

Lifestyle Migration to Bocas del Toro, Panama: Exploring Migration Strategies and Introducing Local Implications of the Search for Paradise

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Abstract: Lifestyle migration, the flow of relatively affluent people from developed to developing countries, is characterized by the search for 'lifestyle' destinations with warm climates, reduced costs of living, and perceived higher quality of life. Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama are three current major lifestyle migration destinations in Latin America. In this article I explore the emergence of this relatively new phenomenon in the Bocas del Toro Archipelago in Northwestern Panama by discussing the contradiction between lifestyle migrants' idealized perception of place and local realities. I also introduce the implications of these contradicting versions of reality, and how they play out at the local level. Results show that, in general, foreign residents are attracted to Bocas del Toro as a physical manifestation of globally produced images and perceptions of tropical island living. However, an in-depth exploration reveals contradictions between expectations and reality. I suggest that foreigners exhibit a set of attitudes and behaviors towards their new home that are defined by a shared cultural and economic background that, on the ground, contribute to the creation of emerging markets, land conflicts, and changes in environmental practices. The ensuing narrative is contingent upon tensions between and within social, political, and ecological variables at the global and local levels.

Keywords: *lifestyle migration, Bocas del Toro, Panama, social change.*

Introduction

The globalization of travel, technology, markets and ideas is rapidly transforming Latin American cities and rural landscapes. One particular

manifestation of this is the emergence of new migration patterns that are influenced by the global political economy and by changes in individual objectives and attitudes towards life. Lifestyle migration constitutes one such

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migratory phenomenon and, in Latin America, is typically characterized by the international flow of relatively affluent people from the United States and Canada, searching for so called 'lifestyle' destinations in Central and South America, with warm climates, cheaper costs of living, and perceived higher quality of life (Spalding 2011, Benson and O'Reilly 2009b). Recent studies show that these movements are becoming increasingly common in rural and environmentally sensitive areas of Latin America such as coastal and mountain communities within Mexico (MPI, 2006, Sunil, Rojas, and Bradley 2007), Costa Rica (Johnson and Clisby 2008, Frohlick 2009, Janoschka 2009, Barrantes-Reynolds 2011), and Panama (MPI 2006, McWatters 2008, Jackiewicz and Craine 2010, Spalding 2011). Recognizing the economic growth potential of this phenomenon, the Panamanian government has adopted a series of policies to attract foreign residents and associated investments in real estate and foreigner-based businesses¹. In response, lifestyle migrant hot spots have emerged in diverse geographic locations throughout Panama such as the highlands of Boquete, beach communities along the Pacific coast sun belt, and the Caribbean islands of Bocas del Toro in Northwestern Panama. This article aims to describe the context of lifestyle migration to Bocas del Toro and the various migration strategies used by foreigners; it also introduces the local implications of the influx of foreign residents. To do so, I follow the definition of lifestyle migration with a discussion of the juxtaposition of lifestyle migrants' idealization of their new home with local realities.

I then describe how this idealized perception of place, in turn, shapes the various strategies used by foreigners to relate to their new life in the Bocas del Toro Archipelago. I finalize the article by introducing the various ways in which lifestyle migration impacts local communities.

Transnational lifestyle migration studies in an era of globalized mobilities

Defining Lifestyle Migration

Lee (1966) broadly defines migration as a 'permanent or semi-permanent change of residence' (p.49). Migration research covers a wide range of scenarios of mobility that, in Latin America, have accelerated under the adoption of neoliberal economic policies (Kull, Ibrahim and Meredith 2007), and can be explained in terms of Urry's (1999) treatment of the phenomenon of increasingly mobile cultures in terms of a shrinking or homogenized world, in which individuals are able to live anywhere and experience enhanced mobilities due to the ease of travel and communication technologies. Traditionally studied migration research covers South-North and rural-urban movements for structural social, economic, and political reasons², and focuses on the directionality of these movements as well as the legal framework within which they occur and the subsequent diversity of social and economic implications at the national level in both source and destination countries (Lee 1966, King and Connell 1999, King and Wood 2001, Castels and

Miller 2003, Newton 2004). However, they often fail to take into account in-depth perspectives of personal histories and background as a way to understand the implications of such moves (McHugh 2000). In response, a relatively recent sub-set of studies are characterized by reverse movements: North-South and urban-rural, exploring a broader set of migratory phenomena such as high-skilled labor, retirement, amenity, love, and study migrations (e.g. King, Warnes and Williams 2000, King 2002, MPI 2006, Sunil et al. 2007, McCarthy 2008, Benson and O'Reilly 2009b). These relatively recent studies also further the field of migration research by embracing an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis that, as McHugh (2000) suggests, 'hold[s] much potential in revealing the interplay of migration and sociocultural change' (p.72). In other words, they enable the portrayal of migration as a complex process that articulates political economic forces with a post-structural approach that explores personal motivations and cultural nuances to explain why people move in search of an alternative lifestyle (O'Reilly n.d., Lee 1966, Lazaridis, Poyago-Theotoky and King 1999, King et al. 2000, Newton 2004, MPI 2006, Benson 2010).

This movement of individuals in search of a new way of life is known as lifestyle migration. Benson and O'Reilly (2009b) propose a dynamic definition of lifestyle migration as 'the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life' (p. 609). The issues,

debates, and outcomes highlighted by current lifestyle migration scholars represent an innovative academic space for reflection that allows for an in-depth exploration of the reasons why foreigners are moving to Bocas del Toro, and provides insight into their lifestyles as the context for understanding their decision to move and how they relate to their new home. The definition of lifestyle migration put forth by Benson and Reilly (2009b) relies on the assumption that the new destination is invariably contrasted with the migrant's past life. That something may be perceived as 'better', of course, presupposes that the current situation is undesirable, thus meriting an escape that may provide the opportunity to re-define oneself. Hoey (2006) refers to this re-definition as the creation of an imagined 'potential self' that is born from expectations and idealized versions of the lifestyle destination.

The expectation that people can improve their way of life or social and economic condition has increasingly been adopted throughout in Latin America as the result of the exportation of the American Dream, a concept based on North American (mostly US) values of personal freedom, liberty, independence, upward mobility, and property ownership (Cullen 2003, Leichenko and Solecki 2005). Essentially it implies that people have the ability to shape their life path according to individual meanings of a better life, while simultaneously recognizes that what constitutes a 'better life' is not homogeneously represented. These varying perceptions of a 'better life' do, however, all have in common the fact that individuals feel that achieving that which will

provide an improved lifestyle is their right. Part of this belief can be explained by one of the shared traits of United States citizens, the intentional and conscious founding of the country based on shared ideals of the future. As Cullen (2003) points out, 'explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance, is the theoretical basis of the American identity' (p. 6). In this sense, striving for the American Dream is valued as much as the belief that everyone is entitled to this improved life. However, who can actually achieve this dream is ultimately determined by certain conditions such as institutionalized racism, discrimination, economic disadvantages, and political economic factors such as the recent economic crisis of 2008. As most lifestyle migrants in Bocas del Toro are from the United States, for this article I rely on the assumption that the American Dream constitutes an important impetus for migration, simultaneously recognizing that while it may have different meanings and outcomes for each person, it influences individual objectives in the search for paradise. Paradise, in turn, similar to the rural idyll as imagined by city-dwellers in reference to life in the countryside, refers specifically to the utopic vision of a future home that, in this case, is characterized by tropical island living as slow-paced and relaxed in an eternally sunny, lush, and beach oriented environment (McCarthy 2008, Benson and O'Reilly 2009b, Halfacree and Rivera 2012). The global coupling of media and technology has further enabled the current proliferation of these post-card-like images of island living as paradise, strengthening the notion that there is an ideal place to

visit or live in, while simultaneously making it possible to export material lives into idyllic landscapes (Urry 1999). Instead of a simple move from one location to another, lifestyle migration is therefore understood as an ongoing personal process imbued with choice, influenced by past histories, expectations, and globally influenced romanticized visions of living in paradise (Benson and O'Reilly 2009a).

Idealizing their new home: Implications for the host community

Lifestyle migrants to Bocas del Toro relate to the social and natural environment of the archipelago both discursively and materially. Discursive relations refer to readily expressed perceptions of an idealized tropical island lifestyle that is produced through a search for a better life, and reproduced by the media through images of white sand beaches, palm trees, and days spent relaxing in a hammock surrounded by friendly locals. These discourses about the lifestyle destination can shift over time; initially emerging as somewhat naïve representations of a place, prior to the move, they are then shaped by lived experiences. Despite potential disillusionment or problems encountered in the new home, the narrative of the tropical island lifestyle destination as paradise remains constant, as illustrated by images shared by lifestyle migrants in Bocas del Toro on social networking sites and their descriptions of place obtained from interviews.

On the other hand, material relationships, influenced by these

idealized perceptions of the local, include explicit actions and behaviors adopted by foreigners that contribute to shifting existing social and economic conditions within communities (Urry 1995, Bryant and Bailey 1997, Urry 2002, Bury 2005, Kull et al. 2007). I further suggest that lifestyle migrant behavior, influenced by these discursive and material relations to place, is consumptive, ultimately converting the cultural diversity and local flavor of the island into the background or canvas upon which migrants trace their new paths (Urry 1995, King and Wood 2001, Meletis and Campbell 2007). In this sense, I theorize that the social and economic context of lifestyle destinations is shaped by these idealized perceptions of place that ultimately define the lifestyle destination according to what foreigners want to see. By adopting this shared cultural lens, foreigners situate themselves within their new home and navigate their daily lives in terms of personal interactions with locals, other foreigners, and the landscape, that are imbued with individual preconceptions and expectations of place that sometimes differ from a local reality (Benson 2012). As Halfacree and Rivera (2012) point out, the mismatch between imagined and real emerges from a sociocultural construction of the ideal that is most prominent in popular lifestyle destinations. Following Johnson and Clisby's (2008) discussion of environmental cosmopolitanism inherent in expatriate attitudes in Costa Rica, this globalized romantic perception of island living also contributes to a level of detachment from place that limits the possibility of genuine engagement with locals

and their surroundings. Indeed, by favoring the idealized perception of island living, some of the challenges and local outcomes of migrating are selectively overseen and oftentimes ignored, potentially leading to conflicts between foreigners, and between foreigners and locals.

On the ground, impacts of lifestyle migration ultimately result from the articulation of the discursive and material aspects of lifestyle migration that are born from a relatively privileged narrative around the consumption of local cultures and environments that often ignores local social and environmental changes (cf. Bryant and Goodman 2004). Notably, these representations of tropical landscapes as ideal lifestyle destinations commodify local culture and nature (Bryant and Goodman 2004). The exploration of the ways in which lifestyle migrants relate to Bocas del Toro presented in this article further politicizes this consumptive behavior by suggesting local outcomes are the result of a relative privilege characterized by a freedom of choice in selecting where to move and how to act in the destination country that emerges out of the relative economic wealth and embodied knowledge of lifestyle migrants (Benson and O'Reilly 2009a). In addition to the direct effects of developed country consumptive patterns exhibited by the migrant population, such as increased pressure on dated infrastructure and a higher level of waste and demand of local resources, these patterns are also exported to the local population through the promotion of the American Dream (Leichenko and Solecki 2005). This is of particular concern as the clash

between ways of life affects traditional perceptions of private property, land ownership, land use patterns, and preferred economic activities. This article introduces general implications of lifestyle migration as perceived through an idealized sense of place. However, given the heterogeneity of the local community, further research is needed to study how these impacts have differential effects on the various sub-groups within the local population.

Research Methodology

Based on a review of the literature on existing analytical categories³ that describe reasons for migrating and the temporal character of the residence change, and applying an inductive approach to field observations and preliminary interviews with foreign residents, I categorized migrants into three main types: second-home or residential tourists, entrepreneurs or economically active migrants, and retirees. Each of these categories hints at the range of backgrounds, expectations, adaptation strategies, and overall ways in which individuals materially and symbolically relate to their new home (O'Reilly n.d., Ortiz and Mendoza 2008).

Second-home or residential tourists include those who spend approximately six months away from the primary home in their country of origin where they continue to work, pursue business activities, or have strong ties to family and friends. They are generally affluent individuals with flexible employment strategies who purchase a second home primarily to enjoy leisure activities. Entrepreneurs

or economically active migrants in Bocas del Toro include foreigners of all ages and economic backgrounds who have moved in search of economic or investment opportunities that typically cater to foreign tourists or other foreign residents. Generally, retirees in Bocas del Toro are older, relative to other foreign residents, and have a guaranteed monthly income from government or corporate pension funds⁴.

Data was gathered between September 2008 and April 2011, using an anonymous non-probability self-selected survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews with lifestyle migrants. During this time I observed and documented lifestyle migrants' attitudes and behaviors towards their new home in a variety of settings such as daily activities, social interactions (e.g., restaurants, the central park, during festivals and local holidays, and during leisure recreational activities), and public forums. The non-probability, self-selected survey addressed the various strategies used by foreigners to relocate to Bocas del Toro. The survey instrument included fixed-response and open-ended questions and addressed topics such as forms of interaction with the local population (e.g., social, business, family, commerce, employer-employee), ties to their country of origin, as well as perceptions of and concern for specific environmental issues. It also gathered standardized demographic data and information on length of residence in Bocas del Toro and immigration status. The survey was publicized to the Bocas expat community through announcements in the local, bilingual, monthly newspaper, the *Bocas Breeze*⁵

(2008 and 2009), and was available for six months, between November 2008 and April 2009. The survey could either be answered online or on paper. Paper copies were available at a foreign-owned specialty super market, the Super Gourmet, visited by most, if not all, foreign residents at some point during their stay in Bocas del Toro. I received 58 completed surveys.

In-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants constituted the bulk of my data. I specifically identified a non-random selection of individuals who were able to provide distinct perspectives from the three pre-established migrant categories. I conducted a total of 25 interviews between January 2009 and April 2010, addressing the following

themes: reasons for moving to Bocas, knowledge of environmental issues/problems (in both origin and destination country), ties to home country, expected permanence in new home, cultural and social interactions between ‘locals’ and other ‘immigrants’, and attitudes towards national and local development (e.g., tourism, aquaculture farms, marinas, commercial and subsistence fishing, and lumber production).

I used a non-probability sampling method for both the survey and the interviews because, despite the existence of census data from the year 2000⁶, the rapid growth of the foreign population after 2003 suggests that the total population of foreign residents at the time the research was conducted



Figure 1. Map of Bocas del Toro Archipelago

was uncertain.

Moreover, census data does not necessarily capture the foreign population due to seasonal travel patterns, access to remote locations, and foreigners' reticence to be counted or officially registered. Similarly, immigration statistics fail to accurately reflect the foreign population, as many foreigners prefer to routinely leave the country to renew their tourist visas, or even choose to remain in the country illegally (Lazaridis et al. 1999, Janoschka 2009). Although this type of sampling does not allow for generalized statements about lifestyle migrants, the combination of extensive time in the field, literature reviews, continued communication with lifestyle migrants, and personal observations serve to validate responses.

Discussion: Paradise Found?

The political economy of lifestyle migration to the Bocas del Toro Archipelago

The push to re-make lives abroad can generally be explained by demographic shifts in a globalized world (Lazaridis et al. 1999, MPI 2006). The population structure of developed countries is rapidly changing with the aging of the baby boom generation. In the United States alone, the number of people over 65 years of age is expected to double between 2000 and 2030 (MPI 2006). As these baby boomers approach retirement, political, economic, and health considerations, as well as previous experiences living abroad and extended periods of active post-retirement lifestyles, contribute to an

increase in the share of the population interested in retiring abroad (King et al. 2000, MPI 2006, Tolson 2008, Benson 2010). These individuals face important economic decisions, as they find themselves with pensions that do not necessarily reflect inflation, or they may simply be looking to live in a place where they can maintain their standard of living despite the reduction in income due to retirement. The cost of health care is also an important consideration for baby boomers, and they may consider retiring to locations with cheaper medical services and what they may perceive to be healthier climates (MPI 2006).

As a lifestyle destination, Panama's pull includes current national development strategies that prioritize the promotion of economic growth, institutional modernization, and decentralization, in the context of large infrastructure projects such as the expansion of the Panama Canal (CND 2008, EIU 2008), large-scale mining and hydroelectric projects, and the construction of a Metrorail system for the nation's capital. An important component of this process of economic modernization is the creation of incentives for tourism projects and other related forms of foreign direct investment (FDI) such as real estate, hotels, transportation, and telecommunications (MICI 2010). Specially designed incentives to attract foreign residents include the provision of benefits and discounts for retirees, tax breaks for importing household goods and establishing tourism businesses, guarantees on investments⁷, and a streamlined business establishment process⁸ (MPI 2006). Additionally, the National Immigration Service

(NIS) was restructured in 2008 to improve the efficiency of its services, particularly reorganizing immigrant visa categories into permanent resident visas for economic reasons (e.g., investment), special conditions (e.g., retiree, and investor or employee of special economic zones), or visas for demographic reasons (e.g., married to Panamanian)⁹. Other attractive features of the Panamanian political economy include relatively stable inflation rates, cheaper costs of living in sectors such as real estate, in-house services and health care, open markets that allow for the availability of imported comfort goods such as familiar brands of food, health and clothing products, as well as a generally safe environment with low crime rates and negligible international threats (Leichenko and Solecki 2005, MPI 2006). Promoters of Panama as a lifestyle destination have capitalized on this reputation of political stability, modernization, and high economic growth, resulting in the recognition of Panama as a prime location to re-make a life abroad (MPI 2006, Sheridan 2007).

Panama's geographic proximity to the United States and convenient access to major North American travel hubs such as Miami, New York, and Houston also make it an attractive option for tourists and foreigners looking to relocate. The Archipelago of Bocas del Toro, located in the Northwestern corner of the Republic of Panama, includes six main islands (Colón, Bastimentos, Solarte, San Cristóbal, Popa, and Cayo de Agua) distributed throughout the Bay of Almirante and the Chiriquí Lagoon, and is characterized by tropical seascapes and rich tropical biodiversity (See Figure 1: Map of

the Bocas del Toro Archipelago). The local population of Bocas del Toro is very diverse, comprised of Afro-Antillean descendants of West Indian immigrants, Ngöbe and Buglé Indians, and Panamanians of Hispanic, European, and Chinese descent. Although geographically more isolated than other destinations within Panama, Bocas del Toro is rapidly becoming integrated to the national and international political economy.

The articulation of these push-pull factors has resulted in the significant expansion of international tourism to Bocas del Toro in the past twenty years (AMP/UM 2008, ATP 2010). However, due to the lack of accurate data on the foreign population, I relied on personal observations during the 2.5 years I lived in Bocas del Toro to suggest that the foreign population is, in fact, larger than the National Census data indicates.

Who are these lifestyle migrants?

Survey data, personal observations, and previous studies suggest that an overwhelming majority of lifestyle migrants are white, primarily from the United States¹⁰, and only a very small percentage are from non English speaking countries. Based on survey responses, 32.1% of lifestyle migrants are retirees, 30.4% are entrepreneurs or economically active migrants, and 12.5% are second-home or residential tourists. The remaining 25% of respondents did not feel that these categories accurately depicted their situation in Bocas. Of these (14 respondents), however, a more detailed look at survey responses pointed out

that four considered themselves to be retirees, an already existing category, eight qualified as second-home or residential tourists due to the temporary nature of their stay as explained in the survey, and only two failed to fit within these categories. Independent of category, most respondents were between 50 and 65 years of age, with an average age of 53. Economically active migrants were, on average, younger than migrants from the other two categories.

According to survey responses, lifestyle migrants in Bocas del Toro were attracted to the landscape and scenery, natural environment (combination of ocean, jungle, clean air, and warm temperatures), cultural diversity and relaxed lifestyle, as well as affordability. On the other hand, explanations for wanting to leave their home countries varied across each migrant category and included both structural political economic factors and personal motives. Most of the retirees were baby boomers, a rapidly growing segment of the population in developed nations. They moved to Bocas del Toro escaping daily stress, and searching for a relaxed, warm, affordable location with an existing community of foreigners. The average age of interviewed retirees was 59 and they originally came from the United States and Canada. Although they had worked in a wide range of industries, most expressed the need to remove themselves from high stress and demanding jobs in urban areas. Older respondents within this category moved to Bocas to reside on one of the many planned residential communities (TNC 2008), whereas others preferred to live in various locations throughout

the Archipelago. The latter came from quite an independent background, having lived and worked abroad for a long time, owned businesses and ranchlands, worked as artists, promoted music, and dabbled in the stock market. Contrary to other case studies on retirement migration (e.g. Lazaridis et al. 1999, Benson 2010), retirees in Bocas did not have prior experiences of visiting Bocas, or Latin America for that matter. In fact, according to both survey and interview data, retirees were the category of migrant with the lowest average number of years spent in the Archipelago. Through extended absences, divorce or remarriage, aging parents, and loose family ties, they have slowly been removing all ties with their place of origin. However, compared to the entrepreneur group's material or economic interests in Bocas, their expected permanence is a symbolic expression of their desire to make Bocas their new home.

Second-home owners had similar motivations to leave, but due to their attachment to life in their country of origin through home ownership, business, or friend and family ties, managed to find creative ways to justify the experience of living abroad on a part-time basis. The discovery of Bocas del Toro as a lifestyle destination was somewhat opportunistic in all cases. Of a relatively high professional and economic background, these migrants spoke of previous experiences with sustainable living, and saw in Bocas an opportunity to put it into practice. Perhaps due to the contrast between life in the tropics and the US, and the fact that the interviewees in this group has been in Bocas for a relatively long time (an average of 9.8 years), they

exhibited, sometimes contradictorily, a critical perspective on life in Bocas on other foreigners. In some cases they disregarded them as boring or suspicious, while others perceived the foreign residents as a fascinating and interesting mix of characters. Interestingly, although there was no expressed desire to make Bocas a permanent home, second-homers did not consider it to be a holiday destination. Instead, they considered it to be 'another' home.

Finally, entrepreneurs or economically active migrants were motivated to move to a location in which they could experience a laid-back lifestyle, while simultaneously making a living by capitalizing on the reputation of Bocas del Toro as a tourist destination. With an average age of 45, prior to settling in Bocas del Toro, most respondents in this group had led what McHugh (2000) calls a 'footloose' lifestyle, characterized by significant amounts of international travel, restlessness in some cases, and flexible careerism in others.

Navigating daily life in Bocas del Toro

A well-kept secret in the mid to late 1990s, Bocas was an accidental find for many of the early arrivals (i.e., those who arrived before 2004), who claimed to be flexible and creative in finding ways to sustain themselves economically. One interviewee, who had lived in Mexico, Honduras, and Costa Rica prior to settling in Bocas in 1999, illustrated this point:

My being in Bocas is by chance. I came to volunteer on a marine turtle conservation program and

got stuck. Although this work ended about two years ago, the first years in Bocas I primarily made money by selling handicrafts. I currently work as a tour guide for European visitors. Bocas became home in the past four or five years, probably around the time I bought my house. My first house ever. (I13¹¹ 13 February 2010)

Conversely, more recent arrivals discovered Bocas through word of mouth, the Internet, and focused searches for business opportunities abroad. Those who moved to Bocas after 2004 had usually considered a few different locations and made a conscious decision to move there based on specific criteria, such as the existence of a promising business development environment (I23 25 March 2010), ability to retire in a *tranquilo* community, and the possibility of creating a life with a certain level of individual liberties no longer available in the United States (I24 30 March 2010). By 'individual liberties', this interviewee was generally referring to President Obama's increasingly monitored fiscal policies and socially minded government spending. Of this group of recent arrivals, a few respondents were aware of the challenges of living and working abroad and specifically moved with the intention of appreciating and learning about natural biodiversity and to engage with the local culture. Despite embracing these challenges, respondents also subtly expressed frustration with some aspects of island life, especially when contrasted with similar processes in their home countries. For instance, informal conversations with foreign residents

revealed a growing discomfort with the limits and restrictions imposed by local government authorities, which were often perceived as targeted ‘anti-gringo’ sentiments. Respondents who bought into planned residential developments, on the other hand, after spending some time in Bocas, admitted that they were sold an idealized tropical life. Large scale residential developments were never completed as promised, requiring the few residents who did move to Bocas to be responsible for amenities such as inter-island transportation and grounds maintenance, and for the supply of water and energy, as well as to forgo the use of promised facilities such as restaurants and communal meeting areas (I17 22 January 2009 and I2 19 February 2009). One respondent summarized his dissatisfaction with the experience by stating that the ‘concept of tropical paradise and [the] reality are opposing’ (I12 31 January 2010).

Lifestyle migrants’ shared upbringing and language, relative to the local population, also affected how they related with locals and with other foreign residents. Most lifestyle migrants could only communicate in very basic Spanish and expected to get by speaking exclusively in English, representing the extent of their ability and desire to engage with the local community. Eighty eight percent of survey respondents claimed they related with local residents through social interactions. However, the following quote from one respondent who had lived in Bocas del Toro for almost ten years and was married to a Panamanian illustrates how these interactions may be overstated or misunderstood:

Social interactions involve partying. Many foreigners form

friendships with neighbors and workers who become like family. However, many of these relationships are based on the money and/or help the foreigner has to offer. The difference in language and socioeconomic [background] makes it difficult for locals and foreigners to form real friendships although it does happen! I have many ‘real’ local friends! Then again, I speak Spanish. (I22 30 March 2010)

Additionally, I found that each migrant category experienced relations with locals differently, depending on how interested they were in engaging with the local community. This suggests that although lifestyle migrants do not express a unified interpretation of Bocas del Toro, both the idealization of place and the desire to relocate constitute a shared lens through which they reflect their specific intentions and expectations towards their new home. For instance, foreigners who did not work, namely retirees and second-home owners, tended to have an employer-employee relationship with their local neighbors, usually providing them with jobs as gardeners, cleaners, and security guards. Retirees, however, were usually looking to create a sense of community that occasionally included local residents. In contrast, entrepreneurial migrants who worked and resided in town had more opportunities to interact with locals and, due to their more permanent nature and financial interests, tended to be more involved in local politics, employ local staff and actively participate in local community events.

Second-home or residential tourists exhibited a lower sense of social

engagement with locals due to the temporary nature of their stay. The following quote by a long-term foreign business owner aptly summarized these findings:

Locals and foreign interactions can be characterized in a number of ways. [On the one hand] locals and foreigners who have little or no interest in each other...stick to their routines and stay in their boxes with no need to interact. [These are] mainly retirees or self-sufficient second homeowners. [Next are] long-term business owners [who] mostly integrate into or accept local culture... [have] good relations with local people. Some speak Spanish. [Finally] are new businesses or arrivals [who are] focused on their objectives here, no thought for the locals. Interaction & contact is through necessity only so strained relations, [and] little or no Spanish [is] spoken. (125 1 April 2010)

Beyond the descriptive version of the types of local-foreigner relations that take place in idealized tropical lives, lies a deeper perspective on the quality of these interactions. Based on the tone of interview responses, on observations of interactions and on a personal understanding of Panamanian culture, I suggest that both the language barrier and cultural differences ultimately limit the extent to which friendships can be developed (cf. Benson 2010). Additionally, I detected a conflicting attitude towards locals, that emerged perhaps from a lack of understanding of the 'other', exemplified by foreigners' use of the words 'native' or 'them', and by the

recognition of difference (cf. Korpela 2010). Although foreigners came to Bocas with the intention of leading a simpler, easier lifestyle, idealized as being similar to that of the locals (Johnson and Clisby 2008, McCarthy 2008, Gosnell and Abrams 2009), the culturally engrained 'cosmopolitanism' or post-modern commodification of the local, combined with a Western sense of entitlement produced a patronizing attitude and locals were perceived as being, at times, needy, ignorant, or lazy.

Whether implied or stated, lifestyle migrants acknowledged the existence of contrasting ways of life, tenuous relations with locals, and also expressed frustration with elements of life in Bocas such as rising costs of living, corruption, the apathetic nature of locals and their low feelings of responsibility in matters of the environment and civic engagement, as well as rising levels of crime. Some of these opinions probably emerge from a weak self-assessment of belonging in a new place, or perhaps from a true lack of understanding of the cultural differences between their country of origin and the host country in terms of use of resources, political processes and social interactions. Nevertheless, this suggests that, especially in the case of more recent migrants, the expectation of leading an improved lifestyle in a new location relies on a detached appreciation of the realities of their new environment.

The contradictions highlighted in the previous paragraphs can be explained by a romanticized perception of tropical living that drove foreigners to move and influenced their attitudes and behaviors towards Bocas del Toro.

It remains to be seen whether a longer stay in Bocas del Toro would translate into increased engagement with the intricacies of the local community and its politics (i.e. full immersion); whether migrants would continue to experience Bocas as detached participants within a host community, continuing to recreate the conditions of their countries of origin in their new home (i.e. gentrification); or if the excitement and illusion of living in paradise would ultimately become a quotidian experience, prompting foreigners to search elsewhere for a new destination (i.e. abandonment).

Local implications of lifestyle migrants' search for paradise

The shared lens through which the destination site is perceived influences the narrative created by lifestyle migrants around the search for paradise. Whether Bocas del Toro is, in fact, 'paradise', is ultimately a subjective and personal opinion. However, it has been both sold and consumed as such by foreign residents; as a place where 'the grass is always greener' (or 'the sea is always bluer' in the case of the islands), especially when contrasted with life in their country of origin. Throughout my field work I repeatedly heard foreign residents referring to 'life in paradise' as a way to describe their daily commute into town by boat, the view of Bird Island from their front porch, the ability to enjoy a solo surf session in the middle of the day, or the enjoyment of sipping on a cocktail at sunset with other foreign residents as they scoffed at the mundane lives of their friends back home. Ironically, often times I would also hear the same

foreigners express concern about boat-related theft, the lack of adequate infrastructure, access to comfort goods, and 'good' customer service. In this sense, the relative privilege of deciding where to move, enjoyed by lifestyle migrants, affects every day politics of place in Bocas del Toro, and ultimately influences local outcomes as a result of the differences between local realities and the social construction of Bocas as paradise (Johnson and Clisby 2008, Benson 2012).

My research suggests that the establishment of a lifestyle migrant community in Bocas del Toro has had mixed outcomes for the local community. On a macro level it has led to the emergence of new opportunities for the provision of services, increased the circulation of money directly through higher spending and the generation of jobs and indirectly by promoting the islands as a major tourist destination. And it has encouraged philanthropic and community-based assistance programs. However, negative social impacts include the reinforcement of existing social and class systems by privileging English-speaking Afro-Antilleans over indigenous groups in various aspects of daily life. In doing so, a long history of internal racism is perpetuated, while the Ngöbe and Buglé Indians continue to exist as marginalized members of Bocas society (cf. Bourgois 1984, Guerrón-Montero 2006). Additionally, the physical presence of lifestyle migrants has increased pressure on social services and infrastructure, while imported values and expectations tended to clash with traditional ways of life and influence behavior, particularly in younger generations (cf. Leichenko

and Solecki 2005, Gosnell and Abrams 2009). Finally, since the early 1990s, foreign investors have taken advantage of the relatively low property prices, political inexperience and isolation to establish businesses that cater to international tourists and foreign residents (Guerrón-Montero 2006). In effect, this has resulted in land conflicts and speculation, the displacement of local enterprise, and more importantly in the creation of dependence on foreigners for employment.

At the micro-level, my analysis reveals that the most common links between foreigners and locals are those daily interactions with neighbors and/or employees, and that the implications of these interactions are highly variable and primarily dependent on the particular foreigner. Furthermore, at times, interviewees' generalized perceptions of the local population conflict with how they feel about their particular employee or local neighbor. For instance, one interviewee hinted at generalized problems with 'the morals of Panamanians [as being] somewhat different from what I was brought up with,' and questioned their interest in receiving help from gringos (I18 9 April 2009). However, when speaking about his workers, the same respondent explained that he had become quite close with them over the years, met their families, and that through him 'they have learned there's a different way to live', referring to the potential for economic benefits from an improved work ethic (I18 9 April 2009). At the micro level, the influence of the American Dream, understood as an imported underlying belief that individuals are entitled to a better life, is also evident in higher levels of

spending and consumption among the local population, and the adoption of foreign behaviors and attitudes towards private property and even music or food preferences. These outcomes, however, are not linked exclusively to lifestyle migrants, as Bocas del Toro is increasingly becoming integrated into the national and global political economy through national development programs that include the promotion of tourism, the introduction of technology for schools, growing employment opportunities with large mining companies in other areas of the Bocas del Toro Province, as well as increased means of communication with improved air- and road-access to the main cities of Panama.

Conclusion

Globalization plays a major role in creating the political economic context within which foreigners are responding to Panama's recently created incentives to attract foreign investors, the economic and political conditions in countries of origin that lifestyle migrants are increasingly finding undesirable, and in selling (and materializing) the possibility of re-making lives abroad. This research finds that the articulation of globalization, an idealized lifestyle and past personal histories shapes a common perspective adopted by foreign residents and helps explain the contradictions between lifestyle migrant expectations and local realities. In turn, as presented in the discussion, these contradictions play out at the local level with significant material outcomes for the lifestyle destination communities, thus

raising important policy questions. The existence of incentives to relocate and invest in Panama suggests that one of the country's development goals includes the growth of the foreign resident population. In the context of the various implications outlined in the discussion, these findings suggest that migration and investment related policies should include appropriate safeguards to ensure that the local population is not displaced geographically or limited economically from participating in the emerging markets fueled by an increase in the foreign resident population and associated growth of tourism. Similarly, policies must take into account the development of the necessary infrastructure to support and maintain the growing population, both for residential and temporary tourists.

In line with the goal of this special issue to explore the impact and limitations of mobility on/for individuals, institutions and policies, this article additionally demonstrates that the decisions and processes involved in lifestyle migration take into account both structural and personal motivations, and are influenced by globally produced images of ideal alternative lifestyles in idyllic tropical locations such as Bocas del Toro. By delving into an examination of foreign residents in Bocas del Toro, it is clear that they are part of the phenomenon of lifestyle migration regardless of age, country of origin or reason for moving; therefore individuals use a variety of adaptation strategies to navigate life in their new home, undergoing significant transformations in their social life and, where relevant, producing alternative family structures. Whether it is merely a recognition, over time,

that expectations of living abroad are different than the reality, a conscious decision to adapt or become immersed in a new lifestyle, or an unexpected scenario in which bad investments have limited the foreigners' ability to relocate, the new forms of mobility adopted by lifestyle migrants in Bocas del Toro undoubtedly play an important role in shaping their current and future life paths.

Notes

¹ E.g., Ley No. 54, 22 July 1998, judicial guarantees for investments. (Gaceta Oficial No. 23,593, 24 July 1998), and Ley No. 5, 11 January 2007, facilitates the establishment of businesses. (Gaceta Oficial No. 25,709, 12 January 2007).

² Throughout this article I refer to 'South-North' movements as those from developing to developed countries, and vice versa. I recognize the potential problems associated with the oversimplified use of these terms to describe migratory patterns. For the purposes of this article I use them exclusively to illustrate the geography and directionality of these moves.

³ Categories include second-home or residential tourists, amenity/adventure-seekers, high-skilled labor immigrants, economically active immigrants, entrepreneurs, and retirees (from: O'Reilly n.d., King, Warnes and Williams 2000, Fountain and Hall 2002, Hall and Williams 2002, Ortiz and Mendoza 2008).

⁴ In this category I included retired individuals with or without legal resident status in Panama, as well as individuals with the 'pensionado' immigrant status, which provides a lifetime resident visa to individuals and their dependents, regardless of age, as long as they can

demonstrate a guaranteed minimum income from a reputable and verifiable source.

⁵ The Bocas Breeze has a monthly circulation of 5000, of which 3800 issues stay in Bocas Town. It is also published online, and announced to a mailing list of about 1000 individuals around the world. The editor also keeps a smaller local mailing list with approximately 300 members for updates and information on the latest local news.

⁶ The total foreign-born population, according to the 2000 census (DEC 2000), was 314. I used the 2000 census data because it was the only census available at the time of the research (2008-2010). Between 2000 and 2010, National Census data indicates that the foreign resident

population more than tripled from 314 to 1137 (INEC 2000 and 2010).

⁷ Ley No. 54, 22 July 1998, judicial guarantees for investments. (Gaceta Oficial No. 23,593, 24 July 1998)

⁸ Ley No. 5, 11 January 2007, facilitates the establishment of businesses. (Gaceta Oficial No. 25,709, 12 January 2007).

⁹ Decreto de Ley No. 3, 22 February 2008. Creates National Immigration Service. (Gaceta Oficial No. 25986, 26 February 2008).

¹⁰ The most commonly represented states were California, Florida, Texas, and Colorado.

¹¹ I13 is a code number for my informants. It means that this quote comes from Interviewee #13, interviewed on February 13 2010.

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