In this report I would like to formally thank the UNLV McNair Scholars Institute for awarding me funding through the McNair SRI stipend that supported my international travel for an academic conference in Belize this summer. Thanks to the generosity of this program and everyone involved in it, I was able to travel to Belize, Central America and attend the 17th Annual Belize Archaeology Symposium as well as visit various archaeological sites where active excavations are being conducted at this time.

The BAS conference took place in the San Ignacio Resort in the city of San Ignacio, Cayo, Belize from June 26th to June 28th. Known for being the most important conference in Belize where archaeologists of all backgrounds as well as other experts and students present on research completed and on-going within the country through a variety of archaeology projects and field schools. Prior to attending the conference, I was invited and agreed to participate as a volunteer by helping install signs for sessions in progress and provide a microphone to the audience for Q&A. This job at the conference still allowed me to attend and be present in all the sessions as they were all taken place in one large ballroom and gave me the opportunity to become familiar with attendees’ names and faces as I worked through the crowd. For my volunteer work I was awarded free lunch for the days of the conference and a small stipend which I used to visit an iguana sanctuary at the resort! This symposium is small in scale compared to bigger conferences here in the U.S., which benefits attendees for experiencing a more intimate setting for networking and learning. The whole symposium program was packed with so much great information and well planned with sessions organized in a timely manner.

I truly learned a lot in this conference as much research was presented in relation to my current summer research in ‘Maya Sustainability: Green Cities, Ancient & Modern Urbanism’, complementing the large amount of ongoing research related to ancient city settlements and patterns, social organizations, forms of government, anthropogenic landscapes: urban & rural, and more. I had the pleasure of meeting well-known archaeologists/professors from different universities in the U.S. who do research in Belize and have active field schools and projects, that at the same time helped me identify future opportunities for graduate school in archaeology. In addition, I had the opportunity to present my research with my respected research faculty mentor and co-author, Dr. Arlen F. Chase. My poster showcased the work done in completed excavations this Spring season at the Caracol Archaeological Project in Belize, where I participated and had the chance to excavate for the first time. It was through this project that I had a transformative experience in my academic interests. Wanting now to pursue Maya/Mesoamerica archaeology with a study component in urbanism and sustainability combining experience with my dual degree in Urban Studies.

Following the days after the symposium, I had the opportunity of being invited to visit and tour two archaeological sites: El Pilar Archaeological Reserve supervised by Dr. Anabel Ford from UC Santa Barbara and Cahal Pech supervised by Belize renowned archaeologist Dr. Jaime Awe from NAU. El Pilar is a unique site located right in the border with the country of Guatemala (half the site is in Guatemala and the other half in Belize). The project at El Pilar focuses on the conservation of the Maya forest garden as part of the archaeology within the ancient city. Dr. Ford works closely with current Maya forest gardener experts who help identity the dominant plants of the jungle the ancient Maya would use.
as medicinal and food resources. Determining the location of these plant species then helps the archaeology team identify potential settlements under the jungle cover.

Cahal Pech is also a unique site, smaller than others in Belize but rich in architecture and history. Here Dr. Awe has discovered an extensive amount of building phases at several structures that has helped identify when the Maya civilization of this area was most prosperous as well as when the fall of the community happened, leading to abandonment of the site. At the time of the visit, the field school’s second season had just concluded and a third one would start the following day, which allowed me to experience open excavations and witness projects for site reconstruction. I even got to enter a tunnel excavated on the side of structure A-1, which revealed earlier construction phases inside the current building through a series of floors and a broken mask of an earlier structure.

Then for my last activity during my trip I visited the site of Altun Ha which is closer to the coast line near Belize City. This site is known to have been an important community place for the ancient Maya, as it is recognized as a prominent link in the coastal trade routes of Belize, Guatemala and even extending to the city of Teotihuacan in Mexico. In this site, two Belizeans working with archaeologist Dr. David Pendergast in 1968, discovered a famous artifact that is considered the “Jewel of Belize”, a carved Jadeite head of the Maya Sun God “Kinich Ahau” found in a burial at the Temple of the Masonry Altars (more here: https://belize.com/belize-maya-jade-head/). It is said that this artifact is the most valuable archaeological finding in the country of Belize and probably in all of Mesoamerica today.

Visiting these sites truly gave me the opportunity to dive into more knowledge of the ancient Maya, such as how they constructed their cities, organized their resources, performed as a society, built their structures sustainably, about their relationship with the environment, why they followed certain burial patterns, among many more concepts of my research interests. At the same time, I had the amazing opportunity to network with other undergrad and graduate students from all over the world and most meaningful was to build a connection to the directors and their projects for potential collaborations in the future.

Overall, this trip, the experiences I encountered and all the knowledge I gained will be equally as important for my growth as a UNLV student in both disciplines: urban studies and anthropology, as well as beyond in graduate school next year. For that, I am grateful to receive the support of the McNair Institute, especially that of Dr. Della Sala and advisor Carrie Underwood who have invested their time and encouragement in my academic journey through research, along with providing valuable advice for my future scholarship!

I have included a drive folder with photos of the trip you might enjoy and find interesting here: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FPOt6NajPyZ2oIn1Fb0BkSWxKcJ8z0D?usp=sharing

With much gratitude,

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