A New Look at Subsistence and Habitat Use at the Preclassic Maya Site of Cerros, Belize

Ashley E. Sharpe, Graduate Student
Florida Museum of Natural History and Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL – Contact: asharpe@ufl.edu

Introduction
Located on the mouth of the New River by the Cenote Bay in northern Belize, the ancient site of Cerros provides a unique opportunity to examine one of the earliest Maya communities made up of its local animal resources. Cerros developed into an important coastal center during the Early Preclassic (300 BCE – 200 CE), when the first Maya states began to form. Its strategic location would have allowed it to take advantage of a wide variety of animal species, both from the sea and near river as well as the inland forests and grasslands. A chronological and regional analysis of the faunal remains recovered from the site may allow us to better understand the site’s subsistence base over time, and how its acquisition and use of species differed from similar sites elsewhere in northern Belize.

Results and Discussion
Combining mollusk and vertebrate data, it is evident that nearly 75% of Cerros’s subsistence base came from the sea. Mollusks made up the majority of remains, principally the edible Caribbean crown conch (Megalomena melongena, 47% of mollusks recovered). Bony fish, 0.1% of which were identified as freshwater species, also comprised a significant portion of the assemblage. Dogs and deer were the most common mammals (16.7% of mammals).

Distribution of Fauna NISP at Cerros

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>NISP</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marine Mollusks</td>
<td>10,828</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshwater Fish</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mammals</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Species</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Species of Fish

- Bony Fish
- Marine Mollusks
- Freshwater Fish
- Reptiles
- Birds
- Mammals

Species of Mammals

- Dogs
- Deer
- Rodents
- Birds
- Mammals

Species of Reptiles

- Lizards
- Snakes
- Turtles

Species of Birds

- Parrots
- Cormorants
- Ducks

Conclusion
The preliminary results show that Cerros was a unique early coastal community whose population relied on the abundant resources available from the Cenote Bay. Although located near both river and forest habitats, it did not seem to make extensive use of resources available from those locations; rather, marine fish and shellfish, in addition to domesticated dogs, made up the majority of the Cerros subsistence base.

Cerros’s use of fauna differed considerably compared to other Preclassic Maya centers in northern Belize. A portion of the Cerros zoocommunity assemblage appears to have attracted unanalyzed shellfish, and the fine-screened material of small bone and species. Ongoing analyses will address such questions as how bone and shell material was used for crafting and which species were preferred for ritual events, allowing us to better understand how this ancient Maya community interacted with its surrounding environment.

Acknowledgments
Debra Walker and Susan Milbrath were instrumental in allowing me access to the Cerros archaeological collection, and for providing me with excavation notes and context information. Rachel Hamilton has been especially helpful in offering advice regarding zooarchaeological interpretation strategies. I am also grateful to Helen Sonnaya Carr for offering her advice and assistance on several occasions. Debra Walker provided creative illustrations. I am also grateful for the assistance and advice of Helen Sonnaya Carr for offering her advice and assistance on several occasions. I am also grateful for the assistance and advice of Helen Sonnaya Carr for offering her advice and assistance on several occasions. I am also grateful for the assistance and advice of Helen Sonnaya Carr for offering her advice and assistance on several occasions.

References