



Reef stewardship in Belize:
TIDE Freshwater Cup
soccer and environmental competition



A case study developed for the



AUSTRALIA CARIBBEAN
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Local environmental stewardship can be one of the most important ingredients in conservation success. An innovative program in southern Belize is using sporting competition to engage local communities in environmental issues, building their awareness about climate change risks and the role they can play in helping coral reefs.

Background

Although relatively uninhabited at present, southern Belize has a rapidly growing population. Watersheds are still relatively pristine and water quality is high but land-derived pollution is increasing. The main kinds are agricultural run-off, soil erosion due to clearance of riverside forests, detergents from clothes washing in rivers and plastic trash from littering or improper disposal of solid waste in open tips.

As an environmental organisation, TIDE seeks to build stewardship and responsibility for marine and freshwater resources in the local community. This case study summarises the highly successful Freshwater Cup – a yearly carnival developed to foster environmental stewardship.

The challenges

Various forms of pollution from the land can impact the marine environment but people living far from the sea can often be unaware of the impacts they have on the reef downstream.

TIDE needed to find a way to keep water quality in southern Belize high despite the growing population. They needed to enhance stewardship for freshwater resources in the current population, but also to build and embed a greater awareness and commitment to the environment into the habits, activities and identity of Belizeans to ensure that it carries into future generations.

What was done

Belizeans love football – playing it, watching it, talking about it. Local tournaments are some of the most popular social activities in the south and competitions with prizes always draw a crowd. Capitalizing on this passion, in 2004 TIDE set up the Freshwater Cup.

This is a football tournament with a twist – in order to enter, each team must first plan and execute a project to protect freshwater resources. Typical projects include planting trees to protect riverbanks, removing trash from creeks, painting murals celebrating nature or installing signs with environmental messages.

Originally, the competition was exclusively for adults. A children’s competition was introduced in 2007 and in 2011, they removed the adult competition in order to accommodate more children’s teams.

The competition is now for primary school children (male and female) aged twelve or under. Approximately 20 schools participate.



How successful was it?

The TIDE Freshwater Cup has been remarkably successful. It has mobilized schools and entire communities to develop greater awareness of and commitment to freshwater ecosystems.

Enhanced environmental stewardship

Through the mini-projects, many people have seized the opportunity to improve their local environment. “In many cases, the environmental projects transcend the football championship” (UNICEF, 2009).

For example, in 2007, the adult team from Bella Vista cleaned up an area at the edge of their village that had inadvertently become a garbage dump. They used a dumper truck to remove the garbage to a nearby landfill. The following year, they took up the issue with the village council, constructed a new sanitary landfill and arranged regular waste collection for the village.



Likewise, in 2008, the senior team in Jacintoville cleaned up a garbage dump and put up signage to discourage dumping. They formed an environmental club, which still organizes regular village clean-ups to this day. The most popular projects have often been the ones that create green spaces in schools and communities. For example, in 2012 Bladen Primary School cleared trash from a local creek and created a pleasant riverside space with benches on which to sit and enjoy nature.

Other successful projects have included setting up organic vegetable gardens at schools, installing garbage bins by rivers and highways, tree planting and finding imaginative ways to recycle, such as building garbage bins and fences from used plastic bottles. There have been some bold education projects too. In 2013, the school team from San Marcos gave presentations to their parents, most of whom are farmers, to educate them on the harmful effects of pesticides and herbicides on aquatic life.



Players, classmates, and family members join in the environmental projects, thereby creating a domino effect of environmental awareness in the wider community. The reward that children get from successfully completing an environmental project (not just the competition prizes but also the appreciation and praise of their parents, teachers and peers) helps children to develop a sense of social responsibility and environmental stewardship.

What's more, during the TIDE Freshwater Cup is the first time that many of these children (and even teachers) are exposed to key environmental messages. Many had never heard of climate change before, or were aware that forests are necessary to sustain rivers through the dry season or that the Belize Barrier Reef can be harmed by activities of people hundreds of miles inland.

The majority of participating children seem to have internalized these ideas because school principals and teachers comment that since the Freshwater Cup, school compounds are much cleaner and they hear children telling others not to drop litter. Thanks to this formative experience, these children will carry enhanced stewardship into their adult lives.

Other social benefits

Being part of a team that comes up with a shared vision for a project and successfully realizes it is tremendously rewarding for the children. It fosters teamwork and empowers kids by making them realize what can be accomplished when we work together.

The sports component has given thousands of girls, boys, women and men the opportunity to participate in a sports competition, helping to promote a healthy lifestyle, gender equality, teamwork, self-esteem and friendship between people of different ethnic and cultural groups. Three members of the current Belize national team played in the TIDE Freshwater Cup.

"Given the shortage of leisure activities and the overall poverty of the local area, the programme also acts as a sound source of entertainment that contributes toward a healthy lifestyle for adolescents and children," UNICEF (2009). The competition has proven so popular that it has become a household name in Toledo.

International recognition

The TIDE Freshwater Cup has won several international awards for innovation in sustainable development, namely: the CEPAL Social Innovation Award in 2008 (from among over 800 entries), the Green Apple Award in 2010, and the International Olympic Committee's Award for Integrating Sport and Sustainable Development in 2012.

Advice for replicators

Whilst it is acknowledged that every project, team and tool will be different, knowledge sharing and lessons learned can help program developers to identify common approaches and characteristics that can be replicated to other projects to maximise the chance of success.

The TIDE Freshwater Cup involves activities easily transferrable for success should others wish to replicate it. The following details the program of activities that TIDE undertakes each year to implement the Freshwater Cup.

TIDE Freshwater Cup... a step-by-step

1. TIDE's environmental education coordinator visits schools to present the competition, explain the rules, and encourage teams to enter.
2. In a second visit, the education coordinator gives presentations on aquatic and marine ecosystems, land-sea interconnectivity and human impacts. He facilitates a discussion on problems affecting local freshwater resources and encourages teams to suggest solutions. He uses examples of past projects to illustrate how to design a good project and encourages teams to seek input from the wider community as they design theirs.
3. Teams then plan projects tailored to their community's needs and fill out a project plan form that includes a budget (typically less than US\$250), funding plan and timetable for completion of activities. Teams must register for the Freshwater Cup by a certain deadline by submitting their completed project plan form, a list of team members and a team contract agreeing to abide by the rules of the game and the principle of fair play.
4. TIDE staff members evaluate each project plan. Proposals are accepted or returned to the team for modification. A team whose proposal is returned must improve its project plan or withdraw its application.
5. Once approved, teams have four months to complete their projects. In this time, they receive at least one visit from the education coordinator, who monitors progress and provides advice and encouragement. A small budget is made available to support the projects. By the deadline, each team must provide a project report. Teams unable to complete their project or provide a report must provide justification for an extension or be disqualified.
6. TIDE personnel judge the projects according to pre-determined criteria. They read the project reports and visit the sites, where the children present their projects. The winners are announced at the football tournament finals (see below).
7. The football component of the Freshwater Cup has two parts, a league stage and a knockout stage. First, male and female teams are divided into two leagues by geography (giving a total of four leagues). Over several weeks, each team plays the others in its league. TIDE provides the schools with footballs, kits, shin guards and boots, and arranges transportation for away teams. They also organize volunteer coaches and referees.
8. The two teams earning the highest number of points in each league advance to the knockout tournament, which is held on one day toward the end of the school year. On the championship day, the semi-finals, third-place play-off and final are played before the prize-giving ceremony.
9. First, second and third placed winners of the best environmental project and football tournaments (male and female) receive prizes consisting of school supplies, a trophy and a framed photograph of the team for the school, plus school supplies, school fees and winners medals for the individual team members.
10. Follow up focus group reporting is completed for evaluation and improvement in preparation for next year of the program.

Key Elements for Success

With stewardship projects such as TIDE's Freshwater Cup program, we've identified eight key tips for teams hoping to develop a similar program:

1. *Prioritize schoolchildren*

Originally, the TIDE Freshwater Cup only involved adult teams but has gradually shifted to only involving schoolchildren. This is for several reasons. Firstly, children are generally more receptive to learning and behaviour change than adults. Secondly, working with schools brings advantages in terms of organization. Teachers ensure projects are completed on time and teams consistently show up for games. Lastly, family and friends almost always get involved in the children's projects, leading to more widespread awareness in the community.



2. *Support teams to improve their environmental projects*

Teachers and students sometimes enter the program with such a low level of awareness that they do not know what effective steps they can take to protect freshwater ecosystems. Teachers also have many demands on their time and leading a project can sometimes slip to the bottom of the pile.

TIDE overcomes this lack of capacity by providing guidance and encouragement at key junctures, such as

- Meeting with school principals to gain their support
- Hosting classroom lessons on human impacts on freshwater ecosystems
- Facilitating project inception meetings with teams.
- Visiting projects and calling team leaders to check on progress.
- Providing a clear set of criteria for judging projects.
- Publicly rewarding and recognising good performance, not just with prizes, but with praise and certificates of appreciation.

All this takes a lot of time and effort – TIDE estimates at least one hour per team per week for the four-month duration of the Freshwater Cup program – but is worth it because you will be leveraging

orders of magnitude more time and effort and building capacity for environmental stewardship at the same time.

3. Children can be effective agents of change but they must be enabled

Children and adolescents are open to new ways of thinking and can challenge older generations to do more about the world's problems. They can be influential environmental advocates, as recognised by UNICEF (2009), who have sponsored the program for a total of three years... *'There is no doubt that respect for children and adolescents as subjects with full rights provides enormous benefits for society as a whole. This process includes involvement and respect for young people as prime movers in environmental protection and the prevention and mitigation of natural disasters.'*

For this to happen, children must be enabled to come up with their own ideas and have their say. Unfortunately, busy teachers sometimes find it easier to write projects themselves without consulting the children. TIDE does their best to encourage teachers to be inclusive in the project design as this will maximise the personal growth of environmental stewardship from within.

4. Encourage teams to include other stakeholders

The most successful projects often enlist the support of multiple stakeholders, such as village councils and community groups. Obtaining input from these stakeholders during project planning will help garner their support.

Local businesses may be keen to be associated with a popular community environmental and sports event. TIDE and the participating teams can sometimes capitalize on this to get sponsorship for team kits, equipment, transportation and prizes.

5. Use the games for environmental awareness

Once the environmental projects are done and the football competition is underway, it can be easy for some to forget the aim - the stewardship of freshwater resources. There are several things you can do to ensure the environmental focus is not lost.

TIDE has teams present their projects at the games – enthusiastic teams will give performances every bit as entertaining as the football! They insist that each team displays a banner illustrating their name and project, and organise for volunteers to talk to people in the crowd about ways they can protect downstream environments. TIDE reaches further out to a much wider audience by using the event to draw media attention, and with the help of a PA system and an enthusiastic MC, commentary on the games includes reminders of the environmental message.



6. Hold a debriefing

Feedback leads to improvement, and scheduling in events which provide a chance to monitor, evaluate and discuss the program will help improve your program from year to year. ‘What were our greatest successes? How could we do things better? What happened that we really didn’t suspect?’

Focus group meetings, debriefs and surveys of participants, volunteers, and even spectators can provide valuable information that you mightn’t have gathered otherwise. It’s also a great way to give the community some ownership and maintain support from year to year.

7. Make the most of volunteers

Any program can benefit from greater team capacity. Make use of local and international volunteers where possible, and even advertise through other likeminded organisations or businesses to recruit those willing to lend a hand.

TIDE has tried to establish a committed set of long-term volunteers (e.g. referees, coaches, project leaders), and builds their capacity through providing training and incentives to show appreciation for their time and efforts.

8. Make the competition prestigious

A small investment in resources – especially if targeted effectively - can give any event a degree of cachet and boost eagerness for locals to participate. TIDE invests in kits (uniforms), boots, and official soccer balls. Participating and having ‘the gear’ is a badge of pride, creates an identity for each team, and is an important part of the Freshwater Cup.

By following official FIFA rules, and providing trophies, official soccer balls, pitch improvements, trained referees, floodlights, a PA system, video projection and other ‘frills’ each year for the program – TIDE has developed a semi-professional event that is looked forward to each year by locals, participants and volunteers.



Next steps

To increase impact and longevity of the environmental projects, TIDE are planning to experiment with encouraging schools to plan multi-year projects. TIDE are also putting considerable effort into assisting other organizations to replicate the program, both in Belize, the Caribbean and internationally, by providing case studies, publications and guidance.

Where to find out more about this case study

For more information about this project and other initiatives, contact James Lord at the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) info@tidebelize.org, on +501 722 2274, or by visiting www.tidebelize.org

UNICEF (2009) The Toledo Institute for Development and Environment Project “Freshwater Cup Environmental Football League”, Punta Gorda, Toledo, Belize. Produced by UNICEF Regional Office for Latin American and the Caribbean, Panama.

Where to find more case studies and resources

The Australia Caribbean Coral Reef Collaboration www.climateandreefs.org has hand-picked the most useful resources available for coral reef managers in one easy-to-use portal.



Australian Government

**Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority**