

30 Years of Core Conservation

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Minister Habet Visits Chiquibul



With a new Government in place, FCD found it essential to update the new Minister of Sustainable Development, Climate Change and Risk Management, Hon. Orlando Habet. To do this a two-day site visit was

conducted, which took the Minister and his CEO, Dr. Kenrick Williams to observe the habitat of macaws on the Chalillo Lake, hear accounts of progress made in the Chiquibul at Las Cuevas Research Station and get a first-hand view of the landscape challenges and possibilities at the Tower Lookout and at the Bald Hills, in the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve.

For the overview, both the Executive Director of FCD and the Park Manager presented three power-points addressing the threats to biodiversity, the beauty of Chiquibul and key recommendations for a way forward.

Minister Habet committed to support the protection of the Chiquibul Forest and to further investigate the landscape concept as a viable option for the long-term conservation of the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains. He further expressed his desire to have co-management agreements finalized and work closer with co-managers.

Virtual AGM 2021 Conducted

Like most events in 2020, FCD's Annual General Meeting was held virtual. It was a unique experience, but one that was successfully attended by over 80 FCD members and friends.

The 21st AGM was conducted by Mr. Aurelio Sho and virtually hosted by Millennium Studios. Mrs. Susana Vanzie gave the welcome address followed by FCD's President, Mick Fleming with his opening remarks. Reports were given by the Executive Director and the Finance Manager. Mrs. Cynthia Perera, who gave the keynote address expressed the US Department of the Interior's support and their confidence on the work of the FCD. She also described the many facets of their work and how the work of FCD complements their objectives. Awards were then presented to the Best Field Staff, Park Ranger Elroy Reyes Jr. and Data Technician, Wilmer Guerra for their overall performance. Also, BDF Officer, Lt. C Williams was awarded for his leadership and discipline in commanding patrols at Conservation Posts.



The event also had the nomination of Dr. Elma Kay as FCD's Vice President. Dr. Kay is a Belizean scientist and a co-founder of the University of Belize Environmental Research Institute. She is the current Administrative and Science Director (Terrestrial) for the Environmental Research Institute at the University of Belize. The 21st AGM was sponsored by the US Department of the Interior – International Technical Assistance Program.

Panthera Trains Staff



The FCD Research Team started in 2020 to operate wildlife cameras in the Chiquibul and Vaca regions with

the intent of documenting the occurrence of big mammals. This data would support our aim of understanding the status of at least three conservation targets, namely Jaguar, White lipped peccary and Tapir.

Panthera is the leading organization globally that looks after the conservation of wild cats. As a result of a partnership built last year, *Panthera* provided FCD with a set of cameras. These cameras were developed specifically by *Panthera* thus it was important to train our staff on how best to operate them. By the end of the training conducted at Log Cabins on the 22nd of December, the FCD staff learnt the attributes of the cameras, how to install and maintain them in the field. Seven staff including the Vaca Forest Rangers attended the training.

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.

River Conservation Partnerships

More than 8 years ago, FCD started a binational effort to protect the Chiquibul, Mopan and Macal Rivers in Central Belize and southern Peten, Guatemala. This initiative led to the creation of a Binational Watershed Alliance comprised of 19 communities. Leaders from each community, including Mayors and local Alcaldes signed the agreement, which primarily committed them to work together to protect the shared water resources.

Due to community leaders changing after every election, it was found challenging to maintain the Alliance. This led to the creation of a new governance structure comprised of Executive Committees in both Belize and Guatemala, necessarily not political leaders but instead individuals from the communities interested in protecting the rivers. In Guatemala this has led to the creation of ASIPROM (Association for Protection of Chiquibul and Mopan Rivers) and in Belize the CWCA (Cayo Watershed Conservation Alliance). A third organization existing in Cayo is Care for Our Rivers and Environment (CORE).



During the month of December, a meeting was held with CORE and CWCA to understand their status and forge a joint partnership. Similarly, FCD has reached out to ASIPROM. Leaders of the three organizations have expressed their enthusiasm to embark on a new round of work and effort to jointly protect the rivers.

Macaws on Podcast



John Taylor visited Chiquibul some three years ago. From him we learnt about bears and the work ongoing to save bears throughout the world. So, when Paul Lister, spoke of Chris Morgan, who likes bears – we thought there was a connection; and indeed it appeared true.

Chris Morgan visited FCD with the aim of developing a podcast on the emblematic Scarlet Macaw. To do this, himself and Brenda Phillips visited the Chalillo Lake and Las Cuevas Research Station spending three days with the FCD Research team documenting the experiences of the field staff and recording the vocalization of jungle life. Chris also travelled to Red Bank where he met Mr. Florentino Sub. Mr. Sub is a staunch protector of the habitat of macaws in the Eastern Maya Mountains. The podcast will be aired during the month of March.

After his return, Chris informed that Wildlife Media, a nonprofit organization founded by John and Chris are making a donation to FCD on behalf of 'THE WILD with Chris Morgan'/Wildlife Media'. The documentary BEARTREK can be watched on Amazon! <https://www.amazon.com/Beartrek-Chris-Morgan/dp/B078MPF9HL>

Ministers Fly Over Chiquibul



Helicopters are very rare in Belize and taking a flight on helicopter is even that rarer due to the high costs. However, thanks to the courtesies of ASTRUM's Gustavo Giron, FCD was able to conduct an overflight for three key

Ministers, namely Minister Orlando Habet responsible for Protected Areas; Minister Kareem Musa, responsible for the Police Department and Minister Florencio Marin Jr., responsible for Border Security.

The Ministers were flown over all the border conservation posts, Caracol temples, Chiquibul Caverns, Chalillo Lake, Vaca forest and Baldy Beacon. At the Rio Blanco Conservation Post, the helicopter landed and Ministers had an opportunity to hear first-hand accounts from the soldiers and Park Ranger, Douglas Monroy of their observations and challenges faced. Rio Blanco is the first Conservation Post installed in 2008 with the aim of controlling Guatemalan incursions. During a media interview, held after the flight, Minister Habet explained the work of the FCD and the achievements made in recovering denuded areas along the border, as well as the Governments interest in further partnering with FCD for managing other critical areas in the Western Maya Mountains.

Vision:

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

Board of Directors

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Vice-President:

Dr. Elma Kay

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Preparing Staff to Combat Fires

Last year over 22,227 acres were affected by forest fires across the Vaca and Chiquibul ecosystems. The damage to biodiversity was immense although there are no actual figures to demonstrate the losses. Property losses were quantified in the thousands and for FCD it meant that areas being recovered along the western flank of the Chiquibul Forest were lost once more. What remained after the fires were scorched areas and wildlife species killed or scattered.

To prepare for the 2021 dry season, a training on fire prevention and combat took place through the technical assistance of Wildlife Conservation Society (Guatemala). Fire Expert, Mr. Luis Romero led the three-day training with the support of two other technicians from partner Guatemalan organizations. A manual was sent prior to the training and handed out to the ten FCD Rangers. The theory portion was conducted virtually at the Log Cabins Lodge with the financial support of the US Department of the Interior – International Technical Assistance Program.



The other section of the training consists of a 2-day practicum on the use of equipment. This will be led once by WCS Guatemala and retired Forest Officer, Mr. Domingo Ruiz.

Highlighting Border Security



Border security in the Chiquibul was highlighted by the new Government as one that requires close attention.

Given this priority, FCD met with CEO Tapia, BDF General Commander Steven Ortega and Captain Amoa on the 21st of January. During the session Park Manager, Deric Chan updated on the state of affairs in the Chiquibul and Caracol, and the efforts undertaken at the Conservation Posts. The critical zones of south Cebada and northern Rio Blanco were identified as hotspot areas where agricultural farming and cattle ranching is chronic. FCD also noted of the major gaps left, north and south of the Chiquibul where the human footprint expansion has been documented for many years.

As a result of this session, it was accorded of the necessity to continue the technical reviews of joint efforts periodically; establishment of a robust quarterly assessment and planning for improved patrols; formulate a system of consistent patrols in the Vaca and Columbia River, and the urgency to upgrade the Rio Blanco Conservation Post.

FCD Programs

Protection & Enforcement

Community Development

Bi-national Relations

Education & Public Awareness

Karst Management

Research & Monitoring

Landscape Management

Monitoring & Evaluation

Financial Sustainability

Next Step for Vaca and Bald Hills



Two buffering areas to the Chiquibul Forest includes the Vaca Forest Reserve and the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. Understanding the importance of buffer areas as a shield to protect core areas, FCD has been monitoring human activities in both areas for some years; however, FCD has no concrete and secure management

role in these areas. As a result, FCD has been tip-toeing for some years, investing in alternative livelihoods and building partnerships. To do a more effective conservation effort, FCD has realized that a more comprehensive plan and higher profile of management is necessary.

With this in perspective, a planning session was chaired by Mrs. Hannah St. Luce of the National Biodiversity Unit. Attending were the Chief Forest Officer (CFO), Wilber Sabido; Forest Officer, Raul Chun; FCD's Program Director, Esther Sho and Vice President, Dr. Elma Kay. FCD's Executive Director presented several matters, namely Vaca Management, Bald Hills Management, Gates in the Chiquibul and Las Cuevas boundaries. Based on the discussions several resolutions were reached. The CFO agreed to explore an alternative means to an improved management for FCD in the Vaca Forest Reserve; review the most recent MoU for Bald Hills management in the Mountain Pine Ridge and conduct a site visit to assess roads and recently installed gates in the Chiquibul Forest.

Indigenous Stewardship Discussed

Towards the end of 2020, a community survey was conducted in three communities to assess knowledge of villagers in relationship to their forests in southern Belize. The three communities, namely San Jose, San Vicente and Na Luum Ca are found around the Columbia River Forest Reserve. In addition, an aerial recce and ground recce was conducted with community leaders to know more in detail the impacts exerted within the protected area.

On the 20th of February a meeting was held with community leaders and members from the three communities to inform them of the results. The results show that there is a general understanding of the importance of the protected area and of the need for a larger community involvement in protecting the forest. Plantations of cardamom are found in the reserve, grown by Guatemalan farmers. The situation at this time can be addressed effectively before it grows to a major scale. The following recommendations were outlined



as next steps: survey results be shared to community members in each community; leaders to conduct a site visit to Chiquibul; and plan a next ground recce in the Columbia River Forest Reserve.

Save the Date: Chiquibul Symposium II
Restoring Our National Patrimony
March 21, 2021.

Link: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_nK74xTfNT020OMKfYS9Vgw

E-Bulletin Funded by:



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For more information contact:

Friends for Conservation and Development
Chi-Hah Street
San José Succotz
Cayo District
Tel: 823-2657
Email: fcd@btl.net
website: www.fcdbelize.org