People in both communities unanimously agreed that garbage is the main environmental issue that they face today. In the sector of Gardí, several communities have begun to work together on a recycling and garbage cleanup project known as "Basura Cero." While not perfect, some of the project’s accomplishments have already made major impacts on the community. The community of Gardí also believed that many of their problems come from tourism, which they try to combat by initiating an autonomous territory. The Comarca itself consists of 365 islands and about 7513 sq. kilometers of coastal land including part of a mountain range, virgin rainforest, and some of the most pristine coral reefs in the Caribbean.

Considered the “brothers of the trees” by their own religious teaching, the Gardís have always expressed an intimate relationship with and understanding of the mother earth, or “Nana,” a caring, but punishing figure who created all that we presently experience as natural, including the Gardí people. Additionally, Gardí tradition gives importance to a figure of spiritual protection known as a “Galu” which guards important natural features. However, like in most once-isolated parts of the world, the community has experienced the effects of the outside world more recently in than before, especially since the construction of a road into the Comarca in 1970. Tourists now visit the region in greater numbers and packaged products are regularly imported into the Comarca, which lacks the infrastructure to manage inorganic waste. The Gardí people are also facing a mass emigration from the territory as youth and their families search for better jobs and education in other parts of Panama and the world. Today, more Gardí live in Panama City alone (40,620 according to the 2010 census) than in all of the Comarca (30,308).

In order to examine current perceptions in communities that are more intimately affected by the outside world, the majority of interviews in this study were conducted in the sub-urban Gardí community of Abía Yala, which is located at a half hour bus ride from the Panamanian capital. The first half of the study was conducted in the Comarca, mostly in the island community of Gardí Sugdub. Gardí Sugdub is the closest island to the port and road, and is heavily visited by tourists. A large portion of the community has television, and they are one of the few communities to enjoy both solar powered electricity and a generator.

Study Goal

Observe current perceptions of the importance of environmental conservation and how it relates to Gardí tradition in two communities that are intimately affected by the outside world, Gardí Sugdub and the surrounding sector of Gardí and the suburban community of Abía Yala (El Cristal), Arraijan in the province of Panama Oeste.

Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews in conversational format, ethnographic observation, and extensive literature review. Over the course of 17 days, 12 adults were interviewed in Gardí Sugdub and nearby communities and Abía Yala. The average age of participants in the Gardí Sugdub region was 55.5 and in Abía Yala, 38.5. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and Dulega with the help of a translator.

Conclusions

Interview participants in both communities almost unanimously agreed that environmental conservation was important to them individually and religiously. However, while most people saw garbage as a major concern, other less visibly obvious issues were rarely mentioned. People living outside of the Comarca seemed less likely to take actions to solve problems in their communities because they believed that the Panamanian government would eventually step in, despite decades of inaction on the government’s part. Interviewed members of the community in Abía Yala were entirely Protestant or Catholic and many felt little connection to Gardí religion outside of its cultural value. On the other hand, the community studied in the Comarca actively tried to correct visible environmental problems in their community. This difference may be due to a deeper expressed connection with their religious roots and a strong distrust of the Panamanian government. Some differences in answers between the communities may be attributed to the differences in age and education of the interviewed community members.