

LFFU

Leave Fossil Fuels Underground at a Glance

LFFU in Belize: The 2018 ban on offshore oil drilling

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The oil ban at a glance:

- World's second largest barrier reef in Belize, most of being it in a critical state already, would not survive a major stress through oil drilling and/or spills
- 5th January 2018: ban ('permanent moratorium') on all offshore oil drilling on Belizean marine territory becomes law
- Historically close association of Belizean culture, history and livelihoods with marine ecosystems and intact environments played as a decisive factor against oil drilling

- **Key actors:**
 - OCEANA Belize: Belizean side of the INGO dedicated to the protection of marine ecosystems worldwide
 - Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative Belize, founded by concerned members of the public and activists
 - civil society
 - WWF and 450.000 of its supporters worldwide took action for the reef's protection
 - UNESCO
 - IUCN World Heritage Program
 - Government and Prime Minister of Belize
 - 18 petroleum companies involved, including Belize Natural Energy, Treaty Energy, OPIC Resource Corporation and US Capital Energy Belize Ltd.

- **Key arguments in favour of the ban:**
 - Protection of the reef because of its intrinsic value and its use for tourism activities
 - Degradation of the reef would lead to huge losses in tourism revenue and fishing - 50% of the population would be negatively affected
 - Role of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and Obama's ban on oil drilling on large parts of the Arctic and Atlantic seaboard served as an example

- **Key arguments against the ban:**
 - Drilling proponents want to use possible oil revenues for development
 - Too little information available to make an informed decision at the time

- **Key dates:**
 - 2005: first discovery and exploration of oil reserves in Belize offshore territory
 - 2010: fact that concessions had been given to oil companies becomes public - OCEANA and allies start campaigning for a ban on offshore drilling in Belize
 - 2012: unofficial referendum led by OCEANA within which almost 30,000 people voted with a 96% majority favoring to ban offshore oil drilling in Belize
 - 2015: moratorium of majority of oil drilling concession and definite ban of 15% of oil drilling in particularly endangered zones
 - 2018: total ban on offshore oil drilling in Belize, perceived as the 'people's law' and celebrated as a victory of LFFU activism and marine protection worldwide

Belize has the second largest barrier reef in the world, after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. The reef is 305 km long and home to 1,400 species (Green, 2018). Further, the reef carries a central role economically, as it supports half of the population, directly or indirectly, because of fishing activities and tourism. Its location within Central America makes Belize one of the best diving destinations in the world and the reef's economic potential is perceived to exceed the income associated with oil extraction among conservationists and local populations. The reef was designated as a World Heritage Site in 1996 by UNESCO but in 2005 large oil reserves were discovered close to the corals with an estimated size of 18 million barrels (Tillet, 2012). However, oil exploitation would bear the risk of destroying the wildlife in the zone, affecting the tourism industry which contributed more than 10% of the country's gross domestic product at the time. According to Fisheries Administrator Beverly Wades, marine capture fisheries were worth 25 million dollars in 2011 and was an employer to more than 4,000 people. Thus, marine resources are 'a mainstay in the national economy' (Chanona 2012).

The extraction of oil in Belize started in 2006 with a production of 3,000 barrels extracted per day. Because of the damage done by the extraction, in 2009, UNESCO declared the reef as in "danger" saying that the country needed to enact better management and safeguards in order to conserve the ecological value of the reef (WHC, 2009). Experts believe the fragile marine ecosystem would collapse entirely in the event of an oil spill and thus requires special protection. As according to Melanie McField, founder of the Healthy Reefs for Healthy People initiative, offshore oil drilling is a gamble, and taking the risk of destroying the unique marine environment would never be worth the potential profit. Moreover, she thinks that "if you look at photos from the Gulf of Mexico, there's just pipeline and barges, equipment and industrialization everywhere and I don't think anybody that's what anybody really wants our coastline to look like" (Chanona 2012). "We have these little guys now that are hoping to get lucky, little companies, taking risks and not having any deep pockets to pay for any mistakes they make. We are going to pay. Our fishing industry is going to pay. Our tourism industry is going to pay", is what McField named to be decisive aspects and motivations for a ban on oil drilling (ibid.).

Oil extraction in the Gulf of Mexico functioned as an important worst-case example of what oil extraction in Belize could entail. When in April 2010, the crude spill happened in the Gulf of Mexico, it didn't affect Belize's wildlife directly but the environmental community started looking closely to the country's oil extraction as they could face similar accidents and they found in the public record a map showing all the oil concessions in the country and the entire marine territory was blocked off and sold to oil companies. This, and Obama's decision to ban offshore oil drilling in large areas of the US Arctic and Atlantic coastlines, was the beginning of the fight for conservation. As Audrey Mathura-Shepard explains, this event was significant, especially because, "in the Belize context [the problem] is magnified a thousand times." Compared to the US as Belize coastline is much smaller and more essential to people's livelihoods and emotional attachments (2010). Hence, OCEANA and other conservation groups gathered more than 20,000 signatures in 2011 calling for a national referendum, which was not accepted by the government. But the environmentalists, in 2012, promoted an unofficial people's referendum asking if they allow offshore oil drilling. The results were clear, 96% of the 29,235 participants voted against the oil drilling (Root, 2018). However, as the referendum was not official, the government largely ignored the outcome and did not act upon it.

In 2013, the Belize Supreme Court declared some of the granted oil concessions invalid because of inadequate environmental impact assessments. Thereafter in 2015, Prime Minister Barrow declared that all on-going oil concessions that had expired will not be renewed. In an interview with OCEANA leader Janell Chanona, he said that 'I want to do this, because it's the right thing to do. If nobody was asking for it, I would still be doing it' (in Ortiz 2015). Additionally, oil drilling was banned across 7 world heritage sites: "a total of 448 square miles being banned. In addition, Cabinet agreed to a ban offshore exploration within one kilometer on either side of

the Belizean Barrier Reef System, resulting in an additional 868 square miles falling under the offshore exploration ban. The total area covered by the ban is 842,714 acres or 1,316 square miles...". However, this still left about 84% of offshore territories free of a ban, but under a moratorium that could be lifted 'if conditions are right' (Barrow in Anonymous 2015a,c). This step was perceived as a good starting point for a permanent ban on oil drilling in Belize, nonetheless, activists such as Geovani Brackett, who was among the first to campaign against offshore oil drilling, states that more needs to be done and that 'this move by the Prime Minister and cabinet is an excellent start to a complete ban on offshore drilling.' (in Anonymous 2015). After the decision, there was little movement about the oil extraction up until 2016, when there was a seismic ship discovered on the coast. Environmentalist groups claimed that the only reason to collect seismic information is for oil extraction and the community started fighting for a change in the legislation. After one year of legal battles and successful campaigning on the side of conservationists, in 2018, the "[Petroleum Operations Maritime Zone Moratorium Act](#)" was signed as a law by Belize's Prime Minister Dean Barrow. The new legislation contains "a moratorium on the exploration and exploitation of petroleum and other petroleum operations in the maritime zone of Belize", and has made Belize the first country in the world to put a total ban on all offshore oil exploration and extraction within its territories (Root, 2018). The International Union for Conservation of Nature advised UNESCO to remove the Belize Barrier Reef from the list of World Heritage in Danger. The definition of 'endangered', used by UNESCO, is based on four metrics assessing living coral, fleshy macroalgae, commercial fishing and herbivorous fish. In ten years, the overall health of the reef improved from 2,3 to 2,8 out of 5, thanks to environmental movements (Root, 2018). This improvement might not be too substantial, but all reefs across the world are under threat because of the rise of sea temperature, so this small increase is a good accomplishment.

Opponents of the ban claim that the government approved the legislation without knowing exactly how much oil they were giving up and there was no debate, discussion or technical review to support the decision, especially when it comes to possible revenue lost through the ban (Root, 2018). Conservationist groups think the democratic process to ban oil extraction in Belize can be a model for other countries in the world and global engagement is important to tackle environmental issues, therefore they are already sharing their experience in other countries such as Cuba, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Belize - Guatemala dispute

In 1859 the British Empire and Guatemala signed a treaty that defined the borders of both countries and it included an article that said both parties would work to build a cart road from Guatemala to the atlantic ocean. The road was never built and Guatemala blamed Britain for it and tried to cease the treaty in 1946 because of it. After 60 years, Guatemala and Belize held referendums asking their people if they should go to the International Court of Justice to solve the problem, with positive results on both sides. The main problem Belize is facing is the population growth of Guatemala which is leading to deforestation in the border region and its affecting the ecosystem of the Belize's side which is a natural protected area (Belize Referendum Commission, 2018). In the context of possible oil extraction in Belize, however, the question of territorial borders could become more pressing than ever as many Guatemalans still feel a strong feeling of ownership over Belizean land and resources. According to Romero, 'Generations of Guatemalans have been taught in school that "Belice es nuestro," or "Belize is ours," a slogan that might acquire new resonance if abundant oil is found in Belize' (Romero 2006). Hence, the ban on offshore oil drilling in Belize might have prevented the escalation of this long-brewing conflict.

Ideas for future research:

- How are civil society and environmentalist NGOs interconnected and what role do individual actors play?
- Would Belize also have decided in favor of a ban if oil was found outside the coral reefs? What is the value of the reef to Belizean communities and culture?

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