

BELIZE NATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2018

“Research and Development in Belize”

Keynote Speaker: Joseph Palacio Ph.D.

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First of all, I am grateful to Nigel Escalante for inviting me to give this Keynote Address. He is the Director of the Institute for Social and Cultural Research and a member of the Working Group that is hosting this First Belize National Research Conference under the theme “Research and Development in Belize”.

I congratulate the three institutions and their hardworking leaders who have put together a consortium dedicated to scientific research in Belize. These institutions are the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH), the University of Belize, Galen University, and the UWI Open Campus. My hope is that this collaboration will spread to other institutions and will grow from strength to strength. My second hope is that there will be wider collaboration with institutions of higher learning within the larger Caribbean and Central American region – notably Jamaica, Cuba, Mexico, and Central America. In Central America I single out Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras, and, of course, Guatemala.

It is interesting to note that this month of March 2018 would seem to be the open season for research in Belize. Less than three weeks ago there was another Conference held here in Belmopan focusing on research co-sponsored by East Carolina University and the University of Belize. I was fortunate enough to deliver a paper at that Conference. From the list of presenters for this Conference there were also others, who presented there. This is indeed the season for research conferences in Belize. My hope is that there will be a repeat every year so persons can put the time period on their annual calendar of events.

There is a panel taking place this Thursday at 4:25 p.m. entitled “Belize National Research Council”. I am signaling to Nigel that I would like to participate in that panel, where I can elaborate on some of the ideas that I am sharing in this address.

In preparing this address Nigel has asked that I should present some historical reflections as well as perspectives on the role that research has played and will continue to do so in Belize’s development. To introduce this topic I refer to a paper entitled “Anthropology in Belize” which I published in the journal *Current Anthropology* in 1976¹. I encourage researchers to read this article as it argued for a focus on several topics needed to help us proceed at that time from the darkness of colonialism toward the light of nationhood. The exercise helped me a great deal as I was contemplating my own switch from archaeology to social anthropology.

¹ Anthropology in Belize, *Current Anthropology* 1976 Vol. 17 (3): 485-490.

As backdrop to the article in *Current Anthropology* let me elaborate briefly on the sociopolitical context in which Belize found herself in the late 1960s – early 1970s. We found ourselves on a difficult, slippery, and even scary roadmap toward independence. Powerful friends of Belize – mainly the United States and United Kingdom – were ambivalent in their support for Belize to proceed toward independent sovereignty. This in turn meant that Belizeans at all costs should display our unambiguous dedication to our dear motherland. Questions surrounding any divisiveness – be it ethnic identity, colour, geographical origin – needed to be downplayed. The need to weld into a strong nation remained paramount. Our national heroes – George Price and Philip Goldson – remained sterling examples of whom and what the new Belize would be.

My contribution as a Belizean social scientist to the formation of the new Belize was to demonstrate that whatever ethnic differences remained among us could be overcome by complete dedication to the new nation-state called Belize. This was the primary aim of my 1976 article in *Current Anthropology*. But, what in fact has happened by today in 2018 almost forty years after we celebrated our glorious independence? The sectoral divisions among us have become as deep as they had been before independence. The lines of separation by colour, ethnicity, wealth, geographical location have become sharper among us. As an indicator, the scourge of gun violence now reigns supreme in our urban communities.

What suggestions do I have for the young, bright researchers among us? The first is to take as many courses in research methods in as many disciplines as you can including the social and natural sciences. In doing so make sure that you qualify yourself in quantitative and qualitative research methods. Your aim should be to build expertise in as many of the following as possible:

- Understanding poverty and how the wealthy perpetuate poverty so they could become more wealthy
- Understanding the working of our political structure so that the political elite and the economic elite continue to work together for the well-being of the fewer and fewer
- Understanding how the culture of corruption has so infiltrated all levels of our society that it has already become the future well-being of our children and grandchildren. With such knowledge engage in all efforts to uproot this scourge

- Understanding how in present day Belize if you are born black, female, indigenous Maya or Garifuna, you have greater chances of growing up and dying in extreme poverty.

Having shared some thoughts with our young and gifted researchers, what do I have to say to the institutions that provide the appropriate context for training? It may be difficult and costly for each of the institutions to engage in the highest level of training that is so necessary for the necessary courses. I suggest that the institutions redouble their efforts at collaboration among themselves as well as with foreign institutions that may be interested and willing to participate. Along with the challenges of actual teaching, the institutions should also be working seriously on a journal where they publish their own research while encouraging their students to also engage quite early in their careers of publishing their works so that as many interested persons here and abroad can see what studies are being produced.

I thank you.