Northern Belize Coastal Complex

Management Action Planning Outputs

Summary



2015 - 2020



Funded by the Protected Areas Conservation Trust







Collaborative Vision for the Northern Belize Coastal Complex

The Northern Belize Coastal Complex is a model of functional, river to reef ecosystems supported by dynamic, coordinated, transboundary, multi-stakeholder partnerships, for the effective stewardship of the environment, all biodiversity, and the socioeconomic benefits for present and future generations.

> NBCC CAP Workshop, February 2014

A Plan for Collaborative Action

Planning for the Northern Belize Coastal Complex

The Northern Belize Coastal Complex (NBCC) is a river-to-reef seascape of connected protected areas in northern Belize. Water flows from the Rio Hondo, New River and coastal lagoons of the mainland into the Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, and on to the reefs of Bacalar Chico, Hol Chan and Caye Caulker Marine Reserves. The area is important for its reef formations, seagrass beds and extensive inundated mangroves, and critical in the maintenance of Belize's populations of threatened species - including Goliath grouper, sharks and West Indian manatee. The terrestrial components of Bacalar Chico National Park and Caye Caulker Forest Reserve are nationally and regionally important for their large extents of unimpacted mangroves, littoral forest and hawksbill turtle nesting beaches.

The National Protected Areas System Policy calls for strengthening management at system level, with greater planning, communication and collaboration between protected area managers, for more effective system-level management of marine protected areas within the same seascape. This initiative was conducted to build connectivity at the system level - through improved integrated monitoring, surveillance and enforcement, and building of stakeholder awareness, to ensure that each protected area is managed for its system-level roles as well as site level priorities, with increased cost effectiveness and reduced duplication of effort.

A series of planning workshops conducted in 2014 brought together key stakeholders of the NBCC to identify mechanisms for strengthened management at the system level, with the goal of increasing viability of the marine life of the area, improving livelihood options for those dependent on these resources, and building management effectiveness of the individual MPAs.

Transboundary Collaboration

The Northern Belize Coastal Complex is, itself, part of a larger, transboundary seascape - it is contiguous with the Sanctuario del Manati and Parque Nacional Arrecifes de Xcalak, in Mexico. Whilst the scope of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex Plan is confined to the northern protected areas of Belize, the NBCC Task Force is working closely with its Mexican counterparts, with their participation as key stakeholders in the MAP workshops. This provides important transboundary input into the planning process, and a forum for establishing transboundary coordination and collaboration to extend beyond the lifetime of the planning process.

Project Partners

The NBCC Task Force

Fisheries Department

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The Northern Belize Coastal Complex

MEXICO

CHETUMAL (MEXICO)

COROZAL

Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary

Sarteneja

Sanctuario del Manati (MEXICO)

Copper Bank

Chunox

Parque Nacional Arrecifes de Xcalak (MEXICO)

MEXICO

Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve and National Park

BELIZE

Hol Chan Marine Reserve San Pedro

Boundary of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex

Caye Caulker Marine Reserve and Forest Reserve

NB: Protected area boundaries for Hol Chan MR extension are still being finalised Google earth

Image Landsat US Dept of State Geographer Image 2015 DigitalGlobe <u>Data SIO.</u> NOAA. US Navy, NGA GEBCO

Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary

Home of the West Indían Manatee



Key Points

- A trans-boundary estuarine system shared with Mexico
- Critical for reef health in northern Belize, filtering sediment and contaminants from the rivers before they reach the reef
- Supports traditional local fishermen and their families
- Provides sheltered waters, important for Belize's manatees
- Protects stromatolite formations unique in Belize
- Includes the shallow waters behind Ambergris Caye, important for San Pedro's sport fishing industry
- Managed by the community-based organization - Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development (SACD), in partnership with the Forest Department and in close collaboration with the Fisheries Department



Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve and National Park

Protecting Nesting Sea Turtles

Key Points

- A trans-boundary reef system shared with Mexico
- One of seven Marine Protected Areas that form Belize's World Heritage Site - the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System
- A major component of the Mesoamerican reef, contributing to the viability of marine resources, including commercially important fish, lobster, and conch stocks
- Beaches provide important nesting sites for all three species of turtle loggerhead, green and hawksbill
- Provides important protection for critically endangered species including the Goliath grouper, and spawning aggregation sites
- Large expanse of littoral forest, mangroves and shallow lagoon
- The only place in Belize where the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef meets the mainland, exposing the unique formation of fossilized Pleistocene coral bedrock







Hol Chan Marine Reserve

Supporting the economy - Reef-based Tourism, Sport fishing, and Nurse Sharks.

Caye Caulker Marine Reserve and

Forest Reserve

Mangroves and Littoral Forest

Key Points

- One of Belize's oldest marine reserves, and an important tourism destination, originally focused on protection of the deep reef in front of San Pedro
- A major feature of the tourism industry in San Pedro, the primary income generation industry of the caye,
- Maintains representative populations of marine species and an inter-linked system of mangrove, seagrass, and coral reef in the combined Marine Reserve - National Park
- Provides tourists with the opportunity to snorkel with large congregations of stingrays and nurse sharks at Shark-Ray Alley
- Protects important sport fishing flats
- Includes representation of mangrove cayes off the southern tip of Ambergris Caye
- Traditional fishing supported by special permits
- An important, accessible educational resource for students and schools



Key Points

- Important as a tourism destination, providing support for the tourism industry of Caye Caulker
- Key in maintaining the health of the reef and local commercial species in the Caye Caulker area, supporting local fishermen
- Fringing mangroves provide Caye Caulker with protection from storm surges and coastal erosion
- The littoral forest and mangrove component in the Forest Reserve contributes towards representation of these ecosystems in the National Protected Areas System, and provide an important staging point for migratory birds
- An important, accessible educational resource for students and schools



Reef

Protected Areas of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex

PROTECTED AREAS	ACRES
MARINE RESERVES	
Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve	15,766
Caye Caulker Marine Reserve	9,670
Hol Chan Marine Reserve	102,400
WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES	
Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary	180,508
NATIONAL PARKS	
Bacalar Chico National Park	11,145
FOREST RESERVES	
Caye Caulker Forest Reserve	94
TOTAL AREA UNDER PROTECTION	397,691

Threatened Species

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED			
Staghorn Coral	Acropora cervicornis		
Elkhorn Coral	Acropora palmata		
Goliath grouper	Epinephelus itajara		
Hawksbill turtle	Eretmochelys imbricata		
ENDANGERED			
Loggerhead turtle	Caretta caretta		
Green turtle	Chelonia mydas		
Nassau grouper	Epinephelus striatus		
Red Porgy	Pagrus pagrus		
Great hammerhead	Sphyrna mokarran		
Lamarck's Sheet Coral	Agaricia lamarcki		
Pillar Coral	Dendrogyra cylindrus		
Elliptical Star Coral	Dichocoenia stokesii		
Fire Coral	Millepora striata		
Lobed Star Coral	Orbicella annularis		
Mountainous Star Coral	Orbicella faveolata		
Boulder Star Coral	Orbicella franksi		
Rough Cactus Coral	Mycetophyllia ferox		

What is at Risk?

The Mesoamerican Reef stretches for more than 600 miles along the coast of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, and encompasses the largest coral reef system in the Western Hemisphere. The Northern Belize Coastal Complex (NBCC) encompasses the northern-most portion of the Belize reef from the international border with Mexico to the southern point of Caye Caulker, as well as the estuarine waters that flow from the Rio Hondo and New River onto the coastal shelf and the coastal ecosystems of the cayes and coast.

The NBCC is a rich mosaic of inter-connected mangroves, littoral forest, sand beaches, seagrass beds and reef, supporting at least twenty four species of international concern, including the critically endangered Goliath grouper, hawksbill turtle and *Acropora* corals, and the Antillean manatee, an endangered, regional sub-species of the West Indian manatee. The diverse and eye-catching beauty of the colourful life of the patch reefs, reef crest and spur and groove draw visitors to Belize, supporting not only the important tourism-based economy of the cayes, but also a significant percentage of the national economy.

The mangrove-lined lagoons and creeks and extensive seagrass beds provide important nursery habitats for both commercial and noncommercial marine species, important in supporting the traditional fishing industry.

Much of this river-to-reef seascape is under management, encompassing six national protected areas in key locations. Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary provides conservation management for the Belize portion of the largest estuary in the Mesoamerican Reef, with direct connectivity to Bacalar Chico Marine Reserve and National Park to the east, and Hol Chan Marine Reserve to the south. Caye Caulker Marine and Forest Reserve, in the southern portion of the NBCC, completes the protected area network within this important seascape.



IUCN Redlist, 2015

Management Targets

A series of management targets were selected to represent and encompass the biodiversity values of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex, to provide a basis for setting goals, developing strategies and actions, and for monitoring success.

MANAGEMENT TARGETS

COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS

Mangroves, Littoral Forest and Sandy Beaches

The shallow mangrove-filled lagoons of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex provide critical nursery habitat for commercial and sport fishing species while fringing mangroves protect the coastlines from erosion. The sand beaches of northern Ambergris Caye are nesting sites for the critically endangered hawksbill turtle and vulnerable American crocodile.

SEAGRASS



Seagrass in the estuary plays an important role in filtering sediments and contaminants before they reach the reef. It is also important in maintaining the population of manatees that use the Wildlife Sanctuary. The *Thalassia* beds of the reef lagoon support many marine species, including sea turtles and the economically important Queen conch and juvenile lobster.

CORAL REEFS

The patch reefs, reef crest and spur and groove reefs provide structure for the rich, vibrant world of the coral reefs. Critically endangered *Acropora* species, colourful reef fish, reef invertebrates and key herbivores such as the parrotfish all play their roles in maintaining the high productivity of the reef ecosystem. The reef supports a vibrant tourism economy, as well as the important lobster fishing industry.

COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL SPECIES

Queen conch and spiny lobster form the foundation of Belize's traditional fishing industry, supplemented by crabs and finfish such as grouper and snapper. The spawning aggregation site at Rocky Point is critical in maintaining finfish populations throughout the reef. The shallow flats behind Ambergris Caye support an economically important sport fishing industry based on permit, snook, tarpon and bonefish.



CHARISMATIC MARINE MEGAFAUNA

The sheltered, brackish waters of the estuarine system of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex play an important role in maintaining a viable population of the Antillean manatee in Belize. Wide ranging bottlenose dolphins use the entire NBCC, as do bull sharks and nurse sharks, along with hawksbill, green and loggerhead turtles



ANCIENT FORMATIONS

The Northern Belize Coastal Complex encompasses a number of important Ancient Formations. Stromatolite reefs, important at a global scale. Impressive underwater caves and sink holes - Giant Cave is considered to be one of the largest underwater cave systems in the region, if not the world. The remains of an ancient reef is visible at Rocky Point - the only place where today's barrier reef touches the land. Coastal settlements developed by the ancient Maya - such as Cerros and San Juan, provide information on historical use of the area.



Photo: R. Graham

MANAGEMENT TARGET: PHYSIO-CHEMICAL ENVIRONMENT

Good water quality is the foundation for a healthy Northern Belize Coastal Complex. With land based agro-chemical pollution and sediments entering the rivers and coastal waters of the estuary, and transboundary sewage flowing into the bay from Chetumal, the shallow estuarine waters act as a huge settling pond, removing these contaminants before the water reaches the reef. The mud bank, Bulkhead Shoals, acts as the final barrier, ensuring sediments are deposited as water flows southwards.

As a result, water entering the reef at the southern point of Ambergris Caye has high water clarity, ensuring seagrass and corals have access to sufficient sunlight. Water contamination on the reef itself comes primarily from the caye settlements - San Pedro and Caye Caulker. Both these are expanding, with overstretched solid waste and sewage management.

Climate change is also altering the marine environment, with increasing water temperatures, ocean acidification and rapid fluctuations in salinity.

Management Targets

Assessment of Target Viability

The Viability assessment provides an objective, consistent means for determining changes in the status of each management target over time, providing baseline for measuring success. Assessment was based on the Landscape Context, Condition and Size of each Target, with the majority of the targets being rated as FAIR. Seagrass was the one exception, with a rating of GOOD. Overall, the Northern Belize Coastal Complex rates as FAIR.

Management Targets for the Northern Belize Coastal Complex

Management Target	Landscape Context	Condition	Size	Viability Rank
Coastal Ecosystems	GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	FAIR
Seagrass	FAIR	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD
Coral Reefs	FAIR	POOR	FAIR	FAIR
Commercial and Recreational Species	GOOD	POOR	POOR	FAIR
Charismatic Marine Megafauna	POOR	FAIR	GOOD	FAIR
Physio-chemical Environment	FAIR	FAIR	-	FAIR
Ancient Formations	FAIR	FAIR	GOOD	FAIR
Overall Viability of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex				FAIR

Overall Viability of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex L AN

POOR

May result in local extinction. Restoration difficult / impossible

FAIR

Outside acceptable range of variation. Requires human intervention

GOOD

Within acceptable range of variation. Some human intervention required for maintenance

VERY GOOD Ecologically desirable status. Requires little or no intervention for maintenance

Critical Threats

Identification of Critical Threats

Threats were identified and rated for each management target based on four criteria - scope, severity, contribution and irreversibility. The outputs take into account the river to reef connectivity of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex, and facilitate the prioritization of funding needs.

Two threats rate as **VERY HIGH** (climate change and coastal / caye development), reflecting the global issues of changing environments, and the more immediate pressures put on the marine resources from coastal developments, particularly in the Corozal area, Ambergris Caye, and transboundary impacts from Chetumal. Three threats rank as **HIGH**, highlighting the issues of land based pollution and unsustainable fishing, and also the potential threat of oil exploration.

Three management targets were identified as at **VERY HIGH** risk - Coastal Ecosystems, Coral Reefs and Ancient Formations.

Threats	Coastal Ecosystems	Coral Reefs	Seagrass	Commercial Marine Species	Marine Mammals	Physio- chemical Environment	Ancient Formations	Overall Threat Rank	
Climate Change	Very High	High	Low	High	Low	Medium	Very High	VERY HIGH	
Coastal / Caye Development	Very High	High	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Very High	VERY HIGH	
Land-based Pollution	-	High	Low	Medium	Low	High	High	HIGH	
Unsustainable / Illegal Fishing Practices	-	High	Medium	High	Low	-	-	HIGH	
Oil drilling, exploration and spills	Low	High	Low	-	Low	Fair	Low	нідн	
Lionfish	-	High	-	Medium	-	-	-	MEDIUM	
Improper disposal of boat waste	-	Medium	-	-	-	Low	Medium	MEDIUM	
Poor Tourism Practices	-	Low	-	-	Low	-	Medium	LOW	
Poor Boating Practices	-	Low	Low	-	Low	-	-	LOW	
Illegal Activities in Littoral Forest	Low	-	-	-	-	-	-	LOW	
Threat Status for Targets and Project	VERY HIGH	VERY HIGH	MEDIUM	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	VERY HIGH	VERY HIGH	



Critical Threats

Very High

- Climate Change
- Coastal / Caye Development

High

- Land-based Pollution
- Unsustainable / Illegal Fishing Practices
- Oil drilling, exploration and spills







Management Objectives

The Northern Belize Coastal Complex Plan seeks to strengthen management through building partnerships and collaborative implementation. A series of ten management objectives have been developed during the participatory workshops and focal group meetings, each supported by a series of strategic actions. These provide a framework for stakeholders working together to achieve the vision of system-level management of the NBCC:

By 2020, rights-based fishing regimes will be in place and implemented effectively in 100% of marine protected areas in the Northern Belize Coastal Complex, with populations of commercial and recreational species increased by 10% or more above the 2015 stock assessment baselines

By 2020, 100% of marine protected areas of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will have improved resilience to climate change through implementation of collaborative adaptation strategies

By 2020, protected area managers will have increased their knowledge of water quality and contamination levels within the Northern Belize Coastal Complex, and will have implemented at least one strategy targeted at reducing water contamination in the Northern Belize Coastal Complex

Between 2015 and 2020, the average condition of coral reef communities in the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will be maintained at 2015 levels or better, as measured by the Simplified Integrated Reef Health Index (SIRHI)

By 2020, the extent and condition of seagrass within Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary will have improved above the 2015 baseline

Between 2015 and 2020, marine mammal populations in the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will be maintained at, or above, 2015 levels

By 2020, impacts to coastal ecosystems (littoral forests, sandy beaches and mangroves) within the protected areas of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will have been reduced to 10% of 2015 impact levels

By 2020, stromatolites, underwater caves and archaeological sites within the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will be managed effectively, with targeted management strategies identified through technical input and integrated into site level management plans

Through improved communication and collaboration towards achieving the above, the partners of the NBCC will be able to achieve the final objective:

By 2020, the management effectiveness of each of the marine protected areas of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will have increased by at least 15% beyond the 2015 baseline levels

Management Priorities

Management Action Planning for the Northern Belize Coastal Complex has identified the critical targets and threats that need to be addressed in the next five years for increased viability of the marine resources. The planning process facilitates the prioritization of management objectives and strategic actions to ensure that where implementation may be limited by funding availability, priority is given to those considered most critical.

By 2020, rights-based fishing regimes will be in place and implemented effectively in 100% of marine protected areas in the Northern Belize Coastal Complex, with populations of commercial and recreational species increased by 10% or more above the 2015 stock assessment baselines

The Northern Belize Coastal Complex encompasses important resources for local, traditional fishermen from coastal communities in the north - particularly Sarteneja, San Pedro, Caye Caulker, and Corozal. Fishing methods vary - fishtraps target snapper and mojarra for the local market, whilst free diving fishers catch lobster, conch and finfish for the restaurant and export markets. Both types of fishing support traditional livelihoods. Unsustainable fishing practices, however, have reduced marine resources well below previous levels, whilst pressure on the resources from land based pollution and climate change impacts are increasing.

To address this situation, the Belize Fisheries Department is introducing a rights based fishing regime with recognition of traditional fishing rights. Two Managed Areas are located within the NBCC - the coastal waters (including the Marine Reserves) and the Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary.

Strategic action: Roll out the "Managed Areas" regime in the Marine Reserves of the NBCC, with engagement of traditional fishermen

Strategic Action: Develop and implement a rightsbased sustainable fishery plan in Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, with the participation of traditional fishers of the area

Strategic action: Increase effective surveillance and enforcement to reduce illegal, unreported, unregulated "illegal" fishing across the NBCC by 10% in the next 5 years

By 2020, 100% of marine protected areas of the Northern Belize Coastal Complex will have improved resilience to climate change through implementation of collaborative adaptation strategies

Climate change has been impacting northern Belize - the NBCC has been identified as at the highest national risk of climate change impacts, with:

- less predictable, more intense rainfall leading to increased fluctuations in salinity, in the estuarine environment
- increasing sea temperatures, with increasing frequency and length of coral bleaching events, with increased risk of coral bleaching and coral mortality
- rising sea levels with associated saline intrusion of aquifers
- ocean acidification
- higher risk of tropical storm impacts

Tourism is the primary income generation activity in both San Pedro and Caye Caulker. As the aesthetic beauty of the reefs suffer from higher impacts, tourism may well be affected. Reef fishermen will find it challenging to support their families from the lobster and conch fishery as the reef struggles to support viable populations of the marine resources on which they depend.

Strategic action: Conduct climate change adaptation planning for the NBCC and implement the identified strategies

Strategic action: Increase the technical capacity of MPA managers to facilitate protected area adaptation to climate change

Strategic action: Socialise the value of coastal ecosystems in climate change adaptation and coastline protection, targeting all stakeholders

Cross Cutting Strategies

Strategy: Implement / enforce policies and regulations

Strategy: Develop and implement a system-level public awareness and communication programme

Strategy: Implement standardized monitoring and data management

Strategy: Ensure all strategies are resilient to climate change

Measuring Success

It is important to measure success - whether strategies have been successful in achieving the desired outcomes, whether threats have been reduced, and whether targets have been met in maintaining and improving biodiversity within the Northern Belize Coastal Complex.

Measuring success facilitates adaptive management - with strengthening of strategies to meet changes in the seascape and identification of new strategies to address new challenges.



Measuring Success: Management Effectiveness

Coastal Complex will have increased by at least 15% implementation beyond the 2015 baseline levels

Management effectiveness assessments reflect how well protected areas are being managed how effective their surveillance and enforcement programmes are, how well they engage stakeholder participation, as well as areas such as their level of governance and financial sustainability. The outputs highlight individual strengths and weaknesses of the management organizations. They also identify key recommendations for improving effectiveness at both site and system level which, if implemented successfully, will increase the overall site and systemlevel management effectiveness.

Measuring Success: Monitoring Viability

Each management target has been rated during the viability assessment, and indicators identified to measure whether ratings have been achieved.

Examples of Viability Indicators

VIABILITY INDICATOR	2014 RATING		
Population size of manatees	GOOD		
Elasmobranch species diversity	POOR		
Parrotfish species richness	FAIR		
% cover of seagrass	GOOD		
Extent of mangrove in NBCC	GOOD		
Extent of littoral forest in NBCC	POOR		
Availability of turtle nesting beaches	POOR		

By 2020, the management effectiveness of each of Each Objective and strategy is also linked to indicators, to provide the marine protected areas of the Northern Belize a mechanism to measure success of outcomes of strategy

Measuring Success: Objectives and Strategies

Objective	Indicators
Objective: By 2020, rights-based fishing regimes will be in place and implemented effectively in 100% of marine protected areas in the Northern Belize Coastal Complex, with commercial and recreational species populations increased by 10% or more above the 2015 stock assessment baselines	 List of permitted traditional fishers Established fishers committees Stock assessment Catch per Unit Effort Average annual income per fisher







R. Graham

Monitoring Targets

Indicators have been identified for each target to measure success of objectives and strategies



Mexico 3 Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary 4

0

0

Other Protected Areas 0 5 Belize 23

Population Size of Antillean manatees (LightHawk)

E. Gissis 10 15

Projection: UTM Zone 16N Datum: NAD 1927 Coordinates: metres GIS: Adam Lloyd

SACD Sartoneja Allanse for Conservation and Development

Catch assessments _Yellowfin Mojarra of Commercial Marine Species 7% Parrotfish **Species Richness**

Lane Snappe

3%

Striped Mojarra

20%

Grey Snapper

20%

Atlantic Spadefish

2%

Blue striped Grunt

3%

Mutton Snapper

20%



Assessments of Reef Health (SIRHI)



Number of turtle nests per species % Success of Turtle Nest Hatch





Management Action Planning is a structured approach to planning, implementing and measuring success for system-level conservation projects such as the Northern Belize Coastal Complex. It provides a mechanism for broad-scale participation in the planning process by a wide range of stakeholders - community, NGO, government agencies, site-level staff, private sector business and academic.

The opportunities for developing open communication between stakeholders towards more effective collaboration are as important an output as the Management Action Plan itself, with broad stakeholder ownership of the objectives and strategies that result from the series of Management Action Plan workshops.





WORKSHOP ONE

- Developing a Vision
- Defining Management Targets
- Assessing Target Viability

Defining the Scope of the Management Action Plan

This determines the ecosystems, biodiversity and stakeholders to be included in the planning.



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- Identifying and Assessing **Critical Threats**
- Situation Analysis

WORKSHOP THREE

 Identifying Objectives and Strategies



The Participants

The Management Action Planning workshops and focal group meetings were strengthened by the active participation of all key stakeholder sectors, as well as transboundary partners from Mexico.

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NBCC Participants at the final CAP Workshop, Sarteneja, 2014

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