



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.