

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

Answered by Dr. David V. Gibson, Associate Director and Margaret Cotrofeld, Technical Writer/Editor, IC² Institute

1. How did IC2 become involved with this particular project?

Gerhart Walch, CEO of BELIZEA Corp. came into contact with IC² Institute through the introduction of a Texas EX who was interested in the Belize Project and who was aware of IC²'s vision and mission – regional & sustainable development worldwide through science and technology commercialization and shared prosperity. In 2003 Gerhart met with IC² Founder Dr. George Kozmetsky and Dr. David Gibson, Associate Director to discuss his (Gerhart's) vision for Belize.

Discussions continued and in 2004 Mr. Walch committed to paying travel costs and living expenses for IC² Institute MSSTC (Masters of Science in Science and Technology Commercialization) students, IC² Visiting Scholars, IC² Fellows and select staff to conduct research in Central America and Belize to produce a “quick look regional study” the November 2005 report [Knowledge-Base Benchmarking for Belize Education, Science, and Technology \(BEST\) Park](#), see www.ic2.org – linked from homepage.

What does the university hope to accomplish? IC² Institute at The University of Texas hopes to contribute to cross-national educational and research exchange: Promoting education of Belizeans in such topics as policy, entrepreneurship, and business & technology commercialization, while promoting UT student and professor involvement in Belize research projects. Belize is a great laboratory of how to best foster regional development in a very challenged environment.

How do these projects benefit the universities and their faculty, staff and students? The initial learning project, the Quicklook study performed in 2004 engaged MSSTC students in a regional assessment of the Caribbean focusing on Belize. Interviews and a workshop held in Belize presented the data to University of Belize, business leaders, and members of Belize's national government. This was a great experience for the students, and it was well received by the interests in Belize. These data and experiences were used for the report on the feasibility of the vision of the Business Education Science & Technology Park. BEST is partially based on the model of the IC² Institute – to act as a bridge between governments, businesses and academia; and to provide education and research on local economic assets in order to meet the regional challenges.

BEST could also provide The University of Texas at Austin with a location for an array cross-disciplinary research – there are archaeology sites on the property, as well as rainforest acreage, lagoons and more. Over fifty square miles of rainforest with lagoons is a tremendous resource for many types of research. The potential for a cross-disciplinary research center with living laboratory is there, if we can bring the right interests together to provide a structure for student exchange and research. Archeology, botany, marine biology, etc., are some of the assets of the region, and The University of Texas at Austin has the capability to provide quality research in all these arenas.

What are the hi-tech business opportunities *in these disciplines*? This question approaches large issues, such as new drug development, health and wellness, aquaculture, etc. The current plans for BEST includes a Health & Spa center, which would promote products based on local botanicals, etc.; as well as the hope to develop other indigenous industries.

2. IC2 is recognized as a 'think and do' research center, utilizing 'real world' methods. How will your efforts create jobs, foster sustainable growth and improve conditions in Belize? The hope is to create the educational base to develop an ecologically balanced indigenous industry – initiated and owned by Belizeans, not outside interests. One of the common challenges of developing nations is that the largest industry is usually tourism-based and “that” is usually owned by foreign interests. But the BEST goal is to bring industry development – both tourism and other industries – into the hands of the local people, in a way that the environment is preserved and enhanced by industry, not destroyed. We are motivated by the assumption that if you have an educated local population who love and respect their environment, the industry that they develop will be “smart” – truly intelligent – and it will be sustainable.

3. When is the project scheduled to begin? How long has the preliminary work been happening? There has been preliminary work for several years – including the Quicklook Study & workshop, followed by the report. Starting construction of physical assets has been the biggest challenge. Bring the vision to reality hinges on financial investment and construction, to be able to initiate longterm projects; and this has been the great challenge of BELIZEA CORP.

4. What are some commonalities that UT shares with Belize and vice versa? UT currently has archaeology research projects (digs) in Belize. Other disciplines could also benefit from research in Belize including access to the Great Barrier Reef which is one of the healthiest reefs in the world; as well as the rainforests; the caves. Belize is a two hour flight from Houston, so it is very accessible. Belizeans speak English; the money exchange is set at the flat rate of 2 to 1 against the U.S. Dollar.

(IE: UT archeological dept./Belize's rich Mayan culture.) Will the endeavor bring work to Austin as well? Many interesting links already exist between Belize and Austin including renowned local artist Philippe Kleinfelter. If you start connecting these interests that already exists, a dynamic synergy could emerge. It's a nice place to escape to, for workshops and short-term executive education... like Hawaii only closer and less developed and not as expensive. Almost everyone who gets involved with Belize wants to “stay involved” with Belize.

5. Please explain the BEST Park research initiative and the various sectors that will exist within it. The Business Education, Science, and Technology Park initiative has three main focuses: An education center; a Health & Wellness Center & Spa; and a business incubator to support local business development.

6. How would IC2 be able to improve technology usage in Belize and include it in the entrepreneurial education? IC² has a global network of people who want to make this work – and that’s a good beginning. For example, an IC² Visiting Scholar from Norway, Professor Elin Oftedal, was part of the Quicklook Regional Assessment. Norway has a strong aquaculture industry; and there is interest from Norway in investing in aquaculture in Belize. IC² Fellow Dr. Carlos Scheel was an expert advisor to the regional assessment and his professional interest is using IT to facilitate indigenous cluster development. So you bring in industry projects, and have students help develop those projects; some may be “hands on” with the cages in the water; others would be “hands on” with sales, marketing and business management. And when the business project is mature, it spins out into a company. Maybe some of those business projects won’t be very high-tech, but you have local students develop that project until they have started a business. And they own part of that business when it becomes viable.

6. How will the Belize Business Incubator be similar to the Austin Technology Incubator (ATI)?

Part of the goal of BEST is to foster indigenous business incubation. Most of the business development that has gone through ATI is IT-centered high tech industry. Some businesses in Belize will may be that, but not all. The potential technology base is different because the local assets are different. Technology transfer and business development are the qualities IC² brings to the table. This is the know-how we hope will bring sustainable success to Belize.

7. The BEST education and training center would provide workshops, seminars, and conferences on subjects ranging from incubation management to technology transfer and global networking as well as indigenous industry development. What is the draw for businesspeople, looking for an eco-tourism retreat, with the ability to network and learn? Two hours from Houston; English-speaking culture and a friendly local population. Simple 2-to-1 money exchange, because Belize bases their dollar value against ours. This is the “easy gateway” to an idyllic environment of rainforests, coral reefs and more. It is a paradise of sorts. The quality of living is very high for those who are interested in engaging with the natural environment

8. Can you discuss the various industries that will be researched and how researchers will make connections to profitable industries? (IE: astronomy/mathematics – business/entrepreneurship) The potential is vast. The assets of the region are tremendous, but fragile. The challenge is to explore that potential without harming the environment, which is the source of most assets. Potential exists for astronomy and mathematics (the Mayans were high-tech astronomers and mathematicians in their day); biology and botany research can mean new drug development and more; there is almost certainly potential that we can’t imagine at this point of our technology development. The key that IC² Institute offers, is to link business entrepreneurship (and global networks), to each industry as it develops – and therefore maximize the potential of these local industries.

9. Would you say that BEST Park and Belize's goal is to help bring Belize into the status of a developed nation? Developed nation may be a stretch – but BEST could be an important catalyst for an improved quality of life and economic development and future for Belizeans. The challenge is how can a SMALL country like Belize with significant assets use these asset to overcome significant challenges and find a niche to be a viable and sustainable part of the 21st Century global economy.

Please feel free to include additional information that you feel should be included in the piece. I do have the Knowledge-Base Benchmarking for Belize Education, Science & Technology (BEST) Park packet that was sent. As of now IC² has assisted in the development of the vision for BEST – but many challenges remain to launch this vision on initial steps to reality. If successful, BEST could be a model for other small developing nations.