



Ancient Maya Use of Wetlands in the Yalahau Region of Northern Quintana Roo

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Since the 1970s researchers have been gathering evidence that wetlands of the southern Maya Lowlands had been used for agricultural production in ancient times. Use of wetlands apparently ranged from exploitation of natural cycles of flooding and water recession to labor-intensive construction of channels and raised fields. There has, however, been a great deal of debate in recent years concerning 1) the types of wetlands that were exploited, 2) the forms of wetland management practiced, 3) the dates during which wetland manipulation was practiced, and 4) the relative contribution of wetland management to ancient Maya subsistence.



Field investigations of 1996 conducted in a wetland of the El Edén Ecological Reserve in northern Quintana Roo, Mexico, provide the first confirmed evidence for ancient manipulation of wetlands in the northern Maya Lowlands. Constructed features within the seasonally inundated wetland consist of alignments of limestone boulders and slabs apparently intended to function as dikes and check-dams to control water and sediments. Associated settlements investigated by Bethany Morrison have been assigned to the Late Preclassic period (ca. 100 B.C.



to A.D. 400). Potential uses of the **wetland** include intensive cultivation of domesticates, management and harvesting of **periphyton** for use as a fertilizer, and management of edible **wetland** resources such as cattail (*Typha latifolia*) and apple snail (*Pomacea flagellata*). Our 1996 survey covered about 60 percent of the El Edén **wetland**. We will return in the spring of 1997 to complete the survey and to conduct excavation of a sample of the constructed features.



The El Edén **wetland** is only one of an extensive system of **wetlands** found within the Yalahau region of northern Quintana Roo. It is anticipated that evidence for ancient manipulation of other **wetlands** of the Yalahau region awaits discovery. Ultimate understanding of **wetland** manipulation by the ancient Maya will necessitate cooperative research of archaeologists with ecologists, biologists, geomorphologists, agroecologists, and paleontologists. The team of El Edén researchers represents the ideal interdisciplinary atmosphere for conducting such studies.