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## Deputy PM Visits Chiquibul



The Deputy Prime Minister, Honorable Cordel Hyde has become the 2nd Minister of the new Belize Government briefed at Las Cuevas Research Station regarding the beauty, opportunities and challenges faced in the Chiquibul Forest. Joined by FCD Board member, Mrs. Valerie Woods, FCD staff and media houses Krem TV and Love FM, the two-day visit conducted on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of August provided an opportunity to familiarize the Deputy Prime Minister with the areas of the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve,

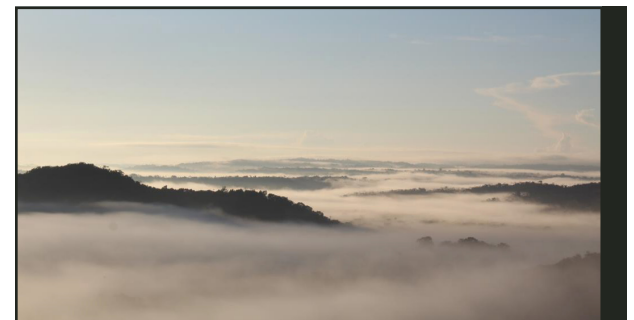
Chiquibul Forest and Caracol Archaeological Reserve. In the Mountain Pine Ridge, Minister Hyde observed the vast landscape of the Western Maya Mountains and the issues of land speculation in the area. In the Chiquibul, he met staff at Tapir Camp and was updated on the current work underway, as well as our aspirations for Government to endorse the Chiquibul landscape for nomination as a World Heritage Site. In Caracol, he observed the encroachments of farming, appearing on the western horizon, at the hands of Guatemalans who are persistently, determined to cultivate inside Belize's territory. At Las Cuevas, a hike to the Tower Lookout show-pieced the magic of the landscape and vividly brought into account the importance of this area as Belize's largest water catchment.

The Deputy Prime Minister noted that indeed the Chiquibul and other areas of the Western Maya Mountains are critical areas for protection and that measures to maintain these are urgent for the greater good of all Belizeans. FCD reassured him of their commitment to continue to work in collaboration with the Government of Belize as a co-manager and looked forward in strengthening this effort across the Western Maya Mountains.

## Government Streamlines FCD's Role

FCD has several agreements with the Government of Belize, which goes back to 2007, when a co-management agreement was reached for the Chiquibul National Park. These 285,937 acres of forest, has been our main focus of attention; however, over the years other arrangements have been reached, including a letter of understanding to operate in the Vaca Forest Reserve; an MoU for administration of Las Cuevas Research Station and a letter of agreement to monitor a gate located at the entrance of the Chiquibul Forest Reserve. These activities are not well aligned; therefore, FCD welcomed enthusiastically Government's interest to streamline our efforts in the Western Maya Mountains.

During the month of August, Minister of Sustainable Development, Honorable Orlando Habet signed a letter titled, "Endorsement of FCD's role within the Maya Mountain Massif". The correspondence clearly articulates and advances the strategic partnership with FCD in the



execution of various programs that includes conservation efforts in four protected areas. To put this into gear, over the next few weeks, the Forest Department, the National Biodiversity Office and FCD will develop the Standing Operating Procedures and protocols that will outline the proper coordination and roles of each institution to improve effective management and administration of these areas.

## New Headquarter Preparation Starts



The need for a new FCD Headquarters has been a repeated 'song' for many years, but it was until 2019, at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of FCD that the Board presented the plan and moved to fundraise for this infrastructure. 2020 didn't become a good year to fundraise, due to COVID 19, thus our plans were truncated which led us to be more conservative on our aspirations for a Headquarters. Nonetheless, the fundraising

continued and a new design was developed. Both Brendan Donaghue and Abel Flores helped with the architectural plan and after visiting several home construction companies in the Cayo District, we opted to work with Premier Homes Construction. The 52 feet by 40 feet wooden building would be at a cost of over Bz\$210,000.00. The old building is dilapidated, with multiple cracks on the walls, infested by termites and the zinks are completely corroded.

During the month of August, FCD entered on a sales agreement with Premier Homes giving way for the construction of the headquarters.

The new headquarters will be located at the same land where FCD saw its origin 32 years ago. San Jose Succotz is the home of Xunantunich Maya ruins, the Mopan River passes through it, and is strategically located for access to the Chiquibul and Vaca Forests. The new headquarters is expected to be in place before the end of 2021.

### Goal:

FCD aims to conserve the natural and cultural resources of the western Chiquibul-Maya Mountains for the sustainable development of Belize.

### Mission:

FCD pioneers adaptive management of the Chiquibul Forest to improve the ecological and cultural integrity of the western Chiquibul-Maya Mountains.

## Binational Action Plan Review

The first Binational Action Plan for the protection of the Chiquibul Maya Mountains (Belize/Guatemala) was developed in 2017. At the time, the signing of a collaborative work was undertaken between La Mesa de Recursos Naturales, Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas, the Belize Forest Department and FCD. Since then, several reviews have been made of this binational effort primarily led by Asociacion Balam based in Guatemala and FCD in Belize. The results of this partnership have been seen obvious with a reduction of Guatemalan human footprint in the Chiquibul Forest; increase of international donor support in the adjacency zone of Guatemala and building of confidence among governmental agencies and civil society groups from both Belize and Guatemala.

The most recent review brought together Governmental institutions from Belize including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Forest Department, Police Department, Belize Defence Force, Immigration Department and the Ministry of Agriculture. In Guatemala, simultaneously Asociacion Balam



convened el Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas, Foro de Justicia Ambiental among others for a one- day session. The session provided a report from both FCD and Asociacion Balam on the achievements in meeting the recommendations of the 2017 Binational Action Plan; activities that were not met and recommendations for the next phase of cooperation. The new action plan is programmed to be finalized during the month of November, 2021.

## Gold Mining in Chiquibul



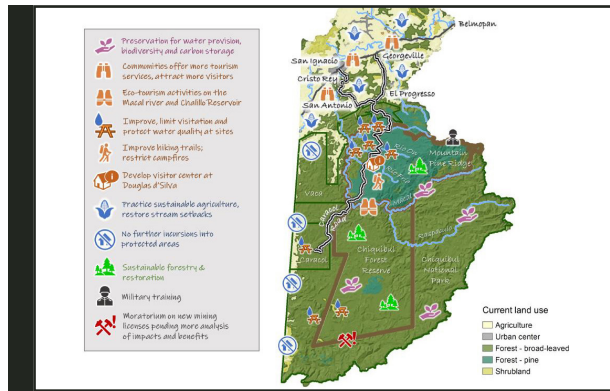
Prior to 1995, the Chiquibul Forest was entirely known as a forest reserve which permitted for extraction of natural resources, but given the importance of the Chiquibul watershed as a priority water catchment region for central Belize, a large portion covering over 285,000 acres was declared a national park in 1995. Gold exploration; however, had started since the time the protected area was a forest reserve. In more recent years, the activity of exploration has scaled up to mining,

which means that extraction of minerals has been provided under an environmental compliance plan. A compliance plan issued by the Department of the Environment establishes condition and guidelines to regulate a company with the purpose of minimizing environmental damages and impacts.

Earlier this year FCD was alerted to what appeared as non-compliance by the mining company who has been operating in the Chiquibul National Park. Government officials have visited the area as well as other Belizean organizations to understand first-hand the activities. FCD has remained attentive in reporting to Government officials and remains with the anticipation that the matter will be fully assessed and addressed by the proper regulatory agencies. The region is the most critical area for the derivation of water resources in Belize and one that shouldn't be further compromised. Already there are other challenges being faced in southern Chiquibul, including gold panning, forest fires and agricultural farming, being addressed through Joint Forces efforts at two conservation posts.



# Landscape Action Plan Developed



The Landscape Action Plan has now been finalized by Zoe Walker of WildTracks. The plan outlines our key stakeholders and necessary steps to strengthen FCD's work at the landscape level.

The Landscape approach recognizes that conservation is a vital component of land management, providing essential ecosystem services and building resilience to climate change, aiming to balance competing demands on land - conservation, forestry, agriculture. It is a shift from single sector-orientated perspectives toward increasingly integrated planning, with principles that emphasize adaptive management, stakeholder involvement, and usually focus on climate change adaptation or ecosystem services (generally water security). In this regard, the plan identified 5 objectives as follows:

To support effective implementation of the Chiquibul-Mountain Pine Ridge-Caracol Complex Sustainable Development Plan (CMCC-SDP); ensure FCD roles and responsibilities in the CMCC landscape are well defined; strengthen collaboration with partners to address threats in the CMCC landscape; improve financial and social sustainability in the landscape, and contribute towards effective monitoring and evaluation at the landscape level.

## Vision:

FCD envisions healthy terrestrial ecosystems that are sustainably managed for Belize and the region.

## Board of Directors

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## Partnership Agreement with ASIPROM

Watershed Management principles clearly rules that whatever occurs upstream, has an effect downstream. For this reason, for more than 8 years FCD has actively engaged Guatemalan communities in addressing water conservation and restoration efforts. The Chiquibul River, starting from Belize's Chiquibul forest, first reaches the Guatemalan communities, and subsequently joins the Mopan River, which then flows into Belize. It is an intricate system where each country depends on how well it does with protecting the shared rivers.

At the local level, the river conservation initiatives have been possible through the efforts of 20 communities from both Belize and Guatemala that came together some 8 years ago to create the Binational Watershed Alliance. Up to date it remains as the only active work of collaboration between Belize and Guatemala in protecting a river system. This alliance has metamorphosed into the registration of independent organizations. In Guatemala, the Association for the Protection and Restoration of the Chiquibul and Mopan



Rivers (ASIPROM) is now an established group. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 2021 FCD and ASIPROM reached a 3-year agreement to continue the collaboration. Mr. Jose Arnulfo Mayen Navas signed on behalf of ASIPROM, while FCD's Executive Director signed as the second party to the agreement.

## MPR Working Group Launched



Another important river is the Macal River which starts in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. This area has been

suffering tremendous pressures since the mid-1990s as a result of the pine bark beetle infestations, forest wildfires and housing development.

Following the recommendations outlined on FCD's Advocacy Strategy of 2019, it has consciously directed efforts in building the capacities of local groups who then can multiply the conservation efforts on the ground. Earlier this year, FCD conducted an informational session with two partners to highlight this concept, namely with the Cayo Watershed Conservation Alliance (CWCA) and Caretakers of Rivers and Environment (CORE). Following this, FCD launched a planning session with Mountain Pine Ridge (MPR) stakeholders on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August at Blancaneaux Lodge with the purpose of establishing a MPR Working Group to advocate for an abundant and fresh supply of water. All those on attendance, which included the Forest Department, community leaders and land owners in the reserve voted for the creation of the Mountain Pine Ridge Working Group.

## First Joint Patrol in Vaca



A joint historic visit with security units was conducted on the Vaca Forest Reserve during the month of August. This was a unique experience given that it never

had been realized before. This activity had been desirable, due to the fact that the reserve is the gateway of various illicit activities, from both internal and external factors.

The reserve is managed by the Belize Forest Department. FCD has a presence in the area through a three-person team under a Letter of Understanding aimed at building the capacities of the Friends of the Vaca Forest Reserve, and help reduce the forest and land degradation through the promotion of alternate best practices among farmers.

Those attending included representatives from the Forest Department, Police Department, Belize Defence Force and FCD personnel. The purpose was to sensitize them regarding the issues occurring in the area and to get first-hand accounts from farmers about incursions. In addition, the trip served to demonstrate to farmers that there are other players behind the management of this protected area. These visits will be done on a quarterly basis.

## Karst Team Receives Training

For more than 2 years, a Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT) funded training activity had not been possible, until now. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, the Karst Management Unit who are responsible for cultural inventory and findings at the Chiquibul Caverns undertook a one week training primarily in cave mapping led by Dr. Holley Moyes. Dr. Holley Moyes is an Associate Professor in Archaeology at the University of California, Merced and the principal investigator of the Las Cuevas Archaeological Reconnaissance. Her interest is in the archaeology of religion, focusing specifically on ritual cave use across time and space.

Dr. Moyes flew down from the United States specifically to train the FCD Unit in the following areas: Thinking about Cave spaces and making decisions about what to map and what not to map; recognizing ancient Maya architecture in caves; pace and compass mapping- compass skills; baseline offset mapping; Station to station mapping; adjusting for different scales of mapping; understanding principles around setting datums and stations; practice sketching and measurement skills- use of cave symbolism and basic information collection for cave reconnaissance.



The Karst Management Unit is cognizant that there is much to learn on the subjects taught, however, it gives them more confidence in cave mapping and opens their wider understanding of the importance of their work.

### FCD Programs

Protection & Enforcement

Community Development

Bi-national Relations

Education & Public Awareness

Karst Management

Research & Monitoring

Landscape Management

Monitoring & Evaluation

Financial Sustainability

E-Bulletin Funded by:



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