The Use of LiDAR in Understanding the Ancient Maya Landscape

Caracol and Western Belize

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A major impediment to full reconstruction and characterization of ancient Maya civilization has been a persistent inability to adequately define the scope of ancient settlement. Because Maya ruins were usually located in areas of dense jungle, it was difficult to not only see but also to map and understand both the spatial extent of their ancient cities and the magnitude of their environmental

ABSTRACT

The use of airborne LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) in western Belize, Central America, has revolutionized our understanding of the spatial dynamics of the ancient Maya. This technology has enabled researchers to successfully demonstrate the large-scale human modifications made to the ancient tropical landscape, providing insight on broader regional settlement. Before the advent of this laser-based technology, heavily forested cover prevented full coverage and documentation of Maya sites. Mayanists could not fully recover or document the extent of ancient occupation and could never be sure how representative their mapped and excavated samples were relative to ancient settlement. Employing LiDAR in tropical and subtropical environments, like that of the Maya, effectively provides ground, as well as forest cover information, leading to a much fuller documentation of the complexities involved in the ancient human-nature interface. Airborne LiDAR was first flown over a 200 km² area of the archaeological site of Caracol, Belize, in April 2009. In April and May 2013 an additional 1,057 km² were flown with LiDAR, permitting the contextualization of the city of Caracol within its broader region and polity. The use of this technology has transformed our understanding of regional archaeology in the Maya area.

El uso de LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) instalado en un avión y sobrevolando el oeste de Belice en América Central, ha revolucionado nuestra comprensión de la dinámica espacial de los antiguos mayas y ha ayudado significativamente a establecer comparaciones con otras civilizaciones tropicales. Esta tecnología ha permitido a investigadores demostrar con éxito las modificaciones humanas a gran escala realizadas en el antiguo paisaje tropical, revelando información sobre los patrones de asentamiento de una amplia región. La densidad y la extensión de la ocupación documentada por el LiDAR tienen implicaciones para los modelos sociales y políticos de la época clásica maya (550-900 d.C.). Antes de la llegada de esta tecnología basada en láser, la densa cubierta forestal impedía la cobertura completa y la documentación de los lugares arqueológicos mayas. Mayanistas no podían recuperar plenamente documentar el grado de ocupación antigua y nunca podían estar seguros de cuántas representativas eran sus muestras mapeadas y excavadas en relación al antiguo asentamiento. El empleo de LiDAR en ambientes tropicales y subtropicales, como el de los mayas, nos ofrece de manera efectiva información del terreno, tanto como la de la cubierta forestal, lo que lleva a una documentación mucho más completa de las complejidades involucradas en la antigua interfaz hombre-naturaleza. El LiDAR aerotransportado sobrevoló por primera vez en abril de 2009 un rea de 200 kilómetros cuadrados de la zona arqueológica de Caracol, Belice. Estos datos revitalizaron la arqueología del paisaje del rea maya, proporcionando una imagen completa de una antigua ciudad—sus asentamientos, centros administrativos y rituales, caminos y terrazas agrícolas. En abril y mayo del 2013 una sección adicional de 1,057 kilómetros cuadrados fueron sobrevolados con LiDAR, así permitiendo la contextualización de la ciudad de Caracol dentro de su región general física y política. Cuando se combina esta información con datos detallados de la excavación arqueológica, LiDAR proporciona un recurso sin precedentes para el análisis de las dinámicas a largo plazo de la relación hombre-naturaleza en relación al aumento, el mantenimiento, y la caída de la antigua sociedad maya.
modifications. For a variety of reasons—including dense tropical vegetation, historical accident, limited resources, mapping difficulty, and theoretical predilections—many Maya sites remain severely under-recorded in terms of their overall scale and anthropogenic effects on the landscape. However, this situation is now changing. The use of LiDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) over large swaths of Maya landscapes has provided researchers with the ability to finally situate ancient Maya constructed remains at a regional scale. In some cases, the ancient Maya completely modified their environs and built large low-density urban centers far larger than had once been thought (A. Chase et al. 2011).

Our interest in LiDAR is an attempt to remedy regional settlement issues in the archaeology of the Maya lowlands. A significant difference between regional survey in the Maya area and highland Mexico is a reliance on surface collections. The history of highland Mexico is largely predicated on the surface collection of artifactual remains, with entire volumes outlining developmental sequences for prehistory being written based on surface collections (e.g., Kowalewski et al. 2009). In contrast, surface artifactual remains encountered in tropical Maya sites are often either not visible or constitute unreliable indicators of the full extent of past occupation (Chase and Chase 1990). Sherds, lithics, and other artifacts in the Maya area are usually covered by a humus layer resulting from the decomposition of organic material; earlier occupation is usually masked in residential...
groups by rebuilding efforts and monumental constructions are similarly hidden by later modifications (Figure 2).

Thus, largely because of environmental differences, regional archaeology in Mesoamerica has developed differently in the highlands and the lowlands. In central Mexico, regional archaeology has been predicated on surface collections and full survey and mapping of extensive land areas—often to the exclusion of actual excavation. In the Maya area, despite some valiant attempts, regional archaeology has been dependent on limited samples of excavation data that have been tied into an even less understood landscape. Detailed transects between major sites to understand settlement were rarely attempted, but when they were done—such as between Tikal and Uaxactun (Puleston 1983) and between Yaxha and Tikal (Ford 1986), they covered narrow spatial swaths and raised more questions than they answered. Until recently, full-coverage mapping of broad areas has been too expensive and laborious to be a possibility.

**MAYA REGIONAL SURVEY: A BRIEF HISTORY**

While early exploration of Maya sites (e.g., Maudslay 1983; Stephens and Catherwood 1855) focused on monumental architecture and stone monuments from site centers, early twentieth-century archaeological projects expressed an interest in locating residential areas and contextualizing site centers. One of the earliest settlement surveys within the Maya lowlands was undertaken at the Guatemalan site of Uaxactun, where an attempt was made to document residential groups that were situated adjacent to and surrounding the monumental architecture of that site (Wauchope 1934). These efforts led to a documentation of a relatively low density of residential groups, but did not focus on the scale and extent of the overall settlement.

From the very beginning of settlement work in the Maya area there was a concern over what constituted a site and how regions were integrated, but archaeological mapping of these regions was extremely limited. Importantly, the frameworks for understanding the ancient occupation of Maya sites were in constant flux, rotating between more complex frameworks focused on a multi-class society and simpler polar models of priests and peasants (Becker 1979). Because the scale of ancient Maya occupation was largely unknown, different models could be applied and changed almost at will. With the lack of detailed archaeological data and with the field firmly subsumed into anthropology in the Americas, these interpretive frameworks became grounded in the ethnographic study of contemporary Maya peoples (Becker 1979:8-11). Essentially, Robert Redfield’s (1941,
The 1947 model that contrasted “urban” (or elite) and “folk” (or “rural”) cultures dominated the Maya area, with the monumental architecture of sites being viewed as being representative of an “urban” core and any residential settlement seen as representing a more “folk” sustaining area. By combining the perceived Maya settlement of concentrated monumental architecture and dispersed residential groups with modern Maya ethnographic data, it was widely thought that ancient Maya society was characterized by “vacant ceremonial centers,” largely empty public architecture and plazas in which outlying rural peasants congregated for periodic festivals (Vogt 1968; Willey 1956).

It was not until 1961, with the publication of the 16 km² map of the Guatemalan site of Tikal (Carr and Hazard 1961) documenting the central portion of that site, that there was recognition of Maya residential settlement being embedded within and integrated with a monumental core (Coe and Haviland 1982:25). And it was not until substantial excavation was undertaken in the sizeable stone buildings located in site epicenters that there was recognition that they had actually been occupied residential areas (Adams 1974; Chase and Chase 2001b, 2004; Harrison 1999). Once established as residential units, the centrally located stone buildings were interpreted as “royal courts” that had been occupied by Maya elite (Inomata and Houston 2000, 2001). This, then, became the basis for an ethnohistorically-based concentric model of ancient Maya occupation in which the elites or nobles occupied the central stone architecture and the commoners or peasants lived around this center (see Marcus 1983). Yet, investigations of residential groups yielded great status differences in these residential units (Becker et al. 1999; Chase and Chase 2014; Haviland et al. 1985), interpreted as evidence for the existence of a multi-level society among the ancient Maya (A. Chase and D. Chase 1992, 1996). Thus, while some resolution began to be reached about the social complexity of ancient Maya society, the actual scale of organization for ancient Maya settlement was still problematic and could not be demonstrated. The postulated organizational complexity associated with larger Maya sites was often seen as anomalous (Houston et al. 2003:234-236), and the constraints of time, funding, and sub-tropical cover made the complete recording of settlement size and landscape features unfeasible.

Several projects attempted to document the scale of Maya sites (Figure 3). Traditional mapping projects were undertaken within and around urban cores, with some efforts being more extensive than others. However, monumental architecture was...
usually the central archaeological focus of these projects to the
detriment of regional settlement; much of the emphasis on site
centers was due both to the spectacular archaeological materi-
als found in the larger Maya architecture and to the difficulty
in mapping within a tropical environment. As indicated above,
Tikal, Guatemala set the stage for new studies of ancient Maya
settlement. The central 16 km² map was extended through a
series of transects to cover some 23 km², eventually resulting in
a population estimate for that site of over 90,000 people (Culbert
et al. 1990; Puleston 1983). But, even with decades of research
and settlement transects extending from the Tikal site center
to other Guatemalan sites at Uaxactun (Puleston 1983), 26 km
to the north, and Yaxha (Ford 1986), 36 km to the southeast, the
full extent of the site and its articulation with surrounding areas
could not—and still cannot—be completely addressed.

Following the Tikal efforts, multi-year projects combining site
center and settlement work became the norm. Mapping at
Dzibanchaltun, Mexico, documented a cruciform pattern for
the central part of that site and recorded 8,507 structures in
19 km² (Stuart 1979). Entire site sectors between causeways at
Coba, Mexico, were recorded (Garduno Argueta 1979), indicat-
ing a site that housed some 60,000 people (Folan et al. 1983).
Settlement and road systems at Chichen Itza were found to be far
more extensive than indicated on the original map made by
the Carnegie Institution of Washington project (Cobos 2004).
At Calakmul, a site with some 60,000 ancient inhabitants, 30
km² of central settlement were recorded (Folan et al. 2001), but
mapping the broader region that encompassed these archaeo-
logical remains was not done. At Caracol, the central 12 km² of
the site were recorded in block fashion like Tikal and Calakmul,
but transects were extended into the region, ultimately result-
ing in 23 km² of coverage and a population estimate of over
100,000 people (Chase and Chase 2001). More recently, another
significant mapping project was undertaken at Chunucumil,
Mexico, documenting dense urban settlement and a popula-
tion of over 45,000 people in what many had presumed to be an
inhospitable—and unsustainable—part of the Yucatán Peninsula
(Dahlin et al. 2005).

However, the variability in the preservation of surface archi-
tecture and in site size and density across the Maya lowlands
made comparative statements difficult (e.g., Culbert and Rice
1990) and, as some of the smaller Maya centers became the
focus of archaeological research projects, our perspective about
the ancient Maya became shaped by this limited sample. At
Quirigua, Guatemala, the site center was found to be situated
amidst a settlement buried below several meters of alluvial soil
(Asmore 2007) and, as a consequence, while settlement locales
within the Motagua Valley could be determined (Schortman
1993), the actual residential groups surrounding Quirigua were
more difficult to discern. Documentation of the neighboring
region of Copan, Honduras (Baudez 1983; Fash 1991), sug-
gested a low-density maximum overall valley-wide population of
some 30,000 people with a higher density of settlement located
only around the area of Copan’s monumental architecture.

Efforts to gain a perspective on multiple sites within a region
also were undertaken. In the Northern Lowlands, regional survey
built upon the base provided by the Yucatan Atlas Project (Garza
Tarazona de Gonzalez and Kurjack 1980), which had analyzed
aerial photographs to identify Maya settlements across the Yuca-
tán Peninsula. In the Southern Lowlands, an ambitious—and
difficult—regional survey of the southeast Petén of Guatemala
was carried out by Juan Pedro Laporte (1994; Escobedo 2008)
in which his project mapped and recorded concentrations of
monumental architecture over a vast region and then attempted
to synthesize ancient political organization. For the most part,
however, due to the difficulty of carrying out jungle survey,
regional settlement studies in the Maya area generally did not
attempt to document the total settlement or landscape modifi-
cations of large regions or zones. In the Usamacinta area of Gu-
atemala, the centers of Dos Pilas and Aguateca were mapped,
but not the region between them (Demarest 1997); part of
this decision was based on an idea of the Maya as occupying
smaller defensible city-states. At Piedras Negras, only one km²
of settlement about the monumental architecture was recorded
(Houston et al. 2001). Thus, to a large degree, models based on
hieroglyphic interpretations, suggesting the existence of a series
of small city-states, supported analysis that focused on single
sites and their surrounding areas.

Despite over 100 years of investigation, the ancient Maya
lowlands occupation over a vast region remains rather incom-
pletely documented and understood (for syntheses of settle-
ment efforts see Ashmore 1981; Culbert and Rice 1990; Sabloff
and Ashmore 2007). The central areas of a number of sites have
been extensively mapped—the result of herculean efforts given
the jungle covering—but the demonstration of exactly how the
sites articulated with their regions or each other was not easily
or definitively shown.

CARACOL LIDAR
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

In April 2009 all of this changed. The Caracol Archaeological
Project subcontracted with the National Center for Airborne
Laser Mapping to overfly the site of Caracol, Belize, with LiDAR
(see Glennie et al. 2013, for details on LiDAR). From April 26–30,
the site was overflown and approximately 20 points per m² were
recorded with lasers for an area of 199.7 km² with a vertical accu-
racy of 5–30 cm (southern part of Figure 4). These dates were
purposefully selected because this was at the end of the dry
season in Belize when the maximum numbers of leaves would
be off the covering vegetation, ensuring better ground returns
from the lasers. As previously detailed (A. Chase et al. 2011:390–
391), the 2009 survey was flown at a height of 800 m and used an
Optech GEMINI ALTM mounted on a Cessna Skymaster. Flight-
lines were 260 m apart and were flown in both east-west and
north-south flight lines, resulting in 200 percent swath overlap.
The aircraft flew at 80 m per second and the laser pulse rate
was 100 Khz; the mirror scanner was set at 40 Hz and an angle
of ± 21 degrees. Of the approximately 20 laser shots per m², an
average of 1.35 laser shots per m² returned from the ground.
Processing of the DEM was done by NCALM; the hillshades
(see Devereux et al. 2008; Zaksek et al. 2011) were processed in
ArcGIS v. 9 (ESRI Inc. 2009) and Surfer v. 9.9 (Golden Software
2010) software programs in combination with Perl and Arc Macro
Language (AML) scripts.

The increased size of the study area, from 23 km² to 200 km²,
led to the discovery of additional residential settlement and
infrastructure—causeways, agricultural fields, and reservoirs. The
FIGURE 4. The 1257 km² of western Belize surveyed by NCALM with LiDAR: lower box around Caracol surveyed in 2009; remaining area surveyed in 2013.
results firmly demonstrated not only the scale of this ancient Maya city, but also a fully anthropogenic landscape (Chase et al. 2010; A. Chase et al. 2011). The LiDAR confirmed that Caracol (Figure 5)—along with the previously named and investigated sites of Hatzcap Ceel and Cahal Pichik—formed a single urban settlement, extending over at least 177 km$^2$ and incorporating almost 160 km$^2$ of continuously terraced landscape. Rather than seeing the region as dotted by multiple small centers, it became possible to conclusively show that a single integrated site occupied the landscape (Figure 6). These same data also demonstrated that so-called “low-density” Maya urbanism was consistent with urban developments in other tropical areas, such as Angkor, Cambodia (Evans et al. 2013; Fletcher 2009).

LiDAR provided the ability to finally demonstrate the scale upon which the ancient Maya operated and provided the tools to examine how the Maya distributed themselves over their landscape by yielding full-coverage regional survey. How they managed water in a waterless environment could now be analyzed in great detail and in multiple ways. LiDAR provided a detailed topography that showed not only the ancient agricultural terracing (Chase and Chase 1998), but also the actual slope of the landscape and these fields. Furthermore, it became possible to isolate both deep depressions into the earth that represented sinkholes and potential caves (Weishampel et al. 2011) as well as more shallow depressions often located near residential groups that represented constructed reservoirs (Chase 2012; Chase and Weishampel 2014). The articulation of Maya settlement and field systems in terms of the topography became clear. For the first time, a complete Maya region could be visually portrayed in terms of topography, settlement, field systems, reservoirs, and roadways. Needless to say, the wealth of these data has had an impact on our interpretations of the ancient Maya (D. Chase et al. 2011).

While the size of Caracol and its multitude of agricultural terraces were initially viewed—and sometimes dismissed—as being “unique” in terms of Maya landscapes, it now appears that the site is typical of other large Maya cities (e.g., Tikal, Calakmul, Coba, Chichen Itza), both in terms of scale and intensity of agricultural practices. Additionally, the anthropogenic nature of much of the Maya landscape—and its various permutations—is becoming more self-evident. By providing detailed and extensive spatial data, LiDAR forces a consideration of the complexity of the ancient-Maya human-nature interface (D. Chase and A. Chase 2014). These newer data supplement our understanding of the Classic period (A.D. 250-900) Maya that is gained from their hieroglyph record, forcing us to rethink how Maya societies were organized socially, economically, politically, and religiously.
However, an even larger spatial sample of LiDAR data was needed in order to better place Caracol within its landscape and to understand regional Maya settlement patterns. These data were acquired for a consortium of researchers working in western Belize in 2013, again as a result of a subcontract with the National Center for Airborne Laser Mapping (NCALM). From April 27–May 10, 2013, NCALM flew an additional total of 1057 km$^2$ at 15 points per m$^2$ that bracketed Caracol to the east and to the north and additionally covered the Belize Valley (see Figure 4), and resulted in an average of 2.8 ground returns per m$^2$. The 2013 NCALM campaign utilized the same equipment and plane used in 2009. However, the plane was flown at an elevation of 600 m and a ground speed of 60 m per second with 325 survey lines that were 137 m apart, resulting in 300 percent swath overlap. The laser had a pulse rate of 125 kHz and a scan frequency of 55 Hz. The scan angle was 18 degrees. Processing of the data was done by NCALM, as in 2009 LiDAR, and the visualizations have used the same programs.

The area recorded to the east of Caracol was undertaken in order to determine both Caracol’s eastern boundary and its relationship to the site of Cuevas. Additional causeways were found to extend east of Caracol. One ran due east from New Maria camp to a terminus 3 km away (Figure 7); another ran from Hatzcap Ceel 3.5 km east to a terminus and then continued another 4 km to yet another terminus. These new causeways mean that it was possible to use the Caracol road system to effectively move from one side of the Vaca Plateau to the other, bypassing the area of rough terrain directly north of Caracol (Chase and Chase 2012). While Caracol is in a limestone environment, these eastern causeways connect the site directly to the only region of the central Maya lowlands containing metamorphic rock (Graham 1987). Based on archaeological research undertaken along the shores of the Macal River (Awe 2005; Brian Woodye, personal communication 2009), granite manos and metates, needed for subsistence production by the ancient Maya, were being produced on a large-scale basis along the banks of this river. Thus, it is likely that granite metates and manos were being transported along the Caracol road system and eventually to consumers in the central Petén—providing clues to Caracol’s location and initial prosperity. To the southeast
in this new LiDAR, both residential settlement and agricultural
terracing drops off substantially as one approaches the small
site of Cuevas (Moyes et al. 2012). However, a new terminus was
located approximately 1 km north of Cuevas on top of a hill and
a 5 km long causeway, running due east, linked this terminus
to the known site of Monkeytail, mapped and archaeologically
tested by Brian Woodye in the 1990s.

The area covered by LiDAR to the north of Caracol ran from the
Belize-Guatemala border on the west and the Macal River on
the east through some very rough karst terrain. Yet, the entire
area is dotted with nodes of public architecture. Plateau areas
where the terrain is not too severe are completely covered in
agricultural terraces and settlement. However, the karst hills
present clear breaks between settlement areas. The site of
Caballo, located on a flat plain, is separated from Caracol by
5 km of severe karst. Yet, it is surrounded by agricultural fields
and exhibits several large nodes of public architecture linked by
an east-west causeway system (Figure 8). While separate from
Caracol, it was clearly within its sway based on the presence of
a giant Ahau altar at the site, which is a Caracol iconographic
signature (Grube 1994:100). North of Caballo, the sites of Ix Chel
and Yaxnoh are visible atop ridges; both sites have causeways
linking together architectural groups. The sites of Minanha
(Iannone 2005), Arenal (Tashek and Ball 1999), and Caledonia
(Awe 1985) are all visible, but so too are isolated nodes of public
architecture resembling E Groups (Chase and Chase 1995).

The area covered by the 2013 LiDAR also incorporated most
of the Belize Valley, extending to include the border site of El
Pilar to the north and going past the site of Pacbitun to the east
to the newly found site of Barton Creek. All of the known sites
from the Belize Valley (see Garber 2004, LeCount and Yaeger
2010) are clearly visible. Xunantunich is larger than the current
map indicates, with palisades along the southern part of the site
core and monumental eastern constructions in evidence near
the Mopan River (Figure 9). The nodal regularity in site spacing
along the Belize River, something commented on by a variety of
researchers (Driver and Garber 2004; Flannery 1977; Helmke and
Awe 2012) is also evident—as is the lack of significant settlement
away from the river in the lower part of the Belize Valley. The
broader implications of the settlement patterns revealed by this
LiDAR survey are discussed elsewhere (Chase et al. 2014).

ISSUES STILL TO BE RESOLVED

The future of regional archaeology in the Maya region is exceed-
ingly promising. First, additional LiDAR needs to be flown to
record ancient landscapes before they are severely modified
by modern encroachment (Weishampel et al. 2012). We know
that there are environmental variations among the areas occu-
pied by the ancient Maya; their adaptations likewise were not
uniform and are evident in the variety of permutations that can
be found in the archaeological record (Chase and Scarborough
2014). LiDAR can provide insight into these alternative adaptive
strategies. However, it will be important to collect data from
large areas to analyze not only human adaptations, but also the
boundaries and relationships among sites and polities. Impor-
tant archaeological work has been undertaken toward defining
the boundaries and borders between Piedras Negras, Guate-
mala, and Yaxchilan, Mexico (Golden et al. 2008), but LiDAR
coverage provides the tools for researchers to define relation-
ships among Maya polities at a scale and level of detail that has
not previously been possible.

Perhaps most importantly, LiDAR can provide the framework
for studying the human-environment dynamic. Without exca-
vation, scholars can effectively research a series of questions
about ancient human adaptation. Reservoirs can be identified
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FIGURE 8. The site of Caballo in 2.5D LiDAR.

FIGURE 9. 2D LiDAR image of Xunantunich, Belize showing large constructions on the river bank. Shadow of the modern town of Benque Viejo shows on the southern bank of the river.
and measured to model the number of people that could be supported. The labor expended in making large-scale land modifications can be estimated. The flow of water across the landscape can be tested to determine the effectiveness of constructed terraces in maintaining soils and distributing moisture. The field area per household or neighborhood can be identified. Essentially, the difficulties in carrying out remote on-the-ground research in a dense jungle are largely removed in the Maya region through the use of LiDAR-assisted large-scale landscape archaeology.

However, LiDAR does not remove the necessity of carrying out on-the-ground fieldwork in order to ascertain dating and determine function— or to frame questions and research designs. The soil depth and Maya construction methods make it very unlikely that the collection of surface artifactual remains will ever become the codified discipline that it is in highland Mexico (Kowalewski et al. 2009) or other parts of the world (e.g., Alcock and Cherry 2004, Sullivan et al. 2007). However, because many Maya and Mesoamerican constructions are raised, the use of this technique will permit the relatively full documentation of site scales and articulations. What will not be represented in these data, without excavation, are the temporal depth of the archaeological features being viewed or the associated artifactual remains. The future issues, then, within regional archaeology in the Maya area will be similar to general problems that the discipline faces today: sampling, dating, and interpretation. These are concerns that go far beyond just regional archaeology. Thus, while traditional questions in Maya archaeology may remain to be dealt with, LiDAR has removed a major interpretational obstacle by permitting the large-scale contextualization of ancient Maya remains (Chase et al. 2012).

CONCLUSION

Regional archaeology in the Maya area is at a crossroads. With the advent of LiDAR, it is now possible to contextualize Maya archaeological remains in terms of their landscapes at large spatial scales. However, because of the rich archaeological background and the sizeable databases that exist for the Maya area, the combination of LiDAR and archaeology promises to yield very complicated and detailed pictures of ancient Maya societies and to overturn long-held, yet incorrect, ideas about these sophisticated and complex people. Full-coverage regional survey in highland Mexico has been phenomenally successful in providing comparative models of societal evolution. The comparative cases that now will derive from the Maya area—one combining full-coverage survey with detailed excavation—will provide far richer understandings of how civilization and urbanism arose and thrive in Mesoamerica. From this base, Maya landscapes can effectively be compared and contrasted with human urban adaptations elsewhere in the ancient and modern world.

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Data Availability Statement

In accord with the wishes of the Institute of Archaeology in the country of Belize, the LiDAR data reported on in this paper are not available to the general public in order to protect the country’s archaeological resources from further looting. However, a limited portion of the LAS digital files may be provided to qualified professional researchers for valid teaching and learning purposes; these digital data may be requested from the senior author.

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