

# The Nojol Nah Settlement Zone Project

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### Introduction

This poster describes mapping and excavations carried out during the 2010 and 2011 field seasons at the ancient Maya site of Nojol Nah located in far north-western Belize. The site of Nojol Nah was first identified in 2004 after activities related to a new logging road uncovered a significant amount of lithic debris (Barrett and Majewski 2010, 57), and in 2010 the full extent of the settlement was revealed due to extensive land clearance for modern agricultural purposes. This site arcs around the south-eastern edge of the Alacranes Bajo, a large area of low-lying land that stretches from the far northwest corner of Belize into Mexico, and covers an area of approximately 500 square kilometres. The bajo is ringed with settlements, and at least four of these sites – Nojol Nah, Grey Fox, Xnoha and Sunnyside – fall within the MRP research permit boundary area. As bajos covered up to 40% of the Maya Lowlands (Kunien 2004, 3), their uses and management are important to understand. Some of the largest and best-known Lowland Maya centres such as Tikal, Calakmul and El Mirador were built adjacent to bajo areas, so clearly bajos played an important part in the development of Maya civilisation. Historically investigations into ancient Maya settlements have often focused on large ceremonial centres and their associated hinterlands. Nojol Nah affords us the opportunity to focus on another aspect of ancient Maya life, that of those who lived far from the monumental centres.

This research is being carried out as part of the work of the Maya Research Program which has been investigating archaeological sites in North-Western Belize since 1991 under the leadership of Dr Tom Guderjan.

### Research Questions

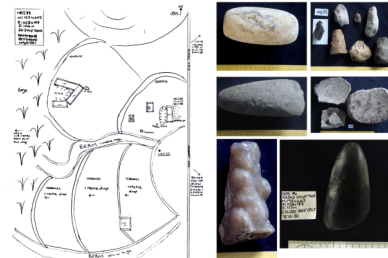


Using the distinct environmental zone of the Alacranes Bajo as a heuristic focal point, we aim to answer the following research questions:

- What was the nature of settlement around the eastern edge of this bajo?
- Why were settlements clustered around the bajo?
- Did this change over time?
- Does proximity to the bajo mean that the communities were 'bajo-centric'?
- Is there any evidence of intensive agricultural practices in or around the Alacranes Bajo?

### 2010 Field Season

The aim of the 2010 field season was to map cultural and topographical features uncovered by the extensive vegetation clearance. The clearance by the current owners of the land, although causing vast damage to local ecological niches, afforded us an unusually clear picture of settlement features and land modifications. The methodology comprised of mapping each feature by hand, recording GPS co-ordinates, surface collection, and geo-referencing and entering data onto ArcGIS. In total more than 50 sketch maps were created over the field season and features recorded ranged from tiny chich mounds and terraces to large structures. In total over 500 structures and landscape features were recorded.



Example of 2010 Sketch Map; Selection of Artifacts from Surface Collection; Freshly Burned and Cleared Fields

### 2011 Field Season

During the 2011 field season, a total of 28 Test Units were undertaken, these consisted of 14 Structures and 14 Landscape features. Artifacts mainly consisted of ceramics and lithics, but also obsidian, groundstone and shell artifacts were recovered, as well as human remains and associated grave goods. Soil samples were also collected where appropriate for future analysis. Carrying out excavations also allowed us to check the veracity of the 2010 sketch maps for accuracy. The biggest anomaly we found was Test Unit 8, which, although appeared to be a rectangular mound, was in fact an oval shaped building with curved walls containing a Late Pre-Classic/ Early Classic lip-to-lip cache in its foundations. This highlighted the importance of excavation alongside survey, as even the most thorough survey cannot give a completely accurate view of what lies beneath the ground in the archaeological record. Other notable finds from the 2011 season included a multiply burned and re-plastered room (Test Unit 22), human remains with filed and inlaid teeth (Test Unit 11) and a pink hueed floor (Test Unit 10)



Test Unit 8 - Plan and Profile, Cache, Beads and Inlay from Inside Cache  
Test Unit 10 - Pinkish Floor; Test Unit 22 Burned Floor, Walls and Bench; Test Unit 11 - Inlaid Teeth

### Preliminary Conclusions

The main objective of the 2011 field season was to collect chronological data from the Nojol Nah Settlement Zone landscape, and to obtain any other information we could about those who inhabited the land. The chronology was established by the analysis of ceramics by Colleen Hanratty, and we were also able to gather other useful information such as burial data. The results of these excavations and future excavations will be added into the GIS and analysed in order to discern any patterns that may be present. Interestingly preliminary results of the Nojol Nah Settlement Zone study have shown that the construction of what appear to be ritual buildings, such as the circular room of test unit 8, and the large structures of NOS 49 date to the Early Classic, with the residential type buildings of NOS 11 to the Late Classic. However we do not currently have enough data about this landscape to say whether this is significant or whether this will become a pattern in the data. Further testing throughout the whole settlement zone is needed as well as at nearby places such as the Rhymer Group and Grey Fox, to see what relationships the inhabitants of Nojol Nah had with their closest neighbours who also occupied the edge of the Alacranes Bajo



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### Project Area

