NEGOTIATED LIVING: AN ETHNO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PUNTA ALLEN

David McRae, B.A., B.A.

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APPROVED:

Andrew Nelson, Committee Chair
Alicia Re Cruz, Committee Chair
Irene Klaver, Committee Member
Lisa Henry, Chair of the Department of Anthropology
David Holdeman, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the Toulouse Graduate School

Situated within the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Tulum and within the Sian Ka'an Biosphere gives the village of Punta Allen a distinctive agency in determining their role in the on-going development of tourism in the region that is not given to other communities in the state. This unique circumstance facilitates a dialogue between the reserve, the municipality, and the business cooperatives of Punta Allen that produce a negotiated living. Through the negotiations with the reserve and Tulum, the lobster fishing and tourism cooperatives are given the opportunity to have a relatively significant role in determining the future of Punta Allen in regards to tourism.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction to Punta Allen</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Project Design</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Purpose of Study and Deliverables</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Ethnographic Overview</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Operational Terms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Limitations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction to Relevant Literature</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Theories on the Global Dissemination of Culture and Ideas</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Land, Culture, and the Impact of Tourism</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Framing Space</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Determining Agency</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Summary of Literature Review</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. HISTORICAL AND SPATIAL CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY PUNTA ALLEN</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Early History</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Life Before Punta Allen: Camp Vega</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Establishing Javier Rojo Gomez</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Rise of the Lobster Industry</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Lobster Crisis</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 The Introduction of Tourism</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Punta Allen in the Past Twenty-Five Years</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Spatial Context in Tulum and Cobá</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9 Spatial Context in Playa del Carmen and Cancun</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Lighthouse at the end of Punta Allen.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Concrete <em>sombras</em> on the beach.</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Painted history in Vigía Chico business building.</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>The road to Punta Allen.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Lobster fishing in the Bay of Ascension.</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Sargassum floating in after a storm.</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Freshly deposited sargassum.</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>First sargassum meeting.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Fly-fishing guide.</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to Punta Allen

Punta Allen is a small coastal village that roughly 500 Maya and Mestizo residents call home today located in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico on the southeastern coast at the end of the Boca Paila Peninsula. The village marks the northern most point of the Bay of Ascension and is the largest village in the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, one of the oldest protected ecosystems in the Yucatan Peninsula established in 1986. Since the creation of the megaresorts in Cancun and Playa del Carmen in the mid 1970s and 1980s respectively, tourism along the coast of Quintana Roo has exploded with activity in what has been referred to as the Riviera Maya. Punta Allen’s inclusion in the Riviera Maya has heavily impacting existing conditions in the village over the past 20 to 25 years by bringing new economic activity, greater financial circumstances for villagers, shifts in culture, and producing unique social conditions.

Geographically situated within the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Tulum and within the Sian Ka’an Biosphere gives Punta Allen a distinctive agency in determining their role in the on-going development of tourism in the region that is not given to other communities in the state. This unique circumstance facilitates a dialogue between the Biosphere Reserve, the Tulum Municipality, the business cooperatives of Punta Allen and residents of Punta Allen that have produced what I call a negotiated living. Through the negotiations with the Sian Ka’an and the relative absence of Tulum’s influence, the lobster fishing and tourism cooperatives in particular are given the opportunity to have a significant role in determining the future of Punta Allen in regards to tourism.
1.2 Project Design

This project was created with the intention of recording the stories, ethno-history, and contemporary life in Punta Allen that is perceived as in danger of being lost to the on-going development of tourism in the surrounding area. Dr. Robin Polseno, Michael Severeign the manager of the Hotel Costa del Sol Michael Severeign, and Mario Ancona Nuñez the owner of the hotel, initially visualized this project in April of 2015 and Dr. Alicia Re Cruz approached me and suggested this as a potential project for my applied thesis. Dr. Re Cruz reached out to Román Sauza and Laura Arciga, graduate students in the MA program of Applied Anthropology at the University of Quintana Roo to assist in the fieldwork. We collectively agreed upon a six-week stay at Costa del Sol, roughly 400 meters from the entrance to Punta Allen and arrived on July 12th. Roman and Laura left Punta Allen on August 7th and I left the village on August 21st and flew back from Quintana Roo on the 25th in 2015.

We primarily utilized structured interviews, semi-structured or exploratory interviews, and participant observation to gather information during the fieldwork. Our structured interviews were chiefly concerned with information on the history of the village, life in Punta Allen today, information concerning ecological issues, lobster fishing, and tourism activity. In addition to these structured interviews we interviewed members of the families that were influential in founding Punta Allen to construct family trees to show the interconnectivity of families through marriage and social relation. We conducted a total of 33 structured interviews and held dozens of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with community members and tourists.
We engaged in participant observation by attending social gatherings such as soccer games, a graduation ceremony, birthday parties, a fishing festival, a scheduled eco-tour, a fly-fishing tour, and lobster fishing excursions. We observed three community meetings held in the town square on the issue of the Sargassum seaweed, in which the doctor reported some of the health issues such as skin and respiratory problems, she believed were associated with the decaying Sargassum and community members voiced their concerns of its' impacts. These meetings served as an open dialogue for developing a strategy on how to best remove the decaying seaweed from the shore, and who should be responsible for doing so. We also observed a follow up meeting with the representative from the Sian Ka’an, the leaders of the cooperatives, and the elected delegate of Punta Allen on moving forward with a Sargassum removal strategy. We sketched a general timeline of the history of Punta Allen based off life-history interviews with some of the founding community members.

I also stayed in Tulum, located two hours up the road from Punta Allen for three days and observed the activities of the hotel district and the on-going construction of a large-scale development project called Aldea Zama that will substantially increase the level of tourism in the city over the next decade that could impact Punta Allen’s ecology and tourism industry in the upcoming years. I sat in for a presentation of their goals, what businesses they hope to bring to their project, and the description of various lots designated for different uses such as residential, condominiums, retail, commercial, and mixed uses. I also visited the neighboring village of Cobá 45 minutes northwest of Tulum, which heavily relies on tourism to the nearby Maya ruins of the city of the same name. I additionally stayed a night in the hotel district of Playa del Carmen and explored parts of the city of Cancun before my flight back to the United
States for comparative analysis of the impact of the different stages of the development of the tourism industry between Cancun, Playa del Carmen, Tulum, Cobá, and Punta Allen since it began in the 1970s. Over all, I was in Punta Allen and the surrounding area for a total of 6 and a half weeks.

Although we began transcribing some of our interviews while we were in Punta Allen, the bulk of my transcription phase was from September 2015 to April 2016. This phase took longer than I anticipated due to the fact that the majority of our interviews were in Spanish and required translation. I used Atlas.TI to organize my transcripts from March to May and analyzed my data using the same program throughout the organization and writing phases. Although I had been writing notes and copying the journal I kept for the duration of my time in Quintana Roo throughout the organization and analysis phases, I began the writing process in earnest in April and continued to analyze throughout the writing phase.

1.3 Purpose of Study and Deliverables

One of the primary objectives of this research project was to determine to what extent the increase of tourism since the early 1990s has impacted the culture in Punta Allen. The principal deliverable of this project was consequently to suggest approaches for strengthening the cultural identity and solidarity of Punta Allen and working with the community to establish strategies in order to do so. However the information we collected suggests that what changes in culture have impacted the community have been to its’ benefit and relatively diminutive in scope. The culture changes in Punta Allen have not been reflective of other Maya communities in the Yucatan Peninsula I would argue as a result of the strength of their aforementioned
agency in determining the level of tourism within the village. Over the past twenty years they have had classes funded by the Biosphere Reserve on foreign languages and sustainability, the latter impacting their understanding of environmentalism and sense of stewardship over the surrounding environment, and perspectives on social issues have reportedly broadened with interactions with tourists and sustained relationships with fly-fishing tourists in particular. Furthermore, residents are already performing many of the suggestions I would make to strengthen cultural identity. They continue to participate in activities traditional to Punta Allen, many residents have diversified their economic activities between tourism and lobster fishing, they are making efforts to control more of the means of production in regards to tourism, and they are ‘performing’ a minimal amount of their culture for tourists. Through these actions the residents of Punta Allen are already making strides in avoiding some of the cultural dilemmas present in other Maya villages and towns outlined in the literature section. However the strength of the solidarity has also had some unexpected consequences, notably the ‘othering’ or social distancing some members of the community, and the creation of an ‘insider’/’outsider’ dichotomy between members and families of the cooperatives and those who are not.

In addition to identifying changes in culture we were also asked to produce a number of other deliverables that would benefit the community that inherently diversified the objectives of this research project. We were asked to gather ethnographical data on the residents of Punta Allen that outlines who they are as a people, their history, and how they conduct their daily lives. We produced a genealogical map of four of prominent families of the village that were instrumental in founding the village as it is today throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and I have written a detailed account of Punta Allen’s history over the course of the last century and describe their
role in shaping the state of Quintana Roo. Lastly, I was also interested in studying villagers’
notions of environmentalism and how residents of Punta Allen understood and responded to
the ecological crisis of the seaweed sargassum that had been washing up on the beaches of
Quintana Roo in incredibly large quantities for months prior to our arrival.

1.4 Ethnographic Overview

Many Punta Allen residents have personally migrated from various parts of Mexico the
majority of which from different cities in the Yucatan Peninsula, while some families have been
living in the village for two or three generations. In the past decade a few families have
migrated to the village from the states of Tabasco and Veracruz, as well as about a dozen long-
term residents who have migrated from the United States and Canada since the 1990s. In terms
of ethnicity, many residents claim some Maya heritage, and there are a handful of indigenous
families that have lived in Punta Allen and the surrounding area for generations. Many villagers
speak Yucatec Maya, (the local name of which is simply Maya and known only as Maya to
speakers) with a handful of fluent speakers of which it is a first language. Spanish is the primary
language spoken in Punta Allen, and some of our participants noted that Maya words are often
mixed into daily conversation. Additionally many non-US and Canadian residents are fluent or
conversational in English as a result of the Sian Ka’an sponsored language classes, and are
conversational or have a limited working proficiency in a handful of European languages such as
French and Italian. The two major religions in the village are Catholicism and Jehovah’s Witness,
however there is also an evangelical church and a small number of people who consider
themselves spiritual as to not adhere to an organized religion. We were able to gather interviews from each of these populations.

There is a noticeable difference in economy that can be generally illustrated by the materials used to construct houses, and by proximity to the main road along the beach. Despite concrete creating additional heat during the summer months, a participant claimed it was seen somewhat as a status symbol in Punta Allen. The closer to the beach and restaurants along the coast line, with some exception the houses are typically larger and constructed using more durable material.

Punta Allen itself is roughly 700 meters from entrance to end and roughly 300 meters across at the middle, not including the lighthouse at the point and a fly-fishing lodge located along the way. There are two, small health facilities and one elementary and middle school, meaning residents have to travel to Tulum or Merida, (with good road conditions, two and five hours respectively) for more complicated health problems, and children are often sent to live with relatives during the school year in other cities or towns to further their education. Some families have homes in other villages and cities in Quintana Roo and Cozumel and choose to relocate children with their mothers for the duration of the school year while the husband continues to work in Punta Allen. The village hosts a number of festivals throughout the year, including one for the start of the lobster season, a deep-sea fishing festival, and a number of religious festivals common in Mexico, such as holidays, mothers/fathers day, *Las Posadas*, etc. and unique to Quintana Roo such as *Cabeza de Cochina* (the dance of the pig’s head).

Most residents cited employment opportunities as one of the principal reasons for initially moving to Punta Allen, others were looking for a quiet, relaxed place to live, and others
still moved for family. There is a resounding agreement on why they choose to continue to live in a village located in a Biosphere Reserve. The top three responses were the peace and tranquility, the environment and beauty of the reserve they lived in, and a lifestyle away from the bustling, busy city. Indeed, it seems as if every response indicated something to the effect of the lifestyle and community found in the village. Other comments included the safety that comes with living in a small community removed from urban life, as well as the community itself. Others cited the desire to live a healthier lifestyle, remarking on the ability to eat fresher food and spend more time outside. A small number of participants also noted the lack of economic pressure and relaxed nature of the village; a few participants declared that everything about Punta Allen was the best aspect of living there. I would argue my data shows that people choose to live in Punta Allen primarily for a peaceful existence, a relaxed lifestyle with a supportive community, in a beautiful environment removed from life in the city.

1.5 Operational Terms

The most effective way of describing the concept of negotiated living is manifested in the jungle road that connects Punta Allen to the closest urban center, Tulum, roughly 55 km north of the village. The time it takes to travel from Punta Allen depends entirely on the conditions of the road that require reoccurring maintenance due to frequent use and rainfall that erodes and damages the road. For instance immediately after repairs are made it takes roughly an hour and 45 minutes to two hours to transverse, and when the road is in a state of disrepair it can take upwards of six to eight hours and can cause heavy damage to vehicles. The residents of Punta Allen have a complex relationship with this road that acts as the only
entrance to their village other than by boat. The road conditions act as a literal gate-keeper to the community by keeping the urban center of Tulum and its’ many tourists at arms reach, a factor that plays into one of the primary reasons many residents choose to continue to live in Punta Allen. Although almost all of our participants adamantly expressed the desire for the road to remain unpaved, residents also voiced frustrations at the perceived lack of attention its’ state is given by the city of Tulum. When the road is in need of repair, residents often resort to open protest in the street of Tulum, and it was reported to me that at one point residents were forced to take the repairs into their own hands. Because the road is within the Sian Ka’an Biosphere, the municipality of Tulum has frequently deferred to the reserve for responsibility for the road’s upkeep due to their restrictions and standards, which in turn defers back to the municipality. Punta Allen in tandem with the Sian Ka’an

1.6 Limitations

There are two noteworthy limitations to this study; time spent in the field, and language barriers. Although I attained a greater than conversational proficiency in Spanish and was able to conduct my own interviews for the second half of my time spent in the field, the first two weeks in particular were difficult for me not only for effectively collecting data, but communicating with my research partners. Because of our short time in the village this was a major concern due to the fact that I had to have at least one of my research partners present for our structured interviews until I gained a better mastery of the language, limiting our ability to reach a greater number of the population.
Unfortunately six weeks in a highly seasonal village is not an adequate amount of time for formulating holistic ethnographic data that fully represents the culture and residents over the course of the full year. Because the economic activity and number of people and families present in the village can change drastically depending on the season, to gain a most holistic perspective of Punta Allen it would be necessary to ten months to a year in the field. The information we gathered is what we observed during the summer months at the beginning on the lobster season while children are home from school, and fly-fishing was not at its’ peak. Although we believe the data we gathered and the information relayed to us by our participants are accurate, the reader should take into consideration that our observations were made only at one point in time in a constantly changing village. Another minor limitation was that one of our voice recorders broke during the third week and we lost four formal interviews that we were unable to recover other than handwritten notes taken during the interviews.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction to Relevant Literature

The focus of this section is to review a selection of literature that speaks to concepts of the environment in relation to culture, the relationship between the booming tourism industry and the rate of culture change, as well as theories on globalization. This purpose of this literature review is to inform my perspective on these topics in order to have a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding my research project in Punta Allen. First, the section on globalization takes a very macro-level perspective on cultural exchange with a conversation between Appadurai’s (1996) model of a network of landscapes to understand the global transmission of cultural materials, and Tsing’s (2005) proposal that the friction of competing perspectives between the local and global is what drives new cultural arrangements. The following sections describe case studies found in articles and books I reviewed on tourism and the environment, which have a close relationship in the wake of the advent of ecotourism.

Throughout this chapter I will be discussing a number of themes I found prevalent throughout these works that will be essential for my understanding of the issues presented therein. For the section on globalization, the discourse between the two authors Appadurai and Tsing will primarily revolve around the dissemination of cultural information, and how the local voice and global narrative of universal concepts work to create and perpetuate meaning through their muddled encounters. This in turn leads into a discussion on the unequal discourse often found between social actors with competing interests, where the local voice is often
drowned out by the significantly larger scale of agency found with national and international organizations.

From globalization, the discussion turns to the environment and its relation to culture change by presenting case studies and concepts from a number of scholars to illustrate how shifts in land use suggest deeper cultural changes; how the social construction of space impacts a community’s cultural relationship with their surroundings; and lastly, how that relationship is rapidly changing with the introduction of a booming tourist industry. I combined the sections on the environment and tourism to illustrate the impact tourism has had on all three of these topics. Particularly considering the current rise of ecotourism and archaeotourism, the authors presented here explain that as tourism impacts local culture, those ramifications in turn effect the environment. Additionally, framing culturally important landscapes and structures as tourist attractions fundamentally change the ways in which that land is used and perceived, resulting in significant changes in culture as well.

Although the ensuing discussion on globalization is somewhat removed from the dialogue on the relationship between culture, the environment, and tourism, it is nevertheless important to discuss the manner in which culture is reproduced and transmitted across national boundaries to have an informed perspective on the influence of international organizations on local communities. Not only is this relevant to the scale and scope of the agencies of social actors in the discourses between them; it is equally important to understand how local communities exert their own influence on globally exchanged cultural materials and contribute to their reproduction.
2.2 Theories on the Global Dissemination of Culture and Ideas

The focal point of Appadurai’s book *Modernity at Large* (1996) is his macroethnographic perspective on the global exchange of ideas, people, information, media, and cultural materials. He introduces a model that he calls a network of constructed landscapes that flow smoothly from one social group to another. Appadurai argues that the global cultural economy is much more complex than the center-periphery models of globalization promoted by world systems theory, that cities and social groups are nodes embedded within this network as these constructed landscapes flow around the globe. Appadurai identifies five different landscapes through which this exchange occurs: people, money and capital, technology, information, ideas and images, and defines them as the ethnoscape, financescape, technoscape, mediascape, and ideoscape respectively. The suffix –scape is added to emphasize that these currents of culture and people are fluid, irregular, and most often unpredictable due to the perspectival nature in which they are constructed. The individual constraints and incentives within these landscapes significantly contribute to their unpredictable and disjunctive nature; Appadurai argues that the disjuncture and relationships between them merit more in-depth analysis considering the impact they have on the interactions between social groups and nations. Because the globalized world we live in today has the ability to produce and disseminate these –scapes relatively instantaneously, Appadurai’s model is more akin to a chaos theory. In which these flows are uneven and disordered, benefiting and harming social groups proportional to their political-economic positions rather than orderly, systematic cultural transactions that are not fair representations of the global cultural exchange. Notably absent from this model is the voice of the local communities that provide their own interpretations and influences on some of
these –scapes. While Appadurai offers a much more realistic model to observe this global exchange than the world systems theory, Tsing takes it one step further with her proposed analysis of the discourse between competing viewpoints on universal ideas.

Although Tsing would likely agree that the interaction between Appadurai’s landscapes warrant further study, she approaches the flow of cultural materials from a different perspective. Rather than the currents of global cultural exchange flowing smoothly from one social group to another, Tsing points to the messy, and often awkward encounters between competing perspectives as the primary instigator for new arrangements of culture. A major critique that might come from Tsing is that social groups are not passively influenced by this global network of exchanges, but are rather actively engaged in their dissemination. In Tsing’s book *Friction* (2005), she primarily looks at what Appadurai would define as the ideoscape and discusses how so-called universal knowledge moves across global connections and shift and change in their meaning as they are transmitted by means of that friction between competing perspectives. Tsing expands on Appadurai’s –scapes by addressing these encounters and by including the local voice. Whereas Appadurai speaks almost entirely from his macroethnographic lens, Tsing reminds us that the agency of the local communities is equally important for influencing the universal ideas they encounter.

For Tsing, a universal concept is both cosmopolitan and situated, global in scale but local in its definition. Tsing illustrates this point by comparing a universal concept to the image of a city located at the intersection of many roads that reach out to a multitude of different directions. Some of these roads bring in foreign ideas that contribute to the shape and influence the city, and others that export locally constructed notions that are unique to that city.
specifically. This is in contrast to Appadurai’s concept of an ideoscape that transmits from one location to the next; for Appadurai the roads would only be importing foreign ideas and exporting nothing.

The environmentalism in Punta Allen is a good example of this concept of friction occurring in Punta Allen. As residents take these notions of sustainability and environmentalism as outlined by foreign actors and redefining them within their own social context. For the villagers of Punta Allen environmentalism is not an abstract, lofty ideological concept, but grounded in practice and personal responsibility. We observed aspects of this after soccer games when coaches would insist their players pick up the trash left by spectators, the pride they take in putting reserve policies on sustainability into practice in their work as fishermen and tour guides, and the mixed attitudes of the trash washing up on their beaches everyday. While some residents would like to see the people of Punta Allen cleaning their beach, others see the trash as the Sian Ka’an’s responsibility because they were not the ones who put it there. Environmentalism is an important factor in many residents’ lives because many livelihoods depend on a pristine environment through the eco-tours, lobster fishing, and fly-fishing. Additionally many perceive climate change as a direct threat to their everyday lives, and attribute some environmental issues to the globally changing climate; for example the influx of sargassum.

One of the principal ways they export their concept of environmentalism fused with personal responsibility is by teaching other lobster fishing communities around the world about their cooperative operations. One of the focal points of their business is facilitating a sustainable lobster population through the use of sombras and designating ownership of
‘campos’ of the bay to fishermen in the cooperative who dictate fishing rights within their individually owned campos. They use artificial habitats that mimic the lobster’s natural habitat that allows them to move in and out of freely rather than ensnaring them in a traditional trap. This allows the lobster to continue to breed, prevents premature death that can occur in traditional traps, and discourages lobster migration to other areas by providing refuge from predators. Their division of the fishing area into allotted campos prevents in-fighting between fishermen over the best spots for fishing and over fishing by disallowing one member to fish another’s plot without his permission. The sombras combined with the campos ensure that fishermen can consistently find lobster in the same areas each time they fish, and allows lobster populations to remain sustainable by reducing competition between members and staggering the rate and frequency various area of the bay are fished. This practice has made Punta Allen one of the most successful fishing cooperatives in the country.

Leaders of the cooperatives demonstrate their sustainable practice to other lobster fishing communities throughout the Caribbean and around the world by visiting other villages, and by inviting others to observe the cooperative operations in Punta Allen. Visiting fishermen are taught how to make sombras, the internal rules and regulations of the cooperative, and observe the productivity of the campos system. Cooperative members have taken the idea of environmentalism and incorporated it within their own system of inter-reliance and personal responsibility inherent in the campos system, and export their resulting unique structure to other communities desiring more sustainable lobster populations.
2.3 Land, Culture, and the Impact of Tourism

What follows is a discussion on the common themes related to culture, the environment, and tourism. For this section, many of the articles and books I reviewed looked at how landscape is tied to culture, land use in relation to culture change, and how different social actors frame particular spaces to forward their own agendas. Tourism intersects with these themes by introducing the changes in land use, by framing landscapes as tourist destinations and in turn inspiring the change in culture. The tourism industry is the catalyst for the change in culture that alters local communities’ relationships with their surrounding environment. A strategy that many of the authors I have read suggest a locally managed industry, which would better allow for communities to maintain their cultural reproduction, and utilize their knowledge of the local environment.

2.4 Framing Space

The significance of framing space can be seen in chapter one of ‘Ethnographies of Conservation’ where Nygren (2000) discusses the difficult circumstances surrounding colonists who have settled on the outskirts of the Indio-Maíz reserve after the conclusion of the Nicaraguan civil war. In this instance, the competing perspectives of NGOs, government officials, national, and international conservationists were utilized as tools to legitimize their own ideas for proper resource management and invalidating others in order to reinforce their own claim to gain authority over the situation. Outside of these organizations invalidating one another while bolstering their own definitions of the situation, the continuous framing of the colonists as intruders intentionally mismanaging natural resources for profit resulted in
considerable issues of identity and self worth, seeing as many of the squatters had few if any alternative options in the wake of the civil war. The issue of the colonists in the Indio-Maíz reserve brings us back to Tsing’s notion of friction; although the different social actors had competing interests, the commonality of appropriate use of natural resources remained at the heart of the dialogue between them, stimulating social mobilization. The circumstances here also introduce us to a new point of discussion, the uneven agency of the social actors participating in the dialogue.

The cooperatives of Punta Allen indeed have a greater agency than many other Maya communities in deciding their future in regards to tourism, however their voice in making that determination is still relatively small compared to the municipality of Tulum and the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve. The present situation gives Punta Allen the ability to make a lot of the decision-making with respect to some aspects of the eco tours such as price, the types of tours given, and the routes they take on the water and in the village. I would argue that a large aspect of the cooperatives’ decision-making power is in spatial framing. However many of the larger decisions are implemented by the Sian Ka’an as standards necessary to qualify for the label of ‘biosphere reserve’ set by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Some of these restrictions include the number of boats on the water at any given time, number of jeeps permitted to travel the jungle road in a given day, the catch-and-release policy for fly-fishermen, and standards for protecting the wildlife the eco-tours are showcasing such as the distance to and time spent in proximity with dolphins, sea turtles, and the coral reef. It is important to know that residents appreciate and largely respect these and similar policies for sustainability, and initially asked for Punta Allen’s inclusion in the Biosphere
Reserve during its’ creation in 1986. Although many residents expressed contentment at the
level of tourism currently under gone in Punta Allen, the number of visitors to their community
outside their eco-tour business, is not entirely within the scope of their agency.

2.5 Determining Agency

This issue of framing can also be observed in the village of Cobá in Quintana Roo, Mexico, as authors Daltabuit and Pi have (1990) illustrated, in tandem again with the important
issue of difference in scale of agency. The land that Cobá is located on was expropriated by the
Mexican national government as an archaeological zone and designated as a national park due
to the location of Maya ruins close to the village. This immediately put a stop to the traditional
slash-and-burn agriculture (*milpa*) practiced by the villagers on some of their most fertile
grounds (Daltabuit and Pi, 1990: 6). Although many Cobá villagers are not necessarily opposed
to the introduction of this ‘archaeotourism’ and acknowledge that many have found increased
economic activity as a result, the consensus among the villagers is that tourism has brought
relatively few advantages as promised. The situation in Cobá as described by Daltabuit and Pi
also intersects with the question of how tourism is affecting culture change in local
communities. The authors ask three questions that work to measure the power of the villagers
of Cobá’s agency, and on how tourism will impact local culture: will their participation in the
tourism industry result improved material and social conditions? Are they given the opportunity
to have a significant role in determining their future? And, will they have enough political
power to maintain their property rights and minimize the socio-cultural costs of tourism?
I use these three questions as a frame of reference when determining the residents of Punta Allen’s overall agency in regards to the quantity of visitors and types of tourism present in their village. It is almost inarguable that tourism has directly improved the material and social conditions of residents participating in the tourism industry. The economic benefits have granted cooperative members greater purchasing power that has allowed them to buy more expensive commodities such as microwaves, cars, and computers, many were previously not able to afford. Many if not most residents are now connected to the Internet and for those who are not an internet café has been established in town. The success of the tourism industry brought the village out of the financial crisis wrought by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. As outlined in the previous section, with cooperation from the Sian Ka’an the tourism has afforded residents a greater ability to determine their own future within the industry. Although some determining factors are still not entirely within their control, their situatedness within the Sian Ka’an coupled with the Municipality of Tulum’s disregard has given them a greater agency in self-determination in comparison to other villages such as Cobá. Because of Tulum’s general disregard for issues concerned with Punta Allen, such as utilities services and road repairs, often times villagers see it fit to take solutions into their own hands. The final question posed by Daltabuit and Pi is a point of concern however. Because the village is located within the reserve, villagers do not technically own the deeds to the land they live on.

The questions posed by Daltabuit and Pi are important to keep in mind when considering Brown’s article (1999) on the construction of the large-scale tourist project called Maya World. Brown’s study on the Maya town of Chemax embodies these questions as well as raises issues of land-use with her discussion on the commoditization of Maya cultural landscape
for consumption by international tourists. The cultural confusion increasingly prevalent in Maya communities in the Yucatan is in part a result of the framing by tourism agencies of their ordinary lives as extraordinary for tourist attractions. The concern here is that as Mayas construct new identities within this context, manufactured caricatures for the sake commodification might take the place of actual Maya culture. Brown also touches on framing space and land use within the Maya World project, a large-scale international tourism project for visitors to tour modern Maya culture, space, and ruins. The relationship Maya have with their cultural landscape is shifting as significance is placed on environmental and archaeological landscapes that is dissimilar to Maya cultural importance. Spaces left outside of the tourism circuit, such as Chemax, remain silent and begin to lose significance within this new context; alternatively, more popular tourist sites, such as Cobá and Cancun, lose their significance as younger generations increasingly see these spaces as tourist attractions before their cultural importance. Brown illustrates how a community’s cultural relationship with its surrounding environment shifts as land use changes and that space is framed differently by external organizations. The power to frame the cultural space of Punta Allen is in the hands of the business cooperatives through the advertising of their eco-tours, the highly structured routes the tours take through the biosphere, and the managed experience tourists have in the village. Because framing the space in Punta Allen is left to the residents and not a third party tourism agency, they have considerable control over assigning significance to their surroundings. The cooperatives are able to highlight what they consider important to Punta Allen.

Frapolli et al.’s paper (2008) on three Yucatec Maya communities illustrates how changes in land use are indicative of a deeper cultural change. The researchers observed the
differences in natural resource management among households as a result of the influence of tourism. According to the authors’ study, as households from these communities increased economic activities in relation to the growing ecotourism in the area, traditional agricultural practices such as milpa and home gardening decreased in importance and prevalence. Frapolli et al. advocate for a strategy that would allow more of a balance between traditional and alternative economic activities that would grant community members the ability to participate in the growing economy related to tourism, while maintain their traditional cultural reproduction. For Punta Allen Frapolli, et al. would suggest that the residents continue to engage in what they consider to be their traditional economic activity, lobster fishing, while exploring economic opportunities in tourism.

In a similar study on the cultivation of Sabal palm historically used for thatching roofs, Martinez et al. (2006) found a close relationship between culture change in Yucatan Maya communities and the demand as well as management of the Sabal palm. The researchers for this project identified two ethnic groups that embodied this gradual shift in culture, the more traditional Mestizos characterized by a stronger devotion to subsistence agriculture, and the Catrines who enjoy a higher social status that comes with mixed heritage of Maya and nonindigenous populations. As with Frapolli et al.’s observations on the abandonment of traditional agricultural practices, the change in culture for Martinez et al. was the observation that the growing tendency for Mestizos to adapt new status symbols and shift their attitudes towards the more market-oriented Catrines, measurably less traditional cultural knowledge was retained. Frapolli et al. have also strongly advocated for adopting strategies that strike a balance between traditional and alternative economic activities that allow Maya communities
to safeguard their cultural knowledge. One such strategy is their argument for locally regulated
tourism activities that value Maya knowledge of their surrounding environment, and allow the
Maya themselves to relate the significance of the cultural landscape. This is another strategy
that Punta Allen employs through the use of their tourism cooperatives. The tourism industry in
Punta Allen is almost entirely locally managed by the residents of Punta Allen. Eco-tour guides
rely on their extensive knowledge of the Bay of Ascension to showcase the biodiversity of the
region through the eco-tours, and the fly-fishing guides use their knowledge of the Bay and
experience in decades of fly-fishing in the Bay to assist their clients in catching a Permit, one of
the most elusive angler-fish to ‘catch on the fly’.

2.6 Summary of Literature Review

As illustrated in the articles and chapters above, the introduction and perpetuation of
the booming tourism industry is profoundly impacting the cultural reproduction of local
indigenous communities. The two questions at hand are to what extent, and how to develop
and implement strategies for mitigating those changes to the benefit of the local communities.
Gottdiener’s article on the largest tourism project in this history of Mexico embodies many of
the themes and concerns outlined above. While international organizations such as Greenpeace
frame the project as primarily an issue of environmental concern, and the state of Mexico
frames the project as an opportunity for a significant expansion of economic activity for the
state as well as for local community members; the voices of the indigenous peoples already
residing in the land slotted for developed are buried, often intentionally, under the discourse
between organizations with substantially larger agencies.
Not only will the large-scale project significantly alter the traditional uses of the surrounding landscape, but the superimposed infrastructure currently proposed will have devastating effects on the local ecological processes, and in turn those who depend on them for their livelihoods. Gottdiener strongly suggests further study on how the aforementioned different scales of ideologies shape local development, that will help us better understand how the development of this tourism industry interconnects with the culture, socioeconomic, and environmental ideologies at the local, national, and international levels. The intersection of the themes outlined above lies in the development of the tourism industry; as many of the authors have suggested, a strategy or series of strategies, should be heavily considered for the sustainable development moving forward that considers the ecological functions, and the arguably more important sociocultural concerns of the local inhabitants.

What makes the tourism industry in Punta Allen unique is their ability to implement of a number of the strategies listed here through the tourism cooperatives. For example residents who have extensive knowledge of the surrounding environment locally manage the tourism industry, and the cooperatives provide a highly regulated experience to eco and fly-fishing tourists that controls the framing of space to incoming visitors. Many cooperative members continue to participate in what they consider to be the traditional economic activity of lobster fishing in equal amounts compared to tourism activities. Both industries work to supplement one another. Using the three questions Daltabuit and Pi use to measure the power of a village’s agency with tourism, Punta Allen seems to have considerable decision-making power over determining their future with tourism. First and foremost the material and social well-being of the village has certainly improved. The cooperatives are given a fair opportunity to have a
significant role in determining their future in the industry due to the strategies they already implement listed above. I would also argue that their ability to have that decision-making power so is due to their ability to negotiate living within the Sian Ka’an and the municipality of Tulum.
CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL AND SPATIAL CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY PUNTA ALLEN

3.1 Early History

There are a number of local speculations on where ‘Punta Allen’ got its name that we were told throughout our time in the village. One of the more interesting theories includes a tale of a pirate, (most commonly attributed to Edward Teach [Blackbeard] although there are legends of other pirates in the Bay of Ascension as well) who stole from the Spanish in and around the Caribbean on the Spanish Main during the Golden Age of Piracy from 1660-1726. According to the story, Teach sought refuge with the Spanish he stole from after his crew betrayed him for not distributing wealth evenly who then asked him to sink an English ship as reprisal. Notwithstanding the more colorful tale surrounding the events, Teach did in fact sink a ship called Great Allen in the Caribbean, however this was reportedly near the island of Saint Vincent in the Lesser Antilles, not off the coast of Quintana Roo.

Another theory is more simply an English explorer was mapping the terrain and named the point after his last name. Adama, a prominent member of the cooperative alliance and long time lobster-fisher who’s family has been in Punta Allen for several generations, posited that the name is a bastardization of the original Mayan name of ‘Punta Ah Allin’ similarly to how the modern pronunciations and spellings of Cozumel and Chetumal originated from Cuzamil and Chactemal respectively, “Look, there are many versions. I believe this one. In Mayan this place is called [Punta Ah Allin]. Each point has a name in Mayan: Punta Yuyun, Punta Samach, this point was called Punta Ah Allin. It’s A-A and in the middle is the Mayan accent ‘llin’. (Adama)” which translates to alligator’s point. Although the village itself is commonly referred to as Punta
Allen, this name refers only to the geographical tip at the end of the outcropping of land the village is located on. The official name of the village is Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo Gómez.

Punta Allen as a geographical location had been of importance long before the establishment of Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo Gómez. During the early 18th century pirates used the area to prey on Spanish ships as they passed through the Yucatan Channel (between the Yucatan peninsula and Cuba) on their way back to Europe; Jean Lafitte and Edward Teach were both specifically mentioned as pirates who operated in surrounding waters. In the mid to late 19th century the area was a refuge to Maya during the successful years of the Caste Wars of the Yucatan Peninsula, and was included in the indigenous Maya state of Chan Santa Cruz that developed after the Maya successful campaign in the mid 19th century around the city of the same name (later named Santa Cruz del Bravo – now Felipe Carrillo Puerto).

3.2 Life Before Punta Allen: Camp Vega

The history of the modern settlement of Punta Allen begins in the years 1898-1901 when Major General José María de la Vega of the Caste Wars was appointed the administrator of the newly established Federal Territory of Quintana Roo. One of the governor’s first actions was establishing a camp under the newly constructed lighthouse at the tip of Punta Allen that served as his base of operations. The reason for this was the geographically strategic position of the Boca Paila Peninsula in relation to the rest of the territory. Although the capital was quickly moved to Santa Cruz de Bravo in 1904, Camp Vega continued to introduce product such as chicle (a natural gum used to produce chewing gum), spirits, wood, and copra to the center of
the territory via boat to the harbor in Vigía Chico, which was then transported to Santa Cruz de Bravo by the comically named ‘jet of the Chocs’ – a truck that moved so slow that it would take a week to get to the city from Vigía Chico. Because the only other two harbors at the time were in Chetumal and Progreso, Camp Vega was incredibly important for transporting goods in this way from Merida to Santa Cruz de Brazo since the Maya had destroyed the rail line between the two cities during the Caste War to prevent the army from transporting supplies and troops. This is how copra was transported to the center of the territory and eventually how la cooperativa de Pescadores de Vigía Chico en Punta Allen received its name in reference to this trade route.

There are four Maya and Mestizo families referred to as the founders that were among the first to settle the area where the village of Punta Allen is today and significantly contributed to its development and the ensuing development of the lobster cooperative: the Mendoza family who have operated the lighthouse since the original construction and owned the surrounding property, the Choc family, the Ancona family who continue to own a property on the opposite side of the village that used to be a coconut plantation, and the Pereira family.

The lighthouse at Punta Allen was a part of a network of lighthouses established in the early 20th century that were amongst the first non-Maya resettlements of the territory since the Caste Wars the century before. The first several decades of life on Punta Allen were somewhat similar to life in other settlements that sprung up around lighthouses on the coast of Quintana Roo. The towns were relatively isolated due to lack of access to other cities and villages. Residents relied on marine agriculture, fishing for sea turtle, snail, shark, scaly fish, and other
marine life, traded with Cuban sailors, and participated in the copra business for economic activity.

The first operator of the lighthouse and subsequently the owner of the surrounding property was Don Manuel Mendoza Martin, the great-grandfather of one of the leaders of the lobster fishing cooperative today. People coming to Punta Allen at this time would ask Don Manuel Mendoza permission to build their houses on his property and to farm the surrounding area for copra, and fish in the Bay of Ascension. The approximately 20 original houses at the lighthouse were made using the tops of mangroves, and the chi palm tree was used to construct the roofs interconnected by a series of tubes to distribute rainwater collected by cisterns. A type of aquatic plant called tasiste was cut into long, thin strips and braided to tie the different pieces of wood together. Although different materials are used today, such as metal sheets for roofs instead of the chi palm tree, there are still some houses and structures in
Punta Allen that are built in a similar fashion. Because there were no freshwater wells at the
time, cisterns were used to collect rainwater that was rationed out to families by a bucket of
water a day by the lighthouse operator. Will is 54 years old and has been living in Punta Allen
for 40 years, immediately after the settlement relocated to where the village is today, and
described some aspects of life at Camp Vega, “There were] cisterns and the roofs were
connected through tubes. The lighthouse keeper was the officer, the doctor – the man of the
thousand professions. And the people who lived there used to have a bucket of water each day.
They had to be smart to preserve the water (Will)”.

In the first half of the 20th century the primary economic activity in Punta Allen was
profiting off of the commerce coming into and out of Vigía Chico, trading with Belize and Cuban
ships as they passed, the coconut business, with lobster and scaly fishing used almost entirely
to supplement income. According to one of our participants there were only a handful (three or
four) of coconut plantations on Punta Allen’s side of the Boca Paila Bridge, however there were
many more along the coast of the Boca Paila peninsula back up to Tulum. The farmers would
first wait for coconuts to fall from the trees and then collect them in giant baskets to put into
storage. They were then cut and peeled, (using various methods depending on the farmer) and
left to sun-dry for two to three days in a drying room on a wire net. Once the sun cracks the
husk, the meat of the coconut can be removed whole from each side of the coconut and are left
to dry for one more day. Once dry, the meat is chopped into small pieces, put in a sack that can
carry up to 100 kilograms (220 lbs.) of copra, and hit with a club-like stick. Finally, the sacks
were taken by boat to Cozumel where they were shipped again to Progresso, (a port on the
other side of the Yucatan Peninsula near Merida) from Progresso to Merida and there sold by
the ton to a company called Hidrogenadora Yucateca there that bought all the copra produced from the Punta Allen area. There are roughly 5,000 coconuts per 1 ton of copra. To give a sense of production, a participant’s father owned a one and a half kilometer coconut farm on the beach that produced roughly six tons of copra per month.

Hurricane Janet in 1955 was a catalytic moment in Punta Allen’s history that initiated a shift in economic activity in the region that was profiting off of the production of copra up until this time. Hurricane Janet was a category 5 hurricane with 175mph sustained winds when it made landfall near Chetumal, just 168km (105 miles) from Punta Allen making it one of the strongest Atlantic hurricanes on record. Lawrence is now 75 years old and was attending school in Merida and living with his Aunt at the time, his father was funding his education with work in the copra industry at Punta Allen. He told us how he and his father worked to tie down houses, boats, and prepare for the hurricane and described some of the devastation:

When it came at 6 am, it started to clear the clearing. We saw the coconut trees falling like dominoes. You push one and then, everything falls. That’s what happened with all plants. When you suddenly saw that the move was coming, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. All coconuts were gone. Then, again. In 30 minutes coconut was gone. There was nothing left.

Residents rebuilt and replanted and many people continued to participate in the coconut industry after Hurricane Janet. Indeed, the coconut business continued in some degree up until the frequent outbreaks of Lethal Yellowing Disease (LYD) over the past four decades that spread through the Sian Ka’an like a plague, infecting and killing upwards of 95% of palms within the biosphere by 2008. The economy in Punta Allen began to diversify more earnestly after hurricane Janet with an increasing emphasis on fishing, however copra continued to be
the more profitable industry up until the height of the lobster cooperative in the 1970s and 1980s and the introduction of the *sombra* lobster traps.

3.3 Establishing Javier Rojo Gomez

The late 60s were incredibly important period for Punta Allen for two reasons: establishing the lobster cooperative and the six families at Camp Vega, (including the aforementioned four founding families) moved out of the lighthouse and began construction on present-day Punta Allen. In 1968, a man named Don Susano Torres Rebolledo began drilling to look for fresh water. As we were told, he would drill a well that would initially yield freshwater, but eventually turn salty by the next day. He continued drilling everyday, every 100-200 meters as he reported, until he reached an area that drill after drill continuously yielded freshwater. He came back to the lighthouse and told the occupants that he had found water about 2km further down the peninsula. Cautiously optimistic, the wives of workers were the first to come down to the area to carry buckets of water back to the lighthouse for washing and bathing until everyone was convinced Don Susano Torres had indeed found a reliable source of fresh water. The history here is somewhat fuzzy, and differs depending on who is asked. Some participants reported that the water was found on Ancona land, reports from other members of the community are as follows.

By this time the keeper of the lighthouse had changed hands from the original operator, Don Manuel Mendoza Martin, to his son, Don Manuel Mendoza Delgado. After some time of coming back and forth between the source of the fresh water and the lighthouse, residents asked Don Manuel Mendoza Delgado where the Mendoza property ended and were told that
the water was found on un-owned territory, between the Mendoza and Ancona property. Don Romualdo Ancona was under the understanding that their two properties were flush with no land in between, and decided that if the Mendoza territory ended before where the fresh water was found that it was on his land. People came from the lighthouse with building materials and built a line of houses on the shore of the beach and constructed a permanent, more stable well. Reportedly, Don Romualdo Ancona waited until residents were away from their newly constructed houses and burnt them to the ground (without injury to anyone) and sewed coconut seeds in their stead. Residents then approached the then governor of the territory of Quintana Roo, Licenciado Javier Gomez to intervene and help solve the territory dispute. The residents claimed that the area was a piece of land outside of Manuel Mendoza Delgado’s property, that they wanted to create a township or village on the land because of the fresh water, and that Romualdo Ancona has claimed the land as his own. The governor himself came to the spot and decided that since the coconut seeds were sowed recently, that the residents claims were true and declared that the residents could settle there. Prior to this, the settlement under the lighthouse was simply referred to as Colonia de Pescadores because they were a fishing colony, but because of the governor’s decision on this dispute, the residents decided to name the township Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo Gomez in honor of the governor’s decision on this dispute and constructed 20 little houses made from “half pole wood” along the beach anew in 1972-1973; few of which remain there today due to hurricanes. Some time later a second row of houses were built behind the first, establishing where the township of Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo Gomez, or more commonly referred to as Punta Allen, is today.
3.4 Rise of the Lobster Industry

In the 1960s the first lobster cooperative was formed and based out of Cozumel, with fishing conducted along the coast of Quintana Roo from Puerto Morelos, Isla del Carmen, and the Bay of Ascension. By 1966-67 one of the founding members of that cooperative, Don Casimiro Choc Uch, proposed along with Manuel Mendoza Delgado and Don Antonia Pereyra, to create another lobster cooperative, and decided on Punta Allen as the base of operations since people in Cozumel didn’t want another lobster cooperative operating out of the town. Because they needed a particular number of members to officially start a cooperative, workers who were cleaning and collecting coconuts on the shore of Punta Yuyum and near the bridge of Yuym were invited to join and the cooperative began with 20-25 original members. They decided to call the cooperative Vigía Chico despite never operating out of that city, with respect to the commercial route used there. In the first years of the cooperative they extracted lobster as well as copra, which was still the priority business at the time – lobster was fished as supplemental income to the more profitable copra.

The history of the lobster fishing cooperative was explained to us as divided into three distinct ‘eras’. The first was from its foundation in 1968 until 1972; defined as when there was open fishing for everyone regardless of location in the Bay, and admittance to the cooperative was open. During these five years, and the couple years leading up to it, the Choc and Pereyra families moved from Cozumel to Camp Vega with the establishment of the cooperative. Open fishing was done on the coral reef as well as in the bay; we were told that in the early days the lobster were in such abundance that they were coming up onto the shore on the peninsula itself. There was little to no concern for conservation at this time and fishermen would use
nets, traditional lobster traps, and catch any lobster regardless of size. During this time period Cuban boats would come to barter goods for lobster. The commerce with the Cuban ships proved to be profitable for the Vigía Chico fishermen in more ways than one; sometime during the trading with Cubans some fishermen were told of how their counterparts in Cuba used *sombras* (the direct translation of this is ‘shadows’) to collect lobster.

![Concrete sombras on the beach.](image)

The *sombras* act as artificial habitats for the lobster, (as well as other marine life) by simulating a coral reef. The first few were made using metal barrels that were flattened and cut in half to create a concave shape that allowed lobster to swim underneath for protection against predators. When the fishermen returned to the trap to find a multitude of lobster using the *sombra*, other fishermen in the cooperative were quick to follow suit. These artificial habitats were instrumental in the rise of the lobster industry by discouraging the migration of lobster, and providing specific locations for fishermen to consistently find lobster. Various construction
materials were experimented with including wood, metal sheets, asbestos sheets, etc. until concrete was established as the best material due to its resilience to deterioration, (and over time would further mimic coral reef as plants and animals such as algae and barnacles would ‘naturalize’ its appearance) and its heavy weight would prevent strong currents from changing their position in the Bay.

The advantages of traps that mimic their natural habitat are numerous. The most immediately apparent is that it allowed the lobsters to move freely in and out of the sombra, eating, breeding, and escaping predators when needed, whereas traditional traps ensnared them and prevented their movement entirely. When caught in traditional traps, lobster would often resort to killing one another for food and fishermen would occasionally return to a trap with only one lobster; or no lobster at all with a single ensnared predator such as nurse shark or moray eel. Sombras provide reliable locations where fishermen could find lobster relative to combing the coral reef, caves, and inspecting rock formations. Other advantages are the sombras sustainability for the lobster population, as well as conservation for the coral reef. Fishermen did not need to rely on fishing the reef, preserving the reefs’ ecosystem and health from accidental damage, and the rapid growth of sombra use in the Bay of Ascension encouraged the lobster population to remain in the Bay instead of migrating to other areas.

1972 marks the start of the second phase of the Vigía Chico Cooperative when the cooperative split up the sea into individual domains, or campos, that were sold by the cooperative to their members. The owners of these campos have control over who is permitted to fish; something no other fishing cooperative in Mexico had done at the time. The time period from 1972 to 1988 were the most productive years for the Vigía Chico Cooperative and where
Punta Allen began to genuinely thrive due to its economic success and the development of the surrounding areas. Although many fishermen were still living at Punta Allen for the more productive lobster seasons and migrating back to nearby cities and towns, the ongoing construction of Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo Gomez during the early 1970s worked to establish a more permanent settlement. The 1970s saw the beginnings of the tourism industry in Cancun due in part to the observable success of tourism in neighboring Cozumel in wake of US interest in the area as a result of the military base there during WWII. The Governor Javier Rojo Gomez began construction of a series of roads and highways throughout the territory, the most important for Punta Allen was the dirt road from Felipe Carrillo Puerto to Tulum, and the Chetumal-Escarcega highway that substantially increased the speed and frequency of trade in the area. The Boca Paila bridge was built in 1975, allowing the fishermen to conduct their growing lobster trade by car more easily instead of exclusively by sea, which they began doing in 1971-72. Up until the bridge’s construction the only way to transverse this part of the road was by raft. Once a day, a trip to and from Tulum was made to trade lobster and copra, which was then carried to Felipe Carrillo Puerto and subsequently on to Merida.

Figure 3. Painted history in Vigía Chico business building
Up until now Quintana Roo was still considered a territory due to a population of less than 80,000, the minimum requirement for statehood in Mexico. It was finally made a state on October 8th, 1974 bringing National economic support from the Mexican government, which established Mexican Fishery Products along the coast of Quintana Roo. The one in Punta Allen was constructed sometime in the late 70s to early 80s and was the only building in town with electricity because it was a scaling and ice factory – a huge boon to the production of lobster in Punta Allen since they had no ice for themselves up until then. A small power plant was soon built in 1982-1983, which connected every house in the village to electrical power for the first time, initially from 6:00am to 10:00pm, and then later extended to midnight. By the mid-1980s the lobster business was booming and by 1985, there were only a small handful of people still participating in the copra business due to the success of the cooperative and its members. Cooperative members were at an all time high of roughly 110 members by 1988, and the stability the lobster fishing (due in no small part to the use of the sombras) brought a time of economic prosperity to Punta Allen based almost exclusively on the production of lobster and fish. People began buying their own cars and electrical appliances previously unavailable to them and an additional electrical plant for more hours with light was established in the village.

From 1985 to 1988 the Vigía Chico Cooperative entered into a semi-public company called Ocean Garden that was already doing business in Puerto Morelos and was almost entirely responsible for the exportation of the lobster extracted in Quintana Roo to the United States. Tulum had become one of the more important cities in the state for commerce due to its central location and intersecting highways. Because of this, most if not all of the lobster caught on the coast of Quintana Roo was brought to Tulum for processing and packaging before
being transported now by trailers and trucks to the United States. As a result of their economic prosperity, the members of the Vigía Chico Cooperative sought to build their own processing plant in the city and invited other cooperatives to join in the endeavor and proposed the idea to Ocean Garden to which they agreed. Due to their good economic standing and success in copra and lobster throughout the past several decades, the cooperative was able to take out several loans from a number of banks to begin construction on the plant.

3.5 Lobster Crisis

Unfortunately, construction on the processing plant was never finished. In 1988 disaster struck with Hurricane Gilbert in September; the most intense hurricane observed in the Atlantic basin until Hurricane Wilma in 2005. Although there was little to no damage to the town itself, the disaster for the Vigía Chico Cooperative was in the bay with the disruption of the lobster spawning cycle, the death of the larvae, and most of the sombras having been swept away in the storm, all of which resulted in the migration of lobster from the area. Indeed, the lobster population in the Bay of Ascension did not recover to the point of economic viability for the cooperative for the next three years. Even today the lobster population in the bay has never regained the numbers it saw prior to 1988.

The sudden and drastic decline of the lobster population absolutely devastated the economy in Punta Allen. The other cooperatives dropped out of the processing plant project having been similarly affected, and began selling their lobster themselves, leaving Vigía Chico to cover the operational costs of the plant they could no longer afford. Some fishermen resigned and left Punta Allen, and others were kicked out after they began diverting their products,
which is against one of the cooperatives rules. The cooperative managed to sell enough products to cover the operational cost of the plant, but struggled to pay off all of their debts. Auditors were hired to determine why there was so much debt and how much they owed in total and discovered that the treasurer of the cooperative was handling the cooperative’s money out of a suitcase instead of a bank. The auditors found receipts for loans on napkins, restaurant receipt paper, and there was no format or method that could be used to determine who exactly within the cooperative owed money. This accumulated a large sum of debt that was referred to as ‘little orphan debt’ that the cooperative split amongst the remaining members to pay back the debt to their lenders. The cooperative fired the administrators responsible for mishandling the money, impounded their properties, boats, and lobster fields, and told them to leave Punta Allen entirely in lieu of pressing any kind of charges. When Vigía Chico could no longer pay their debts they were forced to declare bankruptcy, and the banks collected whatever they had left, including the land on which the processing plant was being constructed. As Adama put it, “...the cooperative [had its] assets seized in the end. It paid everything it could. When it no longer could, a bank came and kept [it] all. This is how we ran out of land, out of business and started again from scratch (Adama)”, marking the third and final phrase of the history of the Vigía Chico Lobster Cooperative in 1990.

3.6 The Introduction of Tourism

Tourism in Punta Allen began in a very similar fashion to the copra and lobster fishing industries, as supplemental income to an already successful economy. There are no set dates for when one industry over takes another in Punta Allen, these industries overlap and are in
production simultaneously until a catalytic event such as LYD or a hurricane instigates greater focus in one industry over another. The very beginnings of the fly-fishing industry started several years before the crisis of the lobster population collapse with the former owner of the deed of Boca Paila, a man named Antonio Gonzalez, went to the United States to study and learned to fly-fishing. He came back to where his parents were living on the Boca Paila peninsula with friends for vacation who thoroughly enjoyed the experience and convinced Gonzalez that a fly-fishing business would do exceedingly well here. Several lobster fishermen from Colonia de Pescadores Javier Rojo Gomez decided to join him in this endeavor since the fishermen were exceedingly familiar with the Bay and were able to take fly-fishermen to locations they knew they would be able to catch the most fish. A lobster fisherman and his wife established the Cuzan Guest House in the early 1980s and offered the very first commercial eco-tours and fly-fishing trips out of Punta Allen, several years before the Sian Ka’an was created, and a full decade before the tourism cooperatives were formed. However, both industries remained in their infancy for all intents and purposes until after Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 and the remaining fishermen were looking for work to pay off the ‘orphan debt’ while the lobster population rebounded. In the same fashion as lobster fishing was complimentary to the coconut farming in the 1950s and 1960s, the fly-fishing and eco-touring provided supplementary income for residents who primarily relied on lobster fishing.

The Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve’s establishment in 1986 and subsequent qualification for a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987 would profoundly influence life in Punta Allen, particularly in regards to its developing tourism industry in the early 1990s. Immediately after the Biosphere’s formation, a business called Friends of the Sian Ka’an A.C. was created to
promote and raise funds for the biosphere. Friends of the Sian Ka’an along with a non-profit organization called Rare began providing fully funded naturalist guide courses, courses for group management, and environmental courses to fishermen who began exploring the fly-fishing and ecotourism industries in the early 1990s. As a prerequisite for conducting tourism in the reserve, guides were required to take an English course at a camp in the reserve called Santa Teresa, where perspective guides stayed for a three-month period to learn the language.

The formation of the municipality of Solidaridad based out of Playa del Carmen in 1993 began what was to become the Riviera Maya, a touristic corridor 150 km (93 miles) long along the coast of Quintana Roo that extended from the town of Puerto Morelos north of Playa del Carmen, and ended with Punta Allen in the south. The Riviera Maya created a tremendous influx of tourism due to recent investment in the area and advertisement geared towards people interested in a less manufactured experience offered by the mega resorts in Cancun and Cozumel. As the Riviera Maya developed through the early to mid-1990s tourism began flowing into Punta Allen more earnestly.

3.7 Punta Allen in the Past Twenty-Five Years

In the early 1990s the economy in Punta Allen was still in a state of recovery from Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. Additionally, as previously mentioned the Lethal Yellowing Disease spread through the Boca Paila Peninsula like a plague, killing off almost the entirety of the remaining coconut farms; effectively putting a conclusive end to the decades old copra business. However, the economy continued to recover due to the increase in eco-tourism and fly-fishing as a result of marketing with the Riviera Maya. And despite apprehension about
making another investment, in 1998 twenty-five Vigía Chico cooperative members established the first tourism cooperative in Punta Allen: La Cooperativa de Gaitanes, followed quickly by the establishment of the second, La Cooperativa Las Boyas in 1999, and a third called Punta Allen. The Sian Ka’an gave 24 permits to individual members of Gaitanes, and one member four permits after he established a sport fishing company, another soon after was awarded 8. What followed soon there after was more official registrations of boats and guides that started to bring regulation to business practices instead of regulating the tourism coming in and out of the reserve. For instance, captains started to have to pay for insurance on their vehicles, tourists, and shipmates. Boats were required to have canvases over the top since sunscreen was prohibited by the reserve. As these regulations went into effect along with the price of gasoline, operational costs, and daily expenses, prices soon increased from the initial 400 pesos to 800, 1000, 1500, until they reached the current price of 2200/2300 pesos per tour. The fly-fishing industry followed a similar trajectory, starting at 1000-1500 per day to the current 3500.

Around the same time a representative from a fishing company in Baja California arrived and introduced the lobster cooperative to the notion of selling lobsters whole and alive, fetching a higher price on the market. Punta Allen finally had opportunities to find their way out of the ‘orphan debt’ from the processing plant as tourism began to soar and the lobster population finally rebounded. Around this time, members of the cooperative who had left in the wake of Hurricane Gilbert began coming back to Punta Allen in light of its recent success with the cooperatives and recovering lobster population. The remaining members decided that since they did not help in paying off the debt, they established a new rule that only family members of existing members of the cooperative could have the opportunity to join the
cooperative, all others were barred reentry. Today there are currently 85 fishermen and 55 owners of *campos* in the bay within the Vigía Chico Cooperative. Fly-fishing lodges began populating the village in the wake of Cuzan’s success and continued to do so until the present with just a few less than ten total.

As the tourism industry progressed over the course of the early 2000s, issues of price gouging became commonplace. Tourists would frequently play one cooperative off of another for cheaper prices for eco-tours, something a little less common with the fly-fishing lodges. This went on for several years and regardless of whether or not the assertions of competitive prices were true, it was effective nevertheless and prices fluctuated along with the nature of the tour. The competition to win more tourists began to impact the captains who were undercutting one another’s prices at the expense of proper maintenance of their boats. In 2012 the cooperatives met for a second time to establish an alliance between the Boyas and Gaitanes, and Punta Allen, ensuring an agreed upon standardized price for eco-tours, standardizing the duration and consistency of the eco-tours themselves, as well as prices for fly-fishing guides and boat-hands. Recently a fourth cooperative has been established by several dozen women in Punta Allen who aim to provide eco-tour activities not already covered by the eco-tours run by Punta Allen, Boyas, and Gaitanes cooperatives; such as bike rides through the reserve, tours of ruins in proximity to Punta Allen, and bird watching.

Life in Punta Allen today, particularly economic activity, is divided into overlapping seasons. The height of the eco-tourism industry is July and August, which then fluctuates to 40-50% of activity between the months of September and December, and remains consistently high from January the May. The typical season for fly-fishing begins around the end of October,
drops slightly in December and January, and picks back up again for the height of the season from February through part of May. However, at least two lodges during the summer I was in Punta Allen have been making efforts to encourage fishermen to come down during the summer months as well, citing fewer boats on the water and subsequently less competition to catch the desired fish. Lastly the lobster season starts on July 1 and ends on March 1.

3.8 Spatial Context in Tulum and Cobá

After my six-week stay in Punta Allen, I stayed with a family friend in Tulum for three nights. My friend was opening a restaurant in the ongoing development project called Aldea Zama, which hopes to rival the hotel district in Playa del Carmen in half a decades’ time. While this project is going to be an economic boon for the city of Tulum and will very likely significantly increase the amount of tourism to Tulum, it embodies the type of tourism development that Punta Allen hopes to avoid. Lots for commercial use, restaurants, hotels, bars, condominiums, retail stores, and houses have been sold on a first come first serve basis with the majority of the spots having already been taken. Since this project is still relatively in its infancy, my friend was one of the first to construct his building within the development area, and has opened the first restaurant. The direct contrast was stark between Punta Allen residents who are deeply concerned with maintaining the status quo and are content with the level of tourism they currently have and trepidation of outsiders who are only concerned with financial gain rather than the culture and place of Punta Allen. I had exploratory interviews about tourism and development with an employee of Aldea Zama in charge of sales, his partner in the restaurant, as well as informal conversations with others residents of Tulum including
taxi drivers and waiters. The majority of residents I spoke to were either apathetic or excited about the development and the commerce and economic opportunities it would bring.

While in Tulum I explored the tourist shops along the main highway, walked past the hotel district somewhat removed from the city, and participated in a tour of the ruins on the beach. The tourist shops could have been in any city in Quintana Roo and sold very typical tourism items at high prices. The tourism at the ruins was impersonal and very crowded; the grounds highly manicured and presented the tourist with a highly controlled experience. Guided tours were also available for additional money. The hotels were numerous and very ostentatious; the difference between the hotels here and the hotels in Punta Allen were similarly stark and clearly catered to radically different types of tourists. It was here that it was made clear to me why people in Punta Allen insisted that the tourists who are coming through their village are of a different nature than the so-called ‘sun and beach’ tourists frequenting their neighbors up the coast. The beaches in Punta Allen are groomed, but not nearly as manicured as the manufactured, micromanaged beaches of Tulum. Here tourists are catered to attentively, with colorful drinks served on the beach, ambient lighting in the evenings, and familiar music playing. Every hotel I saw had a pool and outside bar with beaches that were groomed everyday. Evidence of sargassum removed from the beaches was presented by square patches of recently upturned sand although there was still a large amount of seaweed on the beaches. Because I never actually saw the workers removing the sargassum, I concluded that it was being removed at night to avoid interaction with the tourists. It appeared that it was being removed in such a way as to provide tourists with pathways through the patches of seaweed;
however very few people were swimming, as it was ever present in the surf. The hotels strived to be luxurious.

The morning of my last day in Tulum I traveled to the village of Cobá, a roughly 45-minute drive northwest from Tulum, where I explored the nearby ruins and walked the village streets. There were a handful of tourist shops at the entrance of the ruins manned by residents of the village as was the tourism of the ruins. The village reminded me of Punta Allen. I observed a Catholic church as well as a Jehovah’s Witness place of worship and many of the buildings were similarly constructed. There was equally an observable difference between the houses of families that were more financially well off than of some of their neighbors with steel sheets for roofs. It almost felt invading to be walking the streets here, exasperated by the looks of curiosity I received from the few villagers I passed. Unlike Punta Allen, the village was relatively empty, as the residents had to travel some 600-800 meters down the road to work at the tourism shops/ruin tours, or another half mile or so further down the road to where there were more tourist shops and some restaurants that tourists pass on their way in and out of the ruin tours. The village being behind both of these areas of commerce was clearly not a part of the manufactured experience the tourist was supposed to be presented with, and I think the residents I did encounter were wondering why I was there. Although I was unable to explore this area, I was told that the more financially successful villagers lived in houses and neighborhoods by the first section of the town (divided by the ruins) where the restaurants and shops were located. I returned to Tulum early afternoon and caught a bus in the evening to spend a night in Playa del Carmen.
3.9 Spatial Context in Playa del Carmen and Cancun

I was prepared for the culture shock of Punta Allen because I somewhat expected to encounter a lack of electricity and a slower way of life. Because we made a trip to Tulum about once a week for supplies, money, and to contact relatives, it was a familiar enough part of my experience of Punta Allen that my two and a half day stay was not as jarring. I was not, however, expecting the reverse culture shock of the substantially larger city of Playa del Carmen, or the extravagance of the tourism blocks. It was incredibly overwhelming, and not something I remember noting on my bus ride to Punta Allen. I have a distinct memory of getting off of the bus and being greeted by a McDonalds across the street. I walked down the road to find my hotel and passed by a man dressed in traditionally ceremonial Mayan garb, dancing on the street with a container in front of him for tips. This was such a dichotomy to the experience of exploring the ruins of Cobá the day before, (which were significantly less populated than the ruins of Tulum) where I observed the ruins of the ancient city of Cobá nestled in a steaming Yucatan Jungle after a passing storm blown in from the coast. I arrived at my hotel in Playa del Carmen not half an hour after getting off of the bus with a headache and inexplicably angry. I think I was frustrated at the crowds, the overwhelming sounds and lights and the image of the man dancing in the Mayan costume. I described it in my journal at the time that it was as if the man was prostituted culture to apathetic tourists as they walked by and occasionally offered a passing glance. After collecting myself in the hotel room for a time I ventured out to a restaurant on the main street for tourism and sat outside to observe. The restaurant was American Football themed, a cover band played almost exclusively American music, and it was across the street from a London retail store. Everyone I encountered that
night was speaking English. I observed little Spanish being spoken in Playa del Carmen with the exception of the Spanish conversations I initiated. There was an electronic show with music you could hear half a block away at one of the bars I passed and the street was crowded late into the night with tourists coming in and out of bars, chain restaurants, and retail stores. I later walked down to the beach and discovered very little sargassum and realized that large nets had been erected some hundred yards from the shore. I found a man passed out on the beach by the shore and I found myself wondering if this was genuinely a typical Monday night, or if I happened to be in town on some special occasion I was unaware of.

Cancun was not quite as jarring, I think because of my experience in Playa del Carmen, but I remember being taken aback by the height of the buildings. I explored downtown for some two hours and came to the conclusion that it could be a major city anywhere in America; it was hard to believe that not 40 years ago this was a village of 500 people. I attempted to observe the hotel district here and walked along the road of the skyscrapers that blocked the beach from view. Every hotel I passed greeted me with 15 feet tall bushes intentionally obstructing my view, and iron-barred fences and gates manned by guards. I was the only one walking up this street and saw almost exclusively taxis coming and going.

The purpose of giving this context is to demonstrate the stark differences in tourism present within each of these locations, and to illustrate the type of tourism present in Punta Allen by contrast. Most of our participants expressed a strong desire to maintain the current level of tourism in their village, and described apprehension for what they perceive as a potential threat to their style of living. A critical aspect of their ability to agency to maintain that lifestyle is what I describe as negotiated living, outlined in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4

NEGOTIATED LIVING AND TOURISM

4.1 Introduction to Discussion on Negotiated Living

Tourism has indeed impacted Punta Allen in a variety of ways. However, my experience in Punta Allen did not convince me that it has negatively impacted the cultural integrity of the village as Daltabuit and Pi (1990), Frapolli et al (2008) suggests is occurring with other Maya communities in the Yucatan Peninsula. On the contrary, I would argue that Punta Allen exhibits somewhat of an atypical type of tourism in comparison to the industry as a whole in the surrounding region. This is because they do not exhibit some of the same problematic cultural trends mentioned by the authors listed in the literature section. The cooperatives are given a fair amount of agency in regards to the decision-making processes that impact their future, they frame how the business of tourism is conducted in their town, and most importantly for cultural integrity they are not displaying a performance of traditional culture for the visiting tourists. That being said however, there is a specific path through the village that the eco-tourists are directed down that showcases the houses and buildings on the beach front that are considerably more well constructed than the some of the houses outside of this route. This could be an example of the cooperatives controlling the narrative or framing of Punta Allen by depicting an incomplete picture of the rest of the village. The relatively recent establishment of the women’s cooperative, las orquídeas, exemplifies residents’ ability to frame how eco-tourism is conducted in Punta Allen under the environmental regulations of the Sian Ka’an. As explained by Kendra, the orquídeas, “...focus on what is nature and sustainability. Teaching the
beauty that we have but also provide environmental education...We will work in hiking, we will
work in kayak in the lagoon, biking here on the other side [of the lagoon] (Kendra)”.

The cooperatives are able to do this due to a unique set of circumstances that have
enabled Punta Allen to practice what I have been referring to as ‘negotiated living’. One of the
principal factors in this is the remarkably strong presence of civil society in Punta Allen
orchestrated through the cooperatives. Noel, a prominent member of the Boyas cooperative
and long time resident commented that,

yes, the fishing co-operative is the mother of all. The rest of the tourism co-operatives
were founded from it. All the agreements and rules came from it. The exchange of
experiences with other nations came from it. The fishing co-operative is the one that
controls and the rest take example from it (Noel)

In the historical context discussed in chapter two, the civil society focused manner in
which Punta Allen operates is a direct product of their history. Contributing factors that have
played into this have been their solitary living, (far removed from many of the major cites of
urbanization in central Mexico) and their history of resilience and determination to etch out a
living on the Boca Paila Peninsula despite repeated economic hardships and frequent
hurricanes and tropical storms that have continually forced the long term residents to rely on
one another if they all wished to continue to live there. Particularly since the establishment of
the lobster cooperative in 1968, a principal factor in community solidarity is the shared
employment of lobster and tourism; the economic control over the extraction of marine life,
fly-fishing, and eco-tours. Many of our participants who were previously or continue to be
members of the cooperatives pointed to the cooperatives as the primary source for communal
solidarity. Although this has been mostly to the benefit of Punta Allen, it has created a few
issues that we observed while in the village.
4.2 Negotiated Living

What I define as negotiated living in the context of Punta Allen is the unique situatedness of the village within the Sian Ka’an Biosphere, and the manner in which they have created a dialogue with the Municipality of Tulum. Although Punta Allen has a designated ‘delegado’ (delegate) that advocates on residents’ behalf to both of these entities, the Sian Ka’an approaches the lobster cooperative and alliance of tourism cooperatives with policy changes being made in the reserve, or when confronting a local issue. When the cooperatives wish to approach the reserve, they delegate first and confer with the delegado to advocate on all of their behalf: the cooperatives have an important role in any official communication with Punta Allen. Cally, a member of the recently established Women’s Cooperative las orquídeas and an employee at one of the guesthouses in Punta Allen concluded a conversation about power relations between the municipality and Punta Allen with, “When it is required, we see our leaders and the owners of the cooperatives. We talk to them and ask for help. They make decisions as well, because they are the same [as council or assembly in the village] (Cally)”. From my own observations during the meeting with the Sian Ka’an on the sargassum dilemma, the majority of the conversation was with the leaders of the cooperatives. Although the delegado was present, he remained relatively silent.

Conversely, negotiated living in regards to the relationship with Tulum can be illustrated by the municipality’s lack of communication. Many of our participants expressed sentiments of frustration and made several mentions of feeling neglected. We had numerous participants claim that their issues as a community largely went unheard by city officials. When asked what was one of the worst aspects of living in Punta Allen, Gaius, who has been living in Punta Allen
for over 40 years and has been a member of the lobster cooperative since 1970, explained his frustration with the jungle road to Punta Allen in relation to the municipality of Tulum.

We have already asked for it [the road], but they don’t repair it. They blame it’s not allowed by Sian Ka’an and that is not true. Road work is not restrained by Sian Ka’an. They prevent paving but not road work. I’ve already read the Sian Ka’an [regulations]. It says ‘The Sian Ka’an reserve will not be prohibited road building with exception of paving.’ Then why does the government say it’s not allowed by Sian Ka’an? It’s simply they use Mexican budget to do other stuff and don’t make this. Resources are diverted.

At least one resident attributed this to the municipality being one of the youngest in the state, splitting from Solidaridad in 2008. However, many other participants suggest that the city officials simply do not want to spend money on Punta Allen due to the city’s tendency to defer responsibility to the reserve. Many residents pointed to electrical power and the road connecting Tulum with Punta Allen constantly in a fluctuating state of disrepair as a case-in-point of the relationship with the city. There were reportedly instances in the past where ‘half the village’ felt the need to go in the streets of Tulum to protest until repairs were made. Furthermore, one participant reported an incident where several residents raised funds and repaired particularly hazardous parts of the road themselves. To receive any type of response from the municipality of Tulum, the people of Punta Allen themselves more often than not are the ones who have to initiate the conversation, instigated through village meetings of concerned residents, and from within the cooperatives.

Being situated within the Reserve and Tulum municipality comes with having to negotiate between these two entities, which through their action or inaction impact living in Punta Allen. Through the negotiations with the Sian Ka’an and the relative absence of Tulum’s influence, the cooperatives are given the opportunity to have a significant role in determining the future of Punta Allen in regards to tourism. The tourism cooperatives modeled their
structure and modus operandi after the lobster cooperative, with a strong sense of reliance on one another. The recently established alliance between the two cooperatives strengthened this social cohesion and increased the solidarity between members. The newly established Woman’s Cooperative aims to model their business similarly and has found niche markets of eco-tourism not covered under the preexisting cooperatives, Punta Allen, Boyas and Gaytaines. The regulation of business practices after the cooperative alliance was established in 2012 continued to solidify member solidarity and influences a significant portion of the economic activity in Punta Allen today.

The cooperatives hold a significant amount of decision-making power in Punta Allen due to their role in this negotiated living, and the financial stability they provide to the village. Many participants also cited the cooperatives as a source of solidarity in the village, and the work that they do with the tourists and lobster builds upon the preexisting social unity. It was mentioned by several of our participants that particularly in times of disaster and emergency, the town comes together to act as a support network and helps one another rebuild. Kara, who has been living in Punta Allen for the past 15 years noted that, “They might not always get along and sometimes don’t, but if something goes down, like a hurricane, or if somebody gets hurt, your neighbors are right there to help you out. Help everybody out (Kara)”. When asked about if the community is as supportive of one another today in comparison to previous decades, Cally, who has been living in Punta Allen for almost 30 years concluded, “Yes, they are. When people know someone is sick, or something happened to them, they are...Us, being part of [this] community, how can I say, [we] are giving, generous, we help each other. Even more when there are tragedies, hurricanes, things like that (Cally)”. Perhaps the best example of this is the economic
collapse of the lobster fishing industry after the 1988 hurricane, where remaining members took on a portion of the ‘father-less debt’ to pay off over the course of several years. There are however cracks in this social cohesion, stemming from a mistrust of the social other, and frustration towards residents that threaten the agency of the town. I would suggest that both of these groups represent two different communal apprehensions: the fear of strangers co-opting the cultural space of Punta Allen exclusively for profit with no love for the land, and actions that would limit their agency in the negotiated living with the Sian Ka’an and the Municipality of Tulum. Sharon, a Mestizo resident in her mid-30s who moved to Punta Allen seven years ago due to her occupation, commented on some of the concerns amongst villagers towards outsiders,

The people from outside are unknown and they obstruct the population’s sense of calm. So I hope it’s not the same situation that Majahual [a small coastal village in Quintana Roo undergoing development] went through. Sometimes people tell me that they prefer the entrance path to be the way it is...Otherwise they’ll start bringing in foreigners (Sharon)

A discussion on how this apprehension towards the social other and frustrations towards residents who are seen as negatively impacting the negotiating power of the village can be found in the following section.

4.3 Issues with Solidarity: Limiting Negotiated Living

When we asked what the primary factor leading to solidarity in the village was, almost everyone we interviewed who was at one point or continues to be a member of one of the cooperatives, cited either the cooperatives and the shared employment the unifying force of the town. A man we interviewed named Karl who has been living in the reserve for 38 years
started work in the copra business, then moved to lobster, and currently works with the
tourism cooperatives related that the creation of the alliance significantly helped with
community solidarity,

The work that we do as tourism operators, what we offer...That’s why at the alliance we
established prices for all the cooperatives...That’s why we’re united, because we work in
the same area...We have benefited a lot from the creation of the alliance (Karl)

Many participants noted that the work they do specifically with tourists was also a
factor that brought the community together. Almost everyone outside of the cooperative gave
different answers. Additionally, several participants declared that the social unity today paled in
comparison to the solidarity residents felt for one another in previous decades. I would
hypothesize that this might be due to a historically greater percentage of the population being
members themselves or tied into the lobster cooperative by relation to an existing member.

Inherent to social groups is how individuals define the ‘us’ and ‘them’, and for many
cooerative members the ‘them’ are the so-called ‘outsiders’ who arrive to Punta Allen in the
past one to two decades to capitalize on the rising economy of tourism and low cost of living.
When asked what contributes to less solidarity in Punta Allen, cooperative members were more
likely to cite outsiders who have recently moved to the village in the wake of its’ rising tourism
industry as the primary factor. “Because lots of people came, some days I don’t even recognize
them. They come from different places (Cole)”. Interestingly, the data appears to reflect that
the notion of outsiders never seemed to include the gringos who own or operate some of the
lodges and hotels; outsiders typically refer to Mexicans who have migrated from other states
since around 2000. When participants made reference to ‘outsiders’ it was directed specifically
towards people who had recently migrated from the states of Tamaulipas, Tabasco, Veracruz,
etc. Several non-cooperative-members also expressed discontentment with ‘outsiders’, however non-members and members both were more likely to give different answer when asked what brings more solidarity to the community.

It was reported to us in formal and informal interviews that crime did not exist in Punta Allen. Indeed, the two cell jailhouse that the delegado operated were vacant and looked like they had not been used recently. Occasionally a participant would clarify, “There are no crimes, but there are thefts (Saul)”, and it seemed that the outsider social group is typically on the receiving end of the blame for those instances. “Well, the ones from Veracruz don’t make any trouble. They don’t get in or out. Instead, the ones from Tabasco...bad people have arrived. People who are not form the community. They have contaminated the town... They rob your stuff, they ruin the smaller kids. Everybody knows who they are, but they better shut up, because it can get worse for you [referring to the villager] (Cally)”.

Additionally, there is resentment towards these families because other residents perceive that they saw economic opportunity in the village and decided to live in Punta Allen because of money, not because they have any vested interest in the town:

Well, they are groups or communities that arrive, from Tabasco, from Veracruz; you can say that they saw this as a resourceful place. So they come in their micro-communities, because they are quite compact...But they are people who just come to work; they don’t have an emotional attachment with the place. Well, I don’t know, I have to say, I love this place Punta Allen and I’m concerned about its conservation. But these groups aren’t. They come here to make money. It’s an interesting vision. They’re here for ten months, which is high season. Then they go back home for two months. So they view their stay as temporary, even though they’re here ten out of twelve months. So they’re not committed with the place, they don’t feel a part of it. (Roslin)

The solidarity in Punta Allen comes from a shared history of trials by hurricane and at least two major economic hardships, family, and working together in the cooperatives. Because
the ‘outsider’ group do not share that history, are not related by blood or marriage, and have not been there for a comparatively long, they are not included as insiders. Furthermore the concern was with the ‘outsiders’ lack of appreciation for the place itself – that they were here specifically to make money and had no concern for the land, nor shared that same sense of solidarity with the rest of the village. A relatively frequent complaint of the outsiders is that they cause trouble. They are excluded from the cooperatives because of the rules of only family members of existing members can apply, but they are also spatially kept separated, segregated to the streets on the outer edges of town. We did not get any participants from this group; when Roman and Laura asked a family from Veracruz for an interview they declined, saying that they didn’t want to cause trouble with the founding families. I would theorize that this perspective of Mexicans from other parts of the country is in part a reflection of their apprehension towards the type of future in tourism Punta Allen wishes to avoid, the idea of strangers co-opting the cultural space of Punta Allen who have no concern for the land itself other than a resource to exploit for profit.

Another instance of ‘othering’ can be found along religious differences, the second most commonly mentioned factor decreasing social cohesion. Frustrations towards members of both Jehovah’s Witnesses and Catholics in particular were reported by many of our participants, however animosity between the two religions has reportedly decreased in more recent times. When I spoke with Kara about factors that increase and decreased solidary, she pointed to religion as one of the primary catalysts. Although she acknowledged their importance and some of the good work they do for the community, she commented that,

The religions to some extent divide the town, unfortunately and not in a positive way at all. There is a really big- it’s not as bad as it used to be, there used to be like literally a
line drawn down from the church over here, and over here all the Catholics live, and over here all the Jehovah’s Witnesses live. And they didn’t do business together, and they didn’t shop at their stores, and it was right down the middle. That’s gone away, that feeling of animosity’s gone away, however from what I understand, the Jehovah’s Witness religion, they’re not allowed to be politically involved with anything. They’re a huge chunk of town. So when things happen, like the town needs to get together to, you know, stand up to the government and say you need to help us with the road, or you need to help us with the schools, or you nee to help us with the generator, half the town is not there. So that’s where religion does effect (Kara).

Her last point, that Jehovah’s Witnesses refrain from participating in any political activity continues to be a point of contention for some villagers and the sentiment was echoed by a number of our participants. Relations between the different religions has certainly improved, we did not observe any of the open hostility between Jehovah’s Witnesses or Catholics as reported above. However among non- Jehovah’s Witnesses, the lack of participation in political concerns is considered to be a significant hindrance for communicating issues to the Municipality of Tulum about issues impacting Punta Allen. Some participants expressed frustration that the village could not present a unified front to the Municipality of Tulum over issues such as school funding, repairs to the jungle road, or providing more electrical power. It is generally acknowledged that their lack of participation is due to religious concerns and typically not apathy.

What grievances towards Jehovah’s Witnesses that has persisted to today I would argue has little to do with religious differences, but is directly related to perceived threats to Punta Allen’s ability to effectively participate in the dialogue with Tulum and the Sian Ka’an. Any instances of ‘othering’ in this capacity can be seen as frustrations towards actions that limit the negotiated living, especially considering that many Jehovah’s Witnesses are members of the tourism and lobster cooperatives that hold a fair amount of decision-making power. The shared
work that many residents are engaged with in tourism and lobster fishing has increased
solidarity between the different religions. However when the negotiating power of the village is
threatened by the inaction of some, it has the potential to create divisions within the
community. I believe that this stems from the same root of apprehension towards the
‘outsiders’ listed in this section, the anxiety of unwanted tourism development.

Many of our participants mentioned a satisfaction with the level of tourism currently
operating in Punta Allen, and expressed a strong desire to prevent the larger-scaled tourism
present in Tulum, Playa del Carmen, and Cancun from occurring in their village. However they
still occasionally depend on the city of Tulum for maintaining their living in Punta Allen. Kendra,
who has been living and working in Punta Allen for almost 40 years illustrates the point
concisely, “Well, I feel that a worthy road would be fine, not pavement because it would be
more to come in masses of people. But at least, keeping it well maintained (Kendra).”

Figure 4. The road to Punta Allen.
The road to Punta Allen is the embodiment of this ongoing negotiation. Residents don’t want their village to be so accessible to tourists that it impacts the attraction of living there, so they are glad that the road remains unpaved. However residents still need to travel to and from the village, often on a weekly basis, and request that the road remain in a relatively good state of repair. Maintaining this status quo is perceived as dependent on their ability to maintain the dialogue with Tulum and the Sian Ka’an; action or inaction perceived as a threat to maintaining that dialogue is an indirect threat to the current status quo. Additionally, a dramatic increase in tourism would impact the surrounding environment that many of their livelihoods depend upon. Maintaining a pristine environment is incredibly important to villagers not only because their economy depends on it, but because they have strong connections to the geographical place itself.
CHAPTER 5

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND PUNTA ALLEN

5.1 Introduction to the Environmentalism of Punta Allen

The surrounding environment is one of the roots of the social cohesion in Punta Allen along with family. Most of our participants cited the environment, the isolation it brings from urban centers, and the tranquil lifestyle it provides, as the primary reason for living in the village. The majority of economic activity revolves around the Bay of Ascension, and the work in lobster fishing, fly-fishing, and eco-tourism that the cooperative members find such solidarity in sharing largely depends on keeping that environment pristine for success. Residents enjoy living within the biosphere reserve and take pride in sharing the responsibility of maintaining its’ sustainability.

One of the benefits of the Sian Ka’an’s establishment has been the ecological sustainability courses the tour guides are provided by the biosphere and it’s associated companies. An example of what Tsing (2005) calls friction as outlined in chapter two, these courses allowed residents to learn more sustainable practices and incorporate those lessons into their sense of communal living and inter-reliance on one another, creating the tourism cooperatives in the 1990s. The cooperatives have blended the universal concepts of environmentalism within their context of inter-reliance to create practices that work best within their preexisting business structure. These sustainable practices have gone into their work in the eco-tourism and fly-fishing industries as well as incorporated into the lobster fishing business.
When a resident is doing something environmentally harmful, it works against the solidarity of the community because they rely on one another to collectively maintain the pristine environment they all love, and economically depend on. Residents who are engaging in environmentally harmful behavior are often ‘othered’ by community members because this is conduct that goes against the overall solidarity of Punta Allen; a solidarity that they need to maintain to continue their negotiated living with the Sian Ka’an and the Municipality of Tulum. Particularly if a cooperative member is engaging in environmentally harmful actions, official sanctions or outright expulsion from the cooperative might be enacted from the cooperative alliance as punishment. When discussing the role of the cooperative alliance, Noel explained that the offending tour guides were reported to the alliance for infractions such as passing too close to mangroves, reefs, dolphins, or birds. He also mentioned the success the alliance has had on mitigating these offenses, “We are now in our fourth year...We have some cooperative administrations. We worked three beautiful years; good things have been achieved. We managed to appease tour operators, because tour operators used to be very naughty... Now there are rules for them. Now they are appeased (Noel).” The self-regulating nature the cooperative alliance provides a good example of how seriously the cooperative members take ensuring the sustainability of their environment, as well as maintaining their system of inter-reliance. An example on how negotiated living intersects with Punta Allen’s concepts of environmentalism is outlined below in section 5.3.
5.2 Importing and Exporting Notions of Environmentalism

Environmentalism for many residents of Punta Allen is not an abstract concept, but something put into everyday practice. For residents, environmentalism is an ideology that is heavily connected to place and personal responsibility, a sense stewardship over the ecosystem they live within. The perspective from a significant number of our participants is that the village exists within the environment, rather than situated on top of it. Although the biosphere reserve provided courses in sustainability gave tour guides the tools in order to better protect their environment, stewardship over Punta Allen was not necessarily a new concept. Saul was working in the copra business in Cozumel when he was invited to come to Punta Allen by his friends 40 years ago when the village was still originally being constructed. He wanted to get away from urban life and work in the environment as a builder; he claims to have built 40% of the houses in Punta Allen and began working in the lobster industry. When asked about protecting the environment in Punta Allen, he told us that:

Everything has been protected here. We do not say that because the park ranger came here, this [the environment] is being taken care of. Simply it’s the job that they [Sian Ka’an] must do here, but it’s not protected just because of that. We have been protecting it for years, and that [the reserve] didn’t exist. We have protected this by ourselves. There are always one or two destructive people; it’s common as it is everywhere. Nothing is being exterminated. Before, boys used to shoot those little pigeons... Not anymore. Boys know that this animal should not be killed, and there it is (Saul).

The benefits of the reserves’ environmental courses have been incorporated into Punta Allen’s preexisting notion of stewardship and personal responsibility, increasing their environmental awareness and giving residents information on how to be more sustainable.

Some of the practices put into place since the Sian Ka’an’s implementation have been the catch-and-release program with the fly-fishing, the speed limits in different parts of the bay
for boats, distances to keep from wildlife and time limits the reef is exposed to tourists with the eco-tours. Derrial, a 40-year-old man who owns a fly-fishing lodge and has been living in Punta Allen his entire life, recounts some of the impacts on the village’s environmental perspective since the introduction of the biosphere reserve, “Many years ago, people didn’t use some things, such as nets. They used to catch too many fish and killed the turtles. Everything. There was no reserve. Nowadays we have a reserve, and we have to make it sustainable. We have to tilt the balance, to preserve nature (Derrial)”. Evidence of the preceding personal responsibility can be seen in the difference in opinion on the trash that washes up onto the beach, something that’s increased with the influx of sargassum. While the cooperatives occasionally organize beach cleanups and we spoke with some individuals who reported picking up trash occasionally as they walked the beach; it was also reported that there are some villagers who do not view this as their responsibility because it did not originate from Punta Allen. Allegedly, the mentality here is that since villagers did not deposit the trash, it should be the concern for the Sian Ka’an since it is their responsibility to maintain the reserve from outside influences. Others view it as the village’s responsibility because it is Punta Allen’s beach, however there is some disheartenment at the seemingly endless task and concern for the impact on the mangroves.

Residents took this new information on sustainable practices provided by the reserve and combined it with the business model of the lobster cooperative. Returning briefly to Tsing’s model of the city with many roads, they ‘export’ their environmentalism coupled with this inter-reliance to other communities by showcasing their system of lobster fishing that relies on the sombras and social reliance to maintain a sustainable lobster population. The primary factors that contribute to this: strictly adhering to state, federal, as well as the cooperative’s
own strict policies concerning sustainable fishing, their use of the artificial habitats, or sombras, and Vigía Chico’s dividing the sea bed into lots for their respective members. All of which stem from their combination of environmental practices inherited from the Sian Ka’an and the cooperatives’ self-regulation and inter-reliance on one another to maintain a sustainable lobster population. Adama illustrated the difference between the Vigía Chico cooperative and other lobster fishing communities when discussing the longevity of the lobster business in Punta Allen:

They use polygons [traditional lobster traps] and then run out of places to fish. They come from Belize, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Guatemala, Honduras; people from all over the Caribbean have come here. Lately people have even come from Nicaragua... They came to see how we build the shadow and they even paid for a group of fishermen to go to Nicaragua to help them build a shadow for lobsters, because they want to figure out a way to recover their fishing industry... Sure, they produce more than we do. But the question is how to use what you have, to be efficient. That's what they haven't learned how to do. What I have, how to distribute it and to make it last a long time. This is what the cooperative has done... We all live off of each other. We all depend on each other. You can't deny anyone anything. Why? Because at some point you'll need someone else. So the people who founded this town, who founded this cooperative, who founded tourist attractions, know this story and how hard it has been. So that's what we try to teach the next generation and newcomers. If people want to work with us, they have to adapt to our rules of conduct that we have when we work here. Why? Because otherwise they don't fit it in with our activity system.

Adama highlights two of the principal reasons for the success of their lobster industry; practices that sustain a lobster population over a long period of time, and dependence on the fellow fisherman. The appeal for other fishing communities is how to maintain or recover their local lobster population; I would argue that the sombras would only work for a community the size of Punta Allen in conjunction with a system similar to the Vigía Chico cooperative. The solidarity between fishermen is the keystone to making the system work. If members are not adhering to the campos system it increases competition between fishermen, which can lead to
overfishing. Maintaining the solidarity between fishermen to make slightly less profits over a
longer period of time ensures the longevity of the industry.

Figure 5. Lobster fishing in the Bay of Ascension.

To summarize: the environment is one of the primary sources for solidarity in Punta
Allen. The environment and the tranquil life that the removal from urban centers provides are
some of the most reported reasons for moving to Punta Allen to begin with. Through Tsing’s
concept of friction (2005), residents took the Sian Ka’an’s provided sustainability courses and fit
it within their context of negotiated living and communal reliance along with their preexisting
notions of stewardship and personal responsibility. When a resident is not environmentally
friendly, he or she is working against that inter-dependency because residents rely on one
another to maintain a pristine environment that the majority of their livelihoods depend on. A
fishing lodge that does not adhere to the catch-and-release program impacts the rest of the
industry, however miniscule. Catching juvenile or pregnant lobster, or fishing out of season harms the sustainability of their industry. Behavior against this communal reliance works against the solidarity of the village; solidarity Punta Allen relies on in order to present a unified front. As explained in chapter four working against this solidarity impacts the Punta Allen’s ability to negotiate their living between the Sian Ka’an and the Municipality of Tulum. An example of this negotiated living can be found in how Punta Allen addressed the problem of the sargassum in the following section.

5.3 Responding to Sargassum

The manner in which Punta Allen as a village responded to the issue of the large amounts of Seaweed the bay was depositing on their beach illustrates the negotiation between the Municipality of Tulum, the Sian Ka’an, and the cooperatives. A resident who had been living in the village for roughly a decade initiated the village meetings to address the concern over the seaweed, and the village doctor led the three ensuing village meetings to discuss and define the issue. Although a letter was sent to the Municipality of Tulum to implore government officials to take action, a solution was instead reached with a collaborative effort between the heads of the cooperatives, the delegado of Punta Allen, and the director of the Sian Ka’an. The process I describe below demonstrates how residents identify a problem and rely on the cooperatives to help come to a solution by communicating with the Sian Ka’an and Tulum.

The seaweed had been washing up on the beaches of Quintana Roo for many months and had become a serious issue by the time we had arrived in Punta Allen. Although many residents emphasized during our fieldwork that this was a seasonal, naturally occurring
phenomena, the quantity and length of time that this was on-going was largely considered unprecedented.

I observed a number of strategies employed by the hotels of Tulum and Playa del Carmen that included burying it in the sand on the beach overnight, erecting nets off the shore to catch the weeds before they washed up to the beaches. I also had heard from residents in Punta Allen
explain that other strategies included employed workers hired to dump it into the jungle by the wheelbarrow, or to burn it. Regardless of strategy, the seaweed continued to wash up on the beaches in often staggering quantities; in some unmanned portions of the beaches along the way to Punta Allen we observed the decaying sea-grass piled 4-5 feet high. The sargassum floats at the surface of the ocean and continues to grow until it washes ashore and almost immediately dies.

Reportedly not a week prior to our arrival, several hundred dead juvenile fish were found by a resident washed up on the beach, prompting the doctor’s concern that this was a public health issue and to conduct a meeting in the square in the afternoon on the Wednesday of our first week in Punta Allen, July 15th. I counted at least 50 men and women, members of the cooperatives and otherwise, in attendance during the first meeting not including the children running around the pavilion: somewhere around 10% of the total population of the town. During this meeting fears were raised about how this would impact tourism in Punta Allen, the damage to boat equipment, and health concerns for both villagers and tourists. The doctor reported that in the past fifteen days prior to the meeting there had been an unusual number of people coming into her office, reporting sore throats and headaches, and some with “intense fevers” that she could not reduce in a normal period of time. Other health issues laid at the feet of the sargassum were sick issues such as phytophotodermatitis [hypersensitive skin], and other sicknesses such as poisoning from spoiled food, and diarrhea. There was concern raised about eating marine life such as barracuda that might have consumed high concentrations of the seaweed by feeding on smaller marine life that eat the sargassum. This was something they have had to be cautious about in the past with smaller influxes of seaweed.
It appeared to me that the purpose of this meeting was to establish that the sargassum was presenting health issues with the residents; which would qualify the village for machinery to remove it per the Sian Ka’an’s regulations. In addition to health concerns raised, residents claimed that gasses emitted from the decaying seaweed on the beach was interfering with household appliances, blaming the seaweed for many of the metals in the village turning black and breaking appliances. It was decided that the advice of the Sian Ka’an representative be followed and a letter to the Municipality of Tulum would be drafted.

The results of the first meeting inspired a second, in which the letter to the municipality was read and passed around for signatures. During the third, the State of Quintana Roo’s director of Health, director of Social Development, and the director of Ecology and environment were present to answer questions and inform the people of Punta Allen of their cooperation with the Sian Ka’an on coming up with a solution to the problem which prompted a discussion on responsibility. During this meeting residents voiced the various problems they have been facing as a result of the sargassum, some attendees brought metal partially exposed to the air
to show as an example of the impact the gasses emitted from the seaweed were having on their appliances.

A smaller, forth meeting with a representative from the Sian Ka’an, the delegado of Punta Allen, and the heads of the lobster, and tourism cooperatives was conducted on the beach, in which final opinions were voiced and a solution was reached. The Sian Ka’an representative had decided to hire fifteen Maya campesinos, (the English translation is peasant rather than farmer in this) from outside the village to bury the decaying seaweed on the shore for 69 pesos a day, equivalent to roughly four US dollars, with lodging and a daily three meals provided. Roughly a week later the campesinos arrived on the beach and began digging trenches in the beach roughly four-five feet deep, 8~feet long, and 3 feet wide, every morning and filled them to the brim with the decaying sea-grass until the evening. I noted that regardless of how hard or fast they worked the amount of seaweed continuing to wash up on the shore greatly exceeded the amount buried by the workers by the end of the day, particularly after a storm. The manual digger promised by the Sian Ka’an had not arrived by the time I left Punta Allen.

The process outlined above describes how the village of Punta Allen responds to an issue that impacts their community. A problem is identified and a discussion ensues that both addresses the concern and explores options for finding a solution. The village attempts to open a dialogue with the Municipality of Tulum, and the cooperatives engage in a conversation with the Sian Ka’an Biosphere to find a solution to the problem that solves the issue in an as environmentally friendly manner as possible; despite the troubling use of Maya campesinos cheap labor, (a discussion on this is unfortunately outside the scope of this topic). The repeated
emphasis on the sargassum being a natural process and the repeated desire for an environmentally friendly solution speaks to residents’ appreciation for the environment. This is a good example of the negotiated living as defined in chapter four, how Punta Allen utilizes their solidarity as a village and the structures of the cooperatives to seek a solution to a problem they all face.
CHAPTER 6
PERSONAL REFLECTION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

6.1 Reflection

This project certainly had its benefits and hardships. The largest obstacle for me from day one was my proficiency in Spanish. I had taken Spanish in high school, as well as two classes of Spanish during my undergraduate, and for eight weeks leading up to our fieldwork I learned as much Spanish as I was able to, even hiring a tutor to help increase my ability to communicate. It was my understanding that my partners Roman and Laura would be able to speak English to help me conduct interviews in Punta Allen just as it was their understanding that I would be able to speak Spanish. When we initially met in Tulum for Michael Severign to pick us up to take the two-hour drive to Punta Allen, we assumed that we would have Internet access in our hotel room and that the language barrier would be kept to a minimum since we had translation applications on our phones that would assist our communication. We discovered upon our arrival that the wireless router was broken. Like many other appliances in Punta Allen, the gasses emitted from the decaying seaweed on the beaches were blamed for the malfunction. Although a repairman attempted to reestablish connection a few weeks after our arrival, we were never able to access the Internet from Costa del Sol.

Despite my attempts to establish a conversational level of Spanish prior to my trip (of which I was initially confident) I quickly discovered that I was not nearly as proficient as I thought I was. I was unable to understand the majority of our first interviews during the first week. In the first ten days that I was in Punta Allen, my ability to speak and understand Spanish increased substantially. By the end of the first week, I could have prolonged conversations with
Roman and Laura and by the second week, I was able to understand aspects of interviews. There were definitely moments of frustration in that I had no one to speak to other than Michael, whom I did not initially see very frequently, and that communication with my research partners was limited. I often felt out of control of my project and lot of times I felt that I was receiving information second hand, which my broken Spanish made understanding difficult. Roman and I had several arguments about the direction of the project, as well as other frustrations that come with research, only to realize that almost the entirety of our disagreement stemmed from a miscommunication.

While Roman and Laura were primarily conducting the first dozen or so interviews, my added responsibility was to learn Spanish as rapidly as I was able. And quite frankly I was genuinely astounded with how quickly I lurched to a conversational proficiency of Spanish while I was in Punta Allen. By the end of the second week I was able to articulate my thoughts with Roman and Laura more fluidly, and my comprehension of what they and participants were saying to me increased substantially every week. During the second week I came to realize that my fluency in Spanish was significantly better in the evening rather than the morning since I had the day to practice. By the third week I started conducting a handful of my own interviews exclusively in Spanish unaided by Roman and Laura, and was able to maintain conversations with residents and my partners with relative ease. Despite hearing that ‘immersion is the best way to learn a language’ I was surprised to experience firsthand how quickly I was able to comprehend Spanish. Over a full year later, I remember back on conversations I had and interviews I conducted and remember them as if they were held in English.
By the end of the study I was able to participate in conversations for any period of time, at any time of the day, with any resident of Punta Allen, formal or informal, and understand nearly the entirety of it, as well as respond without hesitation and fluidity. This was especially important since Roman and Laura had to leave at the end of the fourth week, leaving me to finish the fieldwork by myself. In the third week we had reached out to a resident of Punta Allen to assist us in communication between my partners and myself, as well as explore the possibility of translating interviews I would conduct by myself. Although the assistance in communication between researchers was initially beneficial, by the time we explored the notion of assistance with interviews, my proficiency in Spanish had already reached a level where I could understand enough of what my participants were articulating that I could respond with follow-up questions and needed less elaboration or clarification; both of which were my primary concerns when conducting interviews myself.

The conversations I had with Roman and Laura for hours in the evenings were incredibly valuable for me in not only learning Spanish, but also getting back on the same page in terms of the project, as well as learning about my research partners. These conversations were beneficial for practicing Spanish because inhibitions were often lowered and I was less concerned with the proper grammar I had yet to master, and more concerned that my message was getting across. I learned that I was able to understand what was being said long before I was able to articulate it myself. Because communication was more fluid during our evening conversations, these were important moments for us to discuss the project and our ideas and strategies moving forward. Roman and Laura filled me in on the gaps in what I had gathered during the day’s interviews, and I offered my perspective on the information we were receiving.
It was incredibly heartening to learn that while we spoke different languages, we all spoke anthropology. When the conversations between us turned to Anthropology our communication was at its peak, our background knowledge on theories, theorists, paradigms, and perspectives informed the conversation at present which facilitated our dialogue. A lot of the theoretical progress of our project was made during these conversations.

It was during these conversations that we expressed our excitement, trepidation, and frustrations with the project. Roman and Laura were anxious about the multi-faceted objective of the project given the limited number of weeks we were present in the village. We expressed solidarity in our initial frustrations at the language barrier between us, and relief at my growing proficiency. We were concerned with what our research would yield and how it would be received by the population of Punta Allen; it seemed at the time that whatever it was that we said it would offend some social group in the town, something we were very hesitant to do since we had been so well received by all of our participants who were very welcoming of our research and forthcoming. In the end, we absolved to report as honestly and as truthful to the data as we were able, and discussed how to present the information in a manner in which would be best received by our participants, by acknowledging areas of concern as they were reported to us. We wanted to make it clear that we attempted to be impartial and that our data does not reflect our own perspectives, but is a truthful account of the people of Punta Allen.

We also discussed making adaptations to the design of the study as the project progressed. We concluded that we would not have enough time, or be able to gather enough participants for a focus group on the sargassum issue, somewhat of a point of contention between Roman and myself for the first week. Roman and Laura convinced me that this was
not the right approach to broker an on-going conversation about the issue, and brainstormed a
different method of gathering community led solutions to the problem. After several nights of
deliberation, we were informed of a meeting being held in the square conducted by the village
doctor to discuss the problems the sargassum has caused and potential strategies going
forward; effectively initiating the conversation we were hoping to inspire with the focus groups.

Roman, Laura and I were excited about what the results of this project would indicate
for community driven tourism and commented on how we had benefited from the project as
researchers and anthropologists. Although we all ‘spoke the language’ of anthropology, there
were some minor differences in how we conducted it and felt that we all benefited from being
exposed to anthropologists coming from backgrounds different than our own. We concluded
that such an internationally joint project was incredibly beneficial to the researchers, and would
advocate that our two universities continue to explore similarly collaborative projects in the
future. We thought the project succeeded in broadening the perspectives of the researchers,
and hope that this project could speak to more collaboration between anthropology
departments internationally. However, we would suggest that there be two representatives
from each university instead of just one, and that the researchers meet in person if at all
possible before the fieldwork begins.

For this project in particular, we felt that the allotted six-weeks was too short a time to
appropriately address all of the objectives of the study, or to gain a holistic perspective of such
a place as Punta Allen that shifts with the season in economic activity, social life, and number of
present community members since many have homes in other cities and towns. We at times
also felt that were encountering problems that were somewhat out of our field of expertise;
particularly with the sargassum and hypothesized that if funds were more readily available, a
larger, more interdisciplinary team of researchers would add valuable depth to the study that
we could not provide: such as a public health worker and an expert in ecology. We felt that
overall the project succeeded in its goals in that by the end of our fieldwork we had
accumulated a number of different narratives from the various perspectives in Punta Allen that
paint a complex picture of the village, and were able to appropriately observe how the
community reacts to a wide-spread ecological issue. We were pleased with the results, albeit a
little anxious about how the community would respond to some of our findings.

Keeping a field journal proved to be incredibly useful for a number of reasons. It was
particularly useful for allowing me to collect my thoughts at the end of the night and keep what
we learned that day fresh in my mind going forward. I was able to go back through the notes I
made through the analysis portion of my project to refresh myself on details I had since
forgotten. Instead of trying to remember thoughts or ideas I had during the fieldwork, I could
go back through my journal to jog my memory. It was somewhat therapeutic as well, since the
majority of my time there was spent speaking Spanish, often I would go for days without
speaking to anyone in English. While this was incredible for learning the language and adapting
to my surroundings, it was also tedious at times at not being unable to correctly or fully
articulate my thoughts, as well as frustrating at not being able to entirely understand what was
being said around me. During the first week I think I allowed my anxiety to get the better of me
and thought that people were speaking about me in Spanish while I still struggled with the
language; it was beneficial to be able to go back through the previous days’ journal entries after
gaining some mastery of the language and realizing how completely unfounded that anxiety
was. For the first five weeks I kept up with my journal almost everyday, and although the last week was comparatively slower than the first several, I regret not making an entry for the last week of my stay.

A frustration I had in particular with the duration of the project was that by the time I was finally gaining a mastery of truly conversing in Spanish, the fieldwork was coming to its conclusion. There were funds only through six weeks for me to stay at the Costa del Sol, and although I would say that I reached a limited working proficiency by the first week and a conversational level by the end of the second, I was only approaching a full professional proficiency of Spanish by the end of the 5th week there, at almost the conclusion of my fieldwork in Punta Allen, and the majority of our interviews already conducted.

The transcription of our interviews and village meetings took significantly longer than I anticipated due again to my language barrier. This was a result of dwindling opportunities to practice my Spanish at an appropriate level to maintain my proficiency with the language. By far my struggles with Spanish proved to be the most difficult aspect of this project. Although I gained a tremendous amount of valuable experience as a researcher and an anthropologist during this project, I don’t think I will take on another project without ensuring that I either have a full mastery of the language, or a research partner that is fluent in both languages.

Another dilemma that resurfaced from the field I had through the writing process was contemplating how the residents of Punta Allen would react to the conclusions of the study. Although there were conflicting reports on some historical points that made constructing an accurate timeline somewhat difficult at times, I was able to write out the more straightforward elements of my data with relative ease compared to when it came time to put my concluding
thoughts to paper. Aspects such as daily life, history, and the sargassum issue were matter-of-fact and easily identifiable in the data. However, I reached some mental roadblocks when it came to making statements about the state of social cohesion and impacts of tourism outside of economy. My advisors were immensely helpful in overcoming this by encouraging me to concentrate on the data itself rather than my readers.

6.2 Concluding Thoughts

Román, Laura, and I originally set out to discover what, if any, culture change was occurring in Punta Allen as a result of the increase in tourism over the past twenty to twenty-five years. Tourism has indeed had a tremendous effect on Punta Allen’s economy: residents have more purchasing power, increased job opportunities, it has diversified their economic activity, and although there is a wealth gap present in the village many residents have greater financial stability. However it’s important to remember that changes in economic opportunity does not necessarily reflect changes in culture. The gradual shift towards more tourism activity in the village is reflective of similar changes in economic activities in Punta Allen. From commerce trade routes between in Quintana Roo and trading with Cuban and Belizean fishermen in the early 20th century, to copra production in the mid 20th century, to lobster fishing from the late 1960s until the 1990s where Punta Allen began to see another shift in economic activity towards tourism, this village is has participated in a number of different industries as the situation called for it at the time. Out of necessity for its’ continuation the residents of Punta Allen diversified their economic activity and fostered new industries.

I do think it’s important to note that there are some instances where a cultural
exchange is present between tourists and villagers. There is certainly an exchange of culture occurring between fly-fishing tourists and their guides built upon relationships that in some instances go back fifteen to twenty years. For six to seven days the fly-fishing guides and their clients spend 8 to 9 hours a day on the water together, and over the course of twenty years this builds the foundation to ask each other questions and cover topics they might not have addressed with guides they were unfamiliar with. Kara, the wife of a lobster fisherman and fly-fishing guide, informed me that she had observed a positive development of character in her husband over the years that he has been guiding fly-fishing tours and noted that,  

...there’s a huge exchange, cultural exchange, that goes on there and learning that happens, that hadn’t happened previously. So with the exchange of cultures, there’s also been an exchange of ethics and morals and wants and desires, and priorities...there’s an exchange of information that happens on the water – you know, in between the boys that’s really made a big difference in people’s lives here. Positive. Positive. (Kara).

In my participant observation of a fly-fishing trip, I observed fishermen and the guides talking about and sharing pictures of their families, discussing occupations, recent news stories, and personal, local, and global events that have transpired since their last visit over alcohol and

Figure 9. Fly-fishing guide.
cigarettes in the periods of time between actively catching a fish. The language classes provided by the Sian Ka’an for the guides to be able to communicate with their clients could also be considered a form of culture change, if indirectly.

Many strategies I would suggest for Punta Allen to strengthen cultural identity have already been implemented by the cooperatives. Punta Allen continues to engage in what many residents see as their traditional economic activity, lobster fishing; and tourism in Punta Allen is certainly a locally managed industry. Cooperative members are able to engage in both lobster fishing and tourism because both are lucrative industries, and neither activity interferes with the other due to the allotted sombra fields and standardized route of the eco-tours. An additional strategy already employed by the cooperatives is the level of control over the framing and management of the tourism industry in Punta Allen. One of the successes of the group management/tourism courses offered by the Sian Ka’an is the capitalization on the lobster fishermen’s preexisting knowledge of the bay and the wildlife in and around it. While the environmental classes helped them better understand how to care for and maintain that environment, the courses on foreign languages and group management gave them the tools to better articulate their preexisting knowledge to tourists. The standardizing of the eco-tour route is another example of how the cooperatives manage the framing of their environment by jointly agreeing on what to showcase to tourists. Additionally, cooperative members are reportedly seeking to gain further control over the tourism industry by providing their own transportation rather than relying on the teams of jeeps carrying tourists from Tulum. This is in addition to taking over the majority of the marketing for the eco-tours, which would grant them
further control over the narrative of Punta Allen and the framing of their environment and tourist operations.

The focus of this thesis has been to study the unique circumstances that allow Punta Allen to have considerably more agency than other villages in the Yucatan Peninsula in determining their future in regards to tourism while living within the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve and the Municipality of Tulum. I utilized Daltabuit and Pi’s (1990) three questions for measuring a village’s power in determining their future with tourism to study how Punta Allen negotiates their relationship with the biosphere and the city of Tulum.

With respect to the first question, it is fair to say that tourism has most assuredly brought improved material and social conditions to Punta Allen in a variety of ways. Tourism provided the residents of Punta Allen additional sources of income to supplement the downturn the community faced in the early 1990s. Additionally, the industry has also allowed residents who would previously migrate with the lobster season to neighboring villages and cities the opportunity to stay in the village all year round. Tourism has given lobster fishermen other financial opportunities when the sombras are yielding low quantities of lobster, and sustains the economy during the off-season. Members of the tourism cooperatives and employees of hotels and fishing lodges have enjoyed the greater purchasing power that comes with annual employment and have been able to provide their families with modern household appliances in a similar way that the early success of the lobster industry was able to in the 70s and 80s. Many who were previously unable to afford cars were now able to do so, and microwaves, TVs, computers, Internet, and smartphones are all relatively commonplace in Punta Allen today. Many residents are now able to afford better construction materials for their
houses, and larger families have constructed additional rooms and living spaces on their properties for family members as children marry and have kids of their own. When asked what the positive effects of tourism have been, almost every one of our participants listed the greater economy and more employment opportunities. An additional economic benefit is the lump sum donations received from many of the fly-fishers who visit Punta Allen on an annual or even more frequent basis. Starbuck, one of the co-owners of one of the fly-fishing lodges in Punta Allen claimed that several of her clients have frequently made donations to the village “...our clients donate! They'll say here's 500$ spend it in the community. We helped build the playground...one of our clients had the gates made for one of the schools in town. People -our people that fish with us, get really involved with the community, they love it here so much. And they give back to the community (Starbuck).” Furthermore, some tourists make extended stays in Punta Allen for months at a time, contributing to the local economy, participating in local festivals, attending ceremonies and parties, and in some cases have become familiar faces throughout some parts of the year.

The second question referring to Punta Allen’s agency in determining their future with tourism can be answered through their ability to conduct negotiations with Tulum and the Sian Ka’an. Between the regulations set down by the biosphere reserve and the relative inaction from the Municipality of Tulum, everyday life is heavily impacted by these two entities. The cooperatives have decision-making power over the tourism industry itself, such as framing their environment by standardizing the eco-tours and fly-fishing tours. However this agency ends at the overarching protocols set down by the biosphere reserve that regulate aspects such as the number of visitors and boats on the water. Although most Punta Allen residents are currently
content with the level of tourism they have and do not wish to see any increase, increasing their tourism industry if they so chose would have to come from negotiations with the reserve. The reserve also impacts other aspects of life, such as building codes and materials that frequently impact villagers. Some participants acknowledged that although the relationship with the reserve and Punta Allen residents outside of the cooperatives has somewhat soured with the newly implemented administration. As a result of Tulum’s tendency to ignore issues related to Punta Allen, villagers often need to form a community-wide unified front when opening a dialogue to the municipality, and residents often utilize the structure of the cooperatives to facilitate a conversation. Because of this, residents rely on solidarity within the community to support one another when engaging in discussions. The jungle road acts as a good metaphor for this relationship; many residents of Punta Allen feel that if they did not press the municipality for repairs when necessary, the road would remain damaged. Frustrations over electrical power and a perceived lackadaisical approach to picking up trash are other good examples of frequently reported frustrations.

Community solidarity is an important factor in Punta Allen because of this negotiated living, a major source of which is the cooperatives. However that cooperative solidarity also works against some villagers by facilitating an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ group for residents who have migrated from other Mexican states such as Tabasco and Veracruz in the past several years. These ‘outsiders’ are seen as trouble-makers that have no personal or emotion ties to the environment and are living in Punta Allen specifically for economic profit. I would hypothesize that this although there might be some truths to these allegations, this ‘othering’ stems from a communal fear of the perception of an encroaching development of tourism.
These ‘outsiders’ represent what is currently underway in Tulum, people who have no personal ties to the land who have ‘parachuted’ into the city to capitalize on the booming tourism industry. Another instance of ‘othering’ that occurs in Punta Allen is towards behavior that works against Punta Allen’s ability to conduct their negotiated living with Tulum, the best example of this are the Jehovah’s Witnesses who are forbidden from participating in anything related to politics due to religious beliefs. This was a frustration reported to us several times by residents who desired to present a unified front to Tulum when advocating for issues such as increased electrical power, funding for education, and repairs to the jungle road. Lastly, ‘othering’ occurs towards residents who are engaging in environmentally harmful behavior. This form of ‘othering’ comes as a result of working against the solidarity of the community by threatening the livelihoods of many of the residents, and harming the environment that initially drew many residents to live in Punta Allen to begin with. Working against this solidarity again impacts Punta Allen’s ability to present a unified front with coming to Tulum or the Sian Ka’an for negotiations. In short, ‘othering’ in Punta Allen occurs when someone is perceived to be threatening the way of life in Punta Allen, be it behavior or beliefs that impact their ability to negotiate with the Sian Ka’an or Tulum, or people who could represent a drastic increase in the tourism industry that the observe in neighboring Tulum.

The final question presented by Daltabuit and Pi, will they have enough political power to maintain their property rights and minimize the socio-cultural costs of tourism, does present some concerns for Punta Allen going forward. Although I don’t believe there are socio-cultural costs of tourism present in Punta Allen at this time, the first part of this question is worrisome because residents do not technically own the deeds to their property since they are living in the
Sian Ka’an. Residents were promised when the Sian Ka’an was initiated that residents would not be forced from their homes, however because they no longer own the land they live on, uncertainty occasionally crept into conversations about the Sian Ka’an. Zac is 65 years old and has been living in Punta Allen for the past 50 years shrugged and said, “Well, we are ok because we don’t pay anything [property tax] but on the other hand we cannot say this is mine. It is a natural reserve and they don’t evict us from here because we were here before. I believe that is why they don’t evict us...or perhaps one day they will. We don’t know what is going to happen (Zac)”. An optimistic approach would suggest that the Sian Ka’an would adhere to their initial promise, and hopefully would not want to lose it’s credibility as a World Heritage Site from the UNESCO by introducing the large scale tourism present in Tulum, Playa del Carmen, and Cancun. However this long-term perspective is not entirely within the decision making power of the people of Punta Allen at this time. Through negotiated living they are able to maintain the status quo they are content with respect to the level of tourism they currently have. And through that same negotiation process perhaps a solution can be reached with the Sian Ka’an that better safeguards the future of Punta Allen.
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