

Pearl Lagoon, a playworker's dream



After living for over twenty years in England, where he worked as a playworker, playwork trainer, and later “right to play” activist, Harry Shier moved to Nicaragua, Central America, in 2001, which is now his permanent home. Here’s what he sees.

(This article is based on a presentation given at the Play Education meeting in Wolverhampton in October 2007.)

It was a visit to the remote village of Pearl Lagoon on Nicaragua’s isolated Caribbean coast a few years ago that first convinced me that the comparison between children’s play environments in the UK and Nicaragua could help us to preserve and create spaces fit for outdoor play in a world that seems ever more hostile to this idea.

Nicaragua’s Caribbean coast is remote and hard to get to. There are no roads through the tropical rainforest that separates the Caribbean coast from the more populous Pacific region of Nicaragua, so the only access is by water.

The lagoon itself is about 50 km long and 20 km wide, protected from the open sea by mangrove swamps, and providing good fishing for the small communities that live around its shores. The village of Pearl Lagoon is the main centre for the area. Although most of the population of Nicaragua has mixed indigenous and European heritage, here in Pearl Lagoon the people are recognisably African Caribbean, their ancestors having been brought by the British, who controlled this part of the coast in slavery days. They refer to their language as Creole, and to me it sounds quite similar to Jamaican Patois. Most people in Pearl Lagoon live by fishing, but they also keep cattle, pigs and

chickens, and grow pineapples and other tropical fruit, and breed horses, the only form of land transport.

Wandering around the community of Pearl Lagoon, what struck me most was the children playing everywhere. There is only one motor vehicle in the village – a jeep that serves as a collective taxi – and virtually no strangers, thus removing the two main parental fears that interfere with children’s right to play in the UK. There are hardly any fences or boundaries, so from their earliest days children play amongst farm animals, which graze freely throughout the village. They also play freely in the waters of the lagoon and the many rivers all around. They hang Tarzan swings over rivers. They play baseball, basketball, hopscotch and marbles. They ride horses. They sail the lagoon in dugout canoes, and go fishing for crabs and shrimps. They don’t drown, they don’t get allergies, they don’t seem to meet with any of the potential disasters that pose

such a threat when children go out to play in the UK.

Of course life is not all play. Children also help their parents in the house or on the land, and, especially the girls, look after younger brothers and sisters. And, in case you’re wondering, they also go to school. Like nearly every community in Nicaragua, Pearl Lagoon has a primary school, and most children go to it, as education is considered very important. Unusually it also has a small secondary school, but this is the only one to serve a vast and remote rural hinterland.

Another obvious difference is that in Pearl Lagoon, at least when I was there, there is no access to information technology. That is to say there are no home computers, video arcades, DVDs, i-pods, playstations, internet or cinemas. Television is starting





to appear in some houses but is still not common; local radio remains the main communication medium. Technological or “passive” recreation is not an option.

I realise that Pearl Lagoon isn’t paradise, and I know the people face many problems and suffer a great deal of poverty and deprivation. On the face of it, there is no respect at all for the child’s right to play. Yet despite these differences, which at first sight seem to weigh heavily in favour of Great Britain, the community of Peal Lagoon has maintained – almost without effort – an ideal play environment for its children. An environment which, in terms of meeting children’s fundamental development needs, seems to be more appropriate and more effective than anything we have achieved in wealthy, well-resourced Europe.

“How is this possible?” I ask myself.

Well, if we think about it, we can see that not all the differences weigh in favour of the UK. We have already mentioned the lack of motor vehicles and negligible “stranger danger”. And it must be admitted that Peal Lagoon’s year-round warm weather increases opportunities for playing out. Also Pearl Lagoon is a small rural community surrounded by lots of untamed “nature” – increasingly rare in England these days. And being a stay-at-home computer-kid is just not an option (yet).

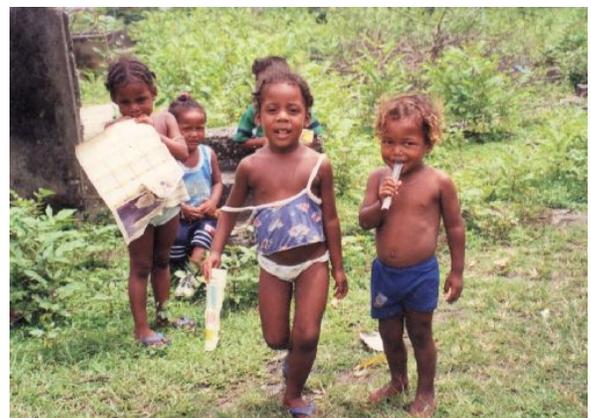
To these obvious differences, I want to add five more, all of which contribute to the quality of the outdoor

play environment, and the opportunities it offers:

1. In Pearl Lagoon animals roam free all around. In the UK there are few animals to be seen, and these are generally caged or restrained.
2. In Pearl Lagoon, fire is familiar: present and useful in every home. For British kids, fire is unfamiliar: attractive yet dangerous.
3. Pearl Lagoon is a small community of people who know each other, where adults look out for children’s wellbeing in general. In the UK most people live in large communities where they don’t know their neighbours well. Adults tend to only look out for their own children and not get involved with other people’s children
4. In Nicaragua, local authorities and other service providers cannot be held responsible for mishaps that occur to children. That is, when something goes wrong there’s no point seeking compensation from anyone. The UK, on the other hand, is becoming a “compensation culture” in which Local Authorities and other service providers can be sued for compensation if any mishap occurs to a child. It is clear that this places constraints on play opportunities available to children.
5. Finally, in Pearl Lagoon, children’s immune systems develop naturally as they combat the various bacteria that abound in the natural environment. In the UK, on the other hand, there is growing scientific evidence that a too-antiseptic environment is weakening immune systems and so making children more susceptible to allergies and germs (so they need greater “protection” – that is to say wrapping in cotton wool).

My second question is, “Is there anything UK playworkers and their managers can learn from this?”

First, let us agree that we cannot turn UK towns and cities into Pearl Lagoon, nor should we attempt to. That is not the idea at all. What this reflection may help us to do, though, is define more clearly the limiting factors on the child’s right to outdoor play, and so to develop a totally home-grown commitment to changes in policy and practice that can really tackle the underlying problems.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HARRY SHIER