Many ancient cities in the tropics exhibited a form of integrated agriculture and settlement unlike that found in modern cities that rely on external agricultural production. This “in-field urbanism” may be unique in some respects, nevertheless these ancient cities embedded systems of interaction and exchange within their landscapes similar to modern ones. The ancient Maya residents of Caracol in modern Belize (and Guatemala) terraformed their landscape to fuse residential settlement with agricultural and hydrologic features. At the same time, their city provided urban services including an integrated market system and interconnected loci of social interaction. Research at Caracol demonstrates that this city exhibits urban scaling properties similar to modern cities. In other words, while residents lived next to their agricultural fields and engaged in household craft production, they still benefited from larger urban processes. At 650 CE, the city housed over 100,000 people with a system of administrative nodes dispersed across its landscape and integrated through a dendritic causeway system. Together, this urban form provided large-scale, civic infrastructure for use by the broader population and a more collective system of governance than would be expected from Maya hieroglyphic records. This, combined with historic events, translated into a period of inequality reduction and widespread wealth sharing. Through this system, the ancient city of Caracol thrived for over 1000 years in a tropical environment where no similarly large cities exist today, suggesting that it may hold lessons for contemporary efforts at sustainable urbanism.

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