERATES MORE THAN \$246 MILLION BELIZE DOLLARS ANNUALLY IN TOURISM AND FISHING INDUSTRY JOBS.

The developer, Sir Karim Hakimi, a knighted entrepreneur who runs an eye-glass company in Canada, constructed a concrete five-story structure adjacent to one of the most productive fishing flats on Turneffe. Before the build, he dredged up a half mile of pristine flats to generate an artificial beach, and used the sludge to fill in mangrove swamp and make the terrain suitable for building. He eradicated a large swath of mangroves all the way to the lagoon to make space for his landfill.

Obviously, this was environmentally destructive, but the striking point is that, in staunch violation of Belize’s Environmental Protection Act, he failed to obtain an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is required for a development of this size in such critical habitat. Granted, EIA assessments are carried out by a contractor hired by the developer and can be biased, but not requiring an EIA eliminated any review or challenge to a myriad of environmental concerns with this development. This scenario would likely not occur today due to Turneffe Atoll Trust’s oversight and the development of the Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve.

In 2022, Dive Haven applied for an EIA for an expansion of the resort. Hayes and TAT organized a broad response to this proposal, which went to the Dept. of the Environment, Ministry of Tourism, and the prime minister. Additionally, TAT is producing a proactive response to this project defining its potential environmental and economic consequences.

Hayes recognized other mounting threats to Turneffe as well, like the 2006 clearing of mangroves on Turneffe’s Northern Bogue area, done without Belize’s mandatory mangrove clearing permit or an EIA. The clearing was halted by TAT following a legal battle.

In 2010, Hayes began pushing for all of Turneffe Atoll to become a marine

reserve. Following a two-year effort and several hundred thousand dollars, Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve became the largest marine reserve in the country at 325,000 acres. A new NGO, Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association, was

formed to co-manage the reserve along with the Belize Fisheries Department.

A new study “2022 Economic Impact of Flats Fishing in Belize” by Anthony J. Fedler, Ph.D.—completely funded by TAT—shows flats fishing now generates more than \$246 million (BZD), which is nearly 7% of Belize’s GDP. Hayes recently presented this new information to the minister of tourism, and he offered his unilateral support for protecting all of Belize’s key flats areas.

A previous economic study by TAT and Fedler provided the foundation for a lobby to outlaw the killing of bonefish, permit, and tarpon. So, in 2009, under Hayes’s watchful eye, and other resort owners in Belize, catch-and-release was mandated in Belize for these three species, making it the first country in the



BRIAN IRWIN - PHOTO

Craig Hayes founded the nonprofit Turneffe Atoll Trust (TAT) and was influential in the formation of the Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve.



BRIAN IRWIN - PHOTO

The 40-year-old Turneffe Flats lodge is a model of conservation. It is powered by a solar farm, collects 250,000 gallons of rainwater annually, and it has its own sewage treatment plant to double-process sewage before using it to grow vegetables on the island.

world to declare that protection. In 2019, TAT and others successfully lobbied into law an irreversible ban on coastal gill-netting. This was yet another crowning achievement.

More recently in 2020, TAT reached a successful agreement with the government of Belize to protect all remaining nationally owned land on Turneffe through formation of the Turneffe Land Trust. This agreement affirmed that the remaining 17,000 acres “is mandated to remain in [its] natural state in perpetuity.”

One of the most recent development threats to Turneffe is a proposed over-the-water resort. A Romanian businessman applied for an EIA to place a number of over-the-water cabanas on the shallows south of Dive Haven known as Big Flat. Based on his EIA, this development would destroy one of Turneffe’s prime backreef flats and three adjacent mangrove islands. It would no longer be a fishing area, it would be a network of floating docks and cabins catering to honeymooners and Instagram influencers. In addition to populating the flat itself with tourists, the plans to generate power, deal with sewage, provide fresh water, and transport guests are questionable.

According to the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust: “The Deadman Caye Group Resort is

seeking to build over-water structures that would damage Big Flat—Turneffe’s largest backreef flat—and impact the country’s economically and culturally important flats fishery, which generates more than \$246 million Belize annually in tourism and fishing industry jobs. The backreef is a critical part of the atoll’s reef structure and supports numerous species, including the bonefish, permit, and tarpon for which Turneffe Atoll is famous.

“This project, like others proposed recently, poses threats that include the destruction and degradation of critically important habitats by dredging, clear-cutting of mangroves, and unwise development. Over-the-water structures are particularly harmful because they disrupt habitat continuity, causing habitat fragmentation and decreasing habitat quality for flats species like bonefish and permit.

“This proposed development at Turneffe is merely another assault on the flats fishery of Belize, and follows similar over-the-water structure development proposals on the flats at Cayo Rosario and Blackadore Caye. BTT, along with the local and international flats fishing community, has called on the Government of Belize to reject the proposed development.”

One of the last nights on Turneffe I stood on our cabana’s porch. The rod

holders on the banister were empty, my bags were packed, and it was late. On the horizon, two glowing patches emerged on the horizon to our south: cruise ships departing the fairly new cruise port in Placencia, 69 miles to the south.

I visited Placencia ten years ago and was enamored. Today it’s thronged with cruise guests. The magic of its old-world atmosphere now lies buried under the cement foundation of its unfinished, bankrupt casino. It made me think that without a man like Hayes, or an organization like TAT, Turneffe could also become a prime target for development because of its beauty and resources.

I stared at the glows until they faded away. The light pollution was erased as the ships sailed over the curve of the earth. Turneffe returned to its native state. And under emerging stars and a new moon, a beautiful darkness fell on a near-perfect island. ~

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