

# PARAISO FOR SALE

*A documentary by Anayansi Prado*

## STUDY GUIDE



Bocas del Toro, Panama

### SYNOPSIS

What price would you pay for paradise? And who would you be willing to take it from? The pristine archipelago of Bocas del Toro, Panama attracts retirees and developers from the U.S. with its crystal-clear waters and its island culture. In *PARAISO FOR SALE*, filmmaker Anayansi Prado returns to her homeland to document the effects this fast-growing migration of Americans is having on the local community.

This engaging and revealing documentary tells the personal stories of the people who call this area home and would like to keep it that way. From an American couple, who've invested not just in their home but in their Panamanian community, to a local businessman turned political hopeful and an indigenous leader fighting for his land, the characters and stories in *PARAISO FOR SALE* speak to the larger global issue of communities, new and old, under siege from faceless corporations. *PARAISO FOR SALE* explores issues of modern day colonialism, residential tourism, global gentrification and reverse migration, by revealing that immigration between Latin America and the US is not just a one-way street.

You can find more information about the film by visiting: <http://www.impactofilms.com/>

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## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

ANAYANSI PRADO, director/producer, is an award-winning documentary filmmaker who has taught and showcased her work throughout the U.S., Latin America, Asia & Africa. Prado was born in Panama and moved to the United States as a teenager. Her debut documentary *Maid in America* about Latina domestic workers in Los Angeles, CA screened nationally on PBS series Independent Lens. Her second production, *Children in No Man's Land*, about unaccompanied minors crossing the US/Mexico border is part of the State Department's *American Documentary Showcase* and has been screened in more than 30 countries. *Paraíso for Sale*, her latest film, takes Prado back to her Panamanian homeland to document the impact American retirees and developers are having on the local community of Bocas del Toro, Panama. *Paraíso for Sale* is began broadcasting nationally on PBS in September 2011.

Prado is the founder of Impacto Films and the non-profit **Impacto Project** with the mission to bring photography and video training to youth in developing countries. She holds a BA in Film from Boston University. Anayansi resides in Los Angeles, California.

## FEATURED IN THE FILM

**Feliciano** – Indigenous Ngöbe-Buglé leader organizing and defending his community against land grabbing for development. He is also fighting his own personal land dispute with the owner of a small resort.

**Dario** – Afro- Panamanian boatsman turned political hopeful. Dario decides to run for Mayor of Bocas del Toro after an unresolved land dispute with an American developer over an island that he alleges has been in his family for decades.

**Karan & Willy** – American retiree couple who moved to Bocas in 2003. In 2008, an American developer claimed ownership of their land. Karan & Willy are in an on-going land dispute with the developer.



Dario

## Bocas del Toro, Panama

The area now known as Bocas del Toro was traditionally inhabited by the Ngöbe-Buglé indigenous peoples. In the early 1800s, American and British settlers arrived with African slaves from other parts of the Caribbean. Free blacks from the British Caribbean also settled in this area during the 1800s. English and Pidgin English were as commonly spoken as Spanish and the native guaymí language.

Throughout most of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, banana plantations drove growth in the region. With the arrival of bananas came American companies and the building of roads, hospitals and communication technology. Immigrants settled in Bocas del Toro to work on the plantations. They came mainly from the Caribbean and also from places including the United States, Europe, Canada, China and other parts of Central America. Fluctuations in the world economy as well as banana fungi and pests resulted in mixed fortunes for banana exports.



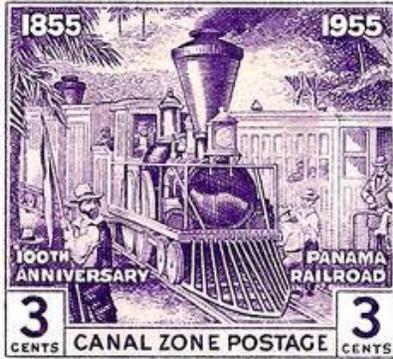
*“The draw: Laid-back island living. Bocas del Toro province, on the Caribbean in western Panama, boasts miles of sandy beaches, turquoise waters and sprawling rainforests. The currency is the U.S. dollar and, while Spanish is the country’s official language, English is widely spoken. Panama has a “pensionado” program for retirees that provides discounts on public transportations, entertainment and health care.”*

<http://www.kiplinger.com/slideshow/places-to-retire-abroad/4.html#top>

Beginning in the 1990s, Bocas underwent a massive reorientation from an export-driven to a tourism-based economy. As democracy was restored to Panama after the fall of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, foreign developers and retirees purchased some of the most valuable land in Bocas. The creation of new hotels, bars, restaurants and tour companies meant short-term employment for locals. However, the rapid development threatened the region’s traditional land distribution system, resulting in the loss of land and homes from the local population. As the tourism economy grew, so did other problems. Bocas’ infrastructure---i.e. electricity, water, sewer, communication, hospitals---was not equipped to handle the large influx of newcomers. The cost of living also increased, making it difficult for locals to afford living in the area.

## US-Panama Relations

The United States has always maintained an involved relationship with Panama. Following independence from Colombia in 1903, the Panamanian government gave the United States the right to build a canal (1904-1914) and to govern the surrounding areas known as the “Canal Zone.” The “Canal Zone” was used



mostly as a military base, but also housed around 3,000 US civilians. US sovereignty over the canal and the “Canal Zone” led to increasing resentment among Panamanians beginning in the 1960s. The US government conceded control of the canal, beginning with joint governance in 1970 and leading to a complete turnover of the Canal to the Panamanian government in 1999.

The United States flexed its military muscle in Panama with “Operation Just Cause” in 1989. After unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with Panamanian

General Manuel Antonio Noriega, the US launched a military invasion purported to protect US interests and citizens in the Canal Zone, prevent human rights and democratic abuses, and end the large-scale drug trafficking that flourished under Noriega’s rule. Noriega eventually surrendered to the United States and served a 17-year jail sentence for drug trafficking and money laundering. Noriega was extradited back to Panama in December of 2011, where he currently sits in prison.



### ***Race and the Panama Canal***

*The building of the Panama Canal was a massive undertaking. Laborers from countries around the world were recruited to help build the canal. Between 75-80% of the workers were African-American or Afro-Caribbean. Canal workers were either paid in gold or silver depending on their skill level. Officially, skilled workers were on the “gold roll” while unskilled laborers found themselves on the “silver role.” However, in practice, gold and silver came to stand for white and non-white. Outside of the construction zone, gold and silver workers had a segregated existence. They lived in separate towns and had separate schools, libraries, recreation areas, transport and restrooms. Gold workers were afforded leave time and paid vacation, while silver workers received no extra benefits.*

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/panama-canal.html>

## Retirement Tourism

Retirement tourism, also known as residential tourism or lifestyle migration, is a growing worldwide phenomenon where people from developed countries relocate to the underdeveloped areas. Affordability, a higher standard of living, and tropical climate are some of the more common reasons people chose to permanently relocate. Panama, in particular, has seen a large influx of lifestyle migrants due to the above stated factors as well as cheap health care, a dollar based economy, proximity to the United States, a large percentage of native English speakers, and special tax incentives. As seen in the film, the media has played an important role in promoting Panama as an ideal place to retire.

In Bocas del Toro the development that followed the wave of retirees has shown little concern for preserving the area. The ecology and flora and fauna have been trampled. The people of Bocas have been displaced from their own lands. The constant construction in the area has meant short-term employment for some Bocatorians, but has not brought long-term gains for locals. While Bocas provides an affordable place to live for Americans, the recent development projects resulted in rising costs of living for locals.

### Did you know?

**Residential tourism is a global phenomenon. Some popular spots for lifestyle migrants:**

- Belize
- Mexico
- Thailand
- Vietnam
- Malaysia
- Ecuador

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) What stance does the film take on residential tourism? Does it portray the phenomenon in a mostly positive, negative or neutral way?
- 2) Why do you think the Panamanian government encourages foreigners to relocate to Panama? Why do you think local Panamanian landowners would sell their lands to developers?
- 3) Describe a “typical” residential tourist. Do you think Karan and Willy are good representations of a “typical” residential tourist?
- 4) How does retirement tourism fit into the long-standing United States presence in Panama? In the film local historian Clyde Stephens likens the new trend to modern-day colonialism while others have called it reverse migration. Do you agree with this assessment?
- 5) Would you ever consider moving to another country? What factors would persuade/dissuade you? Would you try to integrate into local culture or be part of an Americanized community?



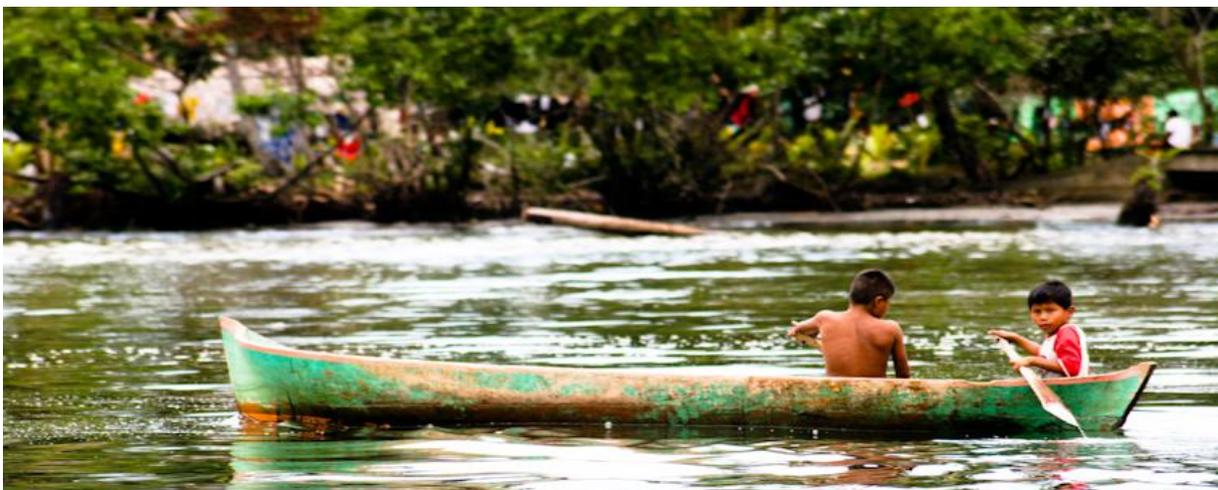
## Indigenous in Panama

The majority of indigenous Panamanians belong to the Ngöbe-Buglé group. Traditionally members of the Ngöbe-Buglé group relied on subsistence agriculture and kinship structures to determine land ownership and use in the community. Although they generally live in small community groups, Ngöbe-Buglé formed part of Panama export economy as laborers on plantations in Panama. As globalization takes hold in many areas of Panama, Ngöbe-Buglé have sought employment in the tourism industry.

The government of Panama was slow to recognize the rights of indigenous communities within its borders. Beginning in the 1970s the Panamanian government set aside lands for indigenous use known as *comarcas*. The Ngöbe-Buglé won the rights to a comarca in 1997. However, with increasing economic pressures from outside developers, the Ngöbe-Buglé lands are under threat. As recent as 2012, the Ngöbe-Buglé protested against foreign mining interests by blockading the Pan-American Highway. The uprisings ended in the death of a few indigenous leaders.

### Using the film as a guide:

- 1) Have indigenous Panamanians maintained a cohesive culture? What aspects of Ngöbe Buglé culture do you see in the film? Compare what you have seen to other places you have studied in the United States or Latin America?
- 2) Why do you think the indigenous are at a high risk for having their lands taken? What rights do the indigenous have to the lands? How can they have rights without land titles? Do you see any links between indigenous land struggles in Panama and the history of Native Americans in the US?
- 3) How do indigenous view landholders in the area? What do you think would be the relationship between Feliciano and Karan or Feliciano and Darío?
- 4) Many indigenous in the film claim the government does not fulfill its legal duties and/or ignores their legitimate complaints. What would you do if your home was being threatened and the law turned its back on you?
- 5) What do you think the future of indigenous Panamanians will be if foreigners continue to make claims on land in the Bocas region? Can you imagine alternative forms of development that did not involve displacing people?



## Afro-Panamanians

Up to 50% of the current population of Panama is said to have African ancestry. Panama has been home to people of African descent since the Spanish arrived to the area with slaves in the early 1500s. During most of Panama's colonial history, Afro-Panamanians made up the largest segment of society. In addition to slaves, free blacks from the British West Indies began arriving in Panama during the mid-1800s to work on banana plantations and construction projects. The building of the Panama Canal, 1903-1914, brought 50,000 new afro-Caribbean migrants to the area. Many of these English-speaking migrants remained in Panama after the completion of the canal. Bocas del Toro and the city of Colon are home to the largest concentration of Afro-Panamanians in Panama today.

Like in the United States, racism against Afro-Panamanians is a fact of life. Black workers were paid less than white workers while building the canal and US-style segregation existed in the Canal Zone itself. Even today, afro-Panamanians are politically and economically underrepresented, with much of the country's black population concentrated in urban slums. Furthermore, those migrants from English speaking areas face further discrimination as they are not only black, but have different social and cultural traditions.

### Discussion questions:

1. How are Afro-Panamanians portrayed in the film? Do they play an integral part in Bocas society?
2. How is someone like Darío affected by tourism in the area? Do you think the benefits outweigh the negatives for him as a tour operator and entertainer?
3. During a confrontation over land ownership, Feliciano accuses an Afro-Panamanian of putting down the indigenous people like all blacks in the country do. What does this tell us about black-indigenous relations in Panama? Can you point to other scenes in the film where tensions exist?
4. How is the concept of race similar or different in Panama from the United States or other places in Latin America you may have studied?
5. Taking Darío as an example, why do you think so many Afro-Panamanians in Bocas speak fluent English? What does this tell us about previous migrations to the area?





## Activity: Panamanian Land Grab

### Purpose

This activity will help students identify and understand the motivations of various interests involved with retirement tourism in Bocas del Toro, Panama.

### Activity

Using the issues of land rights raised in the film as a backdrop, students will hold a town meeting where they will act as one of six interests represented in the film.

### Setting

*Paraiso for Sale* shows a variety of actors affected by retirement tourism in Bocas del Toro, Panama. With an increasing number of foreigners moving to Bocas, demand for land has grown. Developers want to build homes, hotels, restaurants and entertainment for tourists and permanent retirement migrants, while the local community fights to keep traditional lands and ways of life. As seen in the film, the land ownership system and land titles in the Bocas area are not well-defined. Various players lay contending claims to same land.

## Key Players

**Indigenous:** As represented by Feliciano in the film, the Ngöbe-Buglé people are struggling to keep their land and homes against the onslaught of development in the area. Feliciano serves as a community spokesperson, presenting his views at town meetings as well as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The indigenous invoke Panamanian law, which states land rights, through the Rights of Possession Act, belong to families who have occupied the same area for at least 20 years.

**Non-indigenous locals:** Darío represents a group of Bocatoranians who are directly affected by the onslaught of foreigners in the area. On the one hand, Darío has gainful employment as a tour guide and a nightclub singer. On the other hand, developers have laid claim to some of his families land. His political campaign promises to put an end to unrestricted development in the area, yet he gains his livelihood off the projects of these same developers.

**Retirement Tourist:** Karan and Willy exemplify the current trend of Americans moving to Bocas del Toro. Generally, retirement tourists relocate to the region because of its natural beauty and tropical weather. They are drawn to Panama because of the low cost of living for a high quality of life. They build large homes and live out a tropical dream often unaware of the impact they have in the community.

**Land Developer:** Foreign investors have much to gain from developing Bocas. As more Americans show interest in moving to Panama, developers make large profits by building hotels, mansions and yacht clubs. They are motivated mainly by profit and are not overly concerned with the effects of their projects on locals.

**Panamanian Landowner:** Land prices skyrocketed along with the massive wave of residential migrants. Many landowners in the area are selling land titles to developers for a handsome profit. Yet as more land is sold to foreigners, the ecological, economic and cultural dynamics of Bocas are changing. Local landowners are driven by economic greed, but also live in the same communities as concerned locals.

**Government Official:** The government officials walk the fine line between wanting to increase the country's wealth and preserve peace. In the film, a local official listens to Feliciano's complaints against a foreign developer, taking Feliciano's side. However, behind the scenes, the developer wins the land claim and the indigenous family loses their home and land.

## Learn More:

**Cultural Survival:** A non-profit organization committed to defending the lands, languages and cultures of Indigenous communities around the world.

<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/country/panama>

**International Living:** The premier resources for Americans seeking property abroad.

<http://internationalliving.com/>

**Lifestyle Migration Hub:** A scholarly community dedicated to producing research and sharing information on residential migration

<http://www.uta.fi/yky/lifestylemigration/index.html>

**Tourism Concern:** A UK-based non-profit that fights against exploitative tourism.

<http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/>

**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:** An advisory body of the UN dedicated to discussing indigenous issues.

<http://social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples.aspx>

**United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:** An official UN document asserting the rights of Indigenous communities and prohibiting discrimination.

[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

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## About the Author:

**Jamie Holeman** is a freelance researcher with a Master's Degree in Latin American History from the University of Pittsburgh. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in History and Political Science from California State University, Northridge. When not walking dogs at her local animal shelter, she works with documentary filmmakers like **Anayansi Prado** to increase the presence of their films in universities and to create educational materials for the classroom. Holeman is a published author.

## Collaborators:

**Dr. Ed Jackiewicz**, Professor of Geography at California State University, Northridge, has written extensively on lifestyle migration and tourism in Latin America. He received a PhD from Indiana University in 1998. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on Latin American geography, globalization and tourism. Dr. Jackiewicz is currently collaborating with other leading scholars on residential migration.

**Freya Rojo**, Professor of Central American Studies and Journalism, has taught at California State University, Northridge since 2008. Her research focuses on how immigrant communities use social media and how music and multi-media can be instruments of social change and liberation. Prof. Rojo is also the producer and host of the Spanish-language radio show "Nuestra Voz" on Pacifica Radio, KPFK.