

FCD Tracks

The Official E-Bulletin of Friends for Conservation and Development
March 2025, Issue #54

Forging Connections in a Living Landscape

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Exploring the Network of Caves



The FCD Karst Management Unit began its year with much excitement of discovery and learning. During the month of February, with the assistance from the Boundary Fault Karst Project cave experts, a 4-day mapping expedition was conducted aimed at linking the passages of three caves, first located and explored by the Karst Management Unit in 2024. The linking of the caves, located in the northern region of

the Chiquibul National Park has helped provide a visual map, along with proper archaeological documentation, using an established methodology of data sheets (cave site form, feature and artifact forms, and photo logs), which will assist in future archaeological research and interpretation. The caves contain a high concentration of ceramics and other material culture, highlighting the many secrets of the Chiquibul National Park, cloaked under the forest canopy.

The Karst Management Unit has been enhancing their capacity in mapping techniques, including working with sketch plans, cross-sections, and profile mapping. This progress has been made possible through a collaborative partnership with the Institute of Archaeology, that has enabled the Unit to expand its efforts across the Chiquibul National Park.

Belize River Program Rolls

The slogan “Healthy River, Healthy Environment, Healthy People” has spread across the 13 communities targeted under the UNDP GEF6 project, thereby, promoting community participation in the protection of the Belize River. With a terrific and dynamic FCD Environmental Educator, the community outreach campaign has entered its second year. By the end of March 2025, an overall total of 1,430 children, 383 youths and over 266 adults have been sensitized in the Cayo and Belize Districts. These visits have been made possible with the endorsement and support from the Cayo District Education Center. A pre and post survey questionnaire has been filled up by students and educational materials, including folders, pencils, t-shirts and nylon bags have been disseminated.

During the month of March, FCD’s Environmental Educator along with the Biologist also participated in a business fair organized by the Belize Rural High School at Double Head Cabbage. The event was intended to engage students in experiential learning. FCD took the opportunity to provide



valuable insights about FCD’s work while promoting awareness about the importance of protecting the Belize River and its environment.

Board Meets at Las Cuevas



During the month of December, FCD's 25th Annual General Meeting took place which resulted in the nomination of three Board members. They joined the slate of the other 4 actual members.

With the entry of Dr. Dionne Chamberlain, Mr. Hector Guerra and Mr. Greg Maheia it was important to orient them as to the workings of FCD, its foundations and the staff composition. To do this, the Board met on the 1st and 2nd of February at Las Cuevas

Research Station. The station is managed officially by FCD for the Government and People of Belize since 2015. The first segment of the meeting provided an overview of the different programs at FCD ranging from Natural Resource Protection to Cultural Heritage Management and Research to Public Outreach and Landscape Management. The overview was provided by FCD Managers who eloquently described their yearly achievements as well as the challenges faced through attractive and colorful power-point slides. The second part of the session represented the first meeting of the Board. Organizational Matters including governance issues, the Executive Director's evaluation and Strategic Plan were discussed. Conservation and Development matters including an update on the streamlining activities and Ranger Unit strengthening was presented.

FCD welcomes the three new Board members who may serve up to a maximum of 6 years. Meetings of the Board are usually conducted quarterly and occur either online or in person. This particular first session, in person, helped Board members learn not only about the programs but also meet the persons behind the programs as well as the geographical areas where FCD works such as the Chiquibul National Park and Las Cuevas.

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.

Addressing Illegal Wildlife Trade



Even before the inception of FCD's conservation effort in the Chiquibul ecosystem, one of the threats to biodiversity has been the cross border illegal wildlife trade (IWT). This has predominantly been felt with the loss of scarlet macaws at the hands of poachers and primary hardwoods such as mahogany and cedar by Guatemalan illegal loggers.

At the height of illegal logging in 2014, it was estimated that approximately US\$30 million was lost in timber resources. Regarding macaws, the estimate of chick loss was documented

to be at an average of 25 individuals annually. To intervene on these dramatic impacts, FCD along with similar goal-oriented organizations teamed up to create the Illegal Wildlife Trade Binational Taskforce. This body has been maintained over the years and has been vital in sharing of information across borders as well as in devising strategies to counteract the illicit activity.

On the 24th of January the Binational Illegal Wildlife Trade Taskforce met at the Offices of the Organization of American States. The representatives attending included Wildlife Conservation Society (Belize), Asociacion Balam, Foro de Justicia Ambiental, Consejo Nacional De Areas Protegidas and FCD. At the meeting it was decided that a review of the Environmental Security Action Plan was necessary. This plan was developed 4 years ago and contained actions to counteract IWT matters. The aim would be to evaluate what had been achieved both in Belize and Guatemala and to devise a new action plan. At the meeting it was also recommended for the plan to cover more geographical areas and other stakeholders beyond the Chiquibul ecosystem such as the areas south of the Chiquibul National Park where timber is illegally being extracted and crossed into Guatemala uninterrupted.

Sensitizing Farmers

Last year despite an active, aggressive community outreach and education campaign aimed at reducing incidences of wild fires, the results in the Vaca Forest Reserve was not encouraging. Over 285 man days were spent combatting fires and in the end much was lost.

This year, the FCD team has partnered more closely with the Belize Forest Department and the Ministry of Agriculture to let farmers understand the need for a fire permit and sensitize them about the steps and measures to be taken prior to and during the time of using fire.

For the month of March, FCD's Environmental Educator along with the Extension Technician conducted a first round of visits to farmers and residents in and around the Vaca Forest Reserve with the aim of promoting and increasing awareness on suitable methods and practices to prevent forest fires; and to encourage farmers/residents to report any unattended fires. Farmers and residents were also made aware of the total hectare of forest destroyed by last year's fire and observed the area affected through a fire map. Over 35 persons were visited



and sensitized. Forest Department personnel joined on the site visit, demonstrating the cooperation and collaboration between the two institutions to reduce the incidents of wildfires within the protected area. Posters with the topic: "Forest Fires" and the slogan: "Prevent Unattended Fires!" were distributed among the targeted audience. A total of 200 posters, 190 bumper stickers and 50 tefa bags were distributed with support from the Biodiversity Landscape Fund (BLF) project.

Fire Management Taskforce Meet



In 2009 when the Chiquibul National Park Management Plan was developed, fire did not appear as a threat to the forest or biodiversity. However, the fires of 2020 changed that and since then fire is a prominent danger in the areas where FCD operates. Since last year FCD started the development of a wildland fire management plan for areas such as the Vaca Forest Reserve and

the Chiquibul National Park where incidences of fires are prone to occur. FCD also took the opportunity to train a fire boss under the direction of the US Department of Agriculture. Tools and community engagement together with outreach and education were added elements to the plan and serial reconnaissance were employed to document hotspot areas along the western flank of the park which borders with Guatemala.

The plan also promotes the importance of partnerships with Guatemalans. After all, in the end if Guatemalan communities decided to provoke fires all along the boundary of Belize's protected areas, an inferno impossible to contain would occur.

Preventing such scenarios has been the goal of the Binational Fire Management Taskforce. The first meeting of the year took place on the 24th of January at the Organization of American States (OAS). Several institutions attended the session including the Belize Forest Department, Mennonites from Spanish Lookout, FCD and Programme for Belize. From Guatemala those participating included El Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP), Asociacion Balam, Foro de Justicia Ambiental, Municipalities from Melchor de Mencos, Dolores and Poptun.

Vision:

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

Board of Directors

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Mrs. Susana Vanzie

Vice-President:

Dr. Elma Kay

Treasurer:

Mrs. Tanya Santos-Neal

Secretary:

Mrs. Valerie Woods-Smith

Director:

Dr. Dionne Chamberlain Miranda

Director:

Mr. Gregory Maheia

Director:

Mr. Hector Guerra

Cattle Ranching Unabated



With support from the Global Financial Integrity, our staff has been more systematic in documenting and understanding the actual situation and impacts from illegal cattle ranching in the Vaca and Chiquibul ecosystem. The report shows that cattle ranching activity continues occurring unabated and fears are that this activity may be connected to more organized criminal elements. FCD first reported Guatemalan illegal cattle ranching inside Belize's protected areas more than 7 years ago, yet the problem persists and no targeted and consistent approach has been maintained. The illicit activity ran by Guatemalan ranchers inside the protected areas occurs up to 1.5 km inside Belize.

The report indicates that as of August 30, 2024, a total of 1,666.61 acres (674.45 hectares) was being actively encroached for cattle ranching along the western flank of the Vaca Forest Reserve (VFR), which is the buffer protected area north of the Chiquibul National Park. Relative to the total 2023 deforestation loss in the VFR, this figure represents approximately 18% of the entire cleared forest.

In the Chiquibul ecosystem, this illicit practice has intensified, with cattle herds observed grazing in areas such as Valentin Camp in the Caracol Archaeological Reserve (CAR), the southern flank

of the Caballo Conservation Post (CP) and the northern flank of the Rio Blanco CP. By 2024, approximately 1,894.36 acres (766.62 hectares) were occupied as active pasturelands. These activities are generally linked to Guatemalan communities located near the Chiquibul ecosystem, many of whom lack sufficient land for their livestock and are thus expanding into Belize. The situation is exacerbated by newly constructed roads on the Guatemalan side, believed to have been built with heavy machinery by affluent interests, facilitating easier access for ranchers.

Meeting with Mennonites



Cooma Cairn Community is located in the Cayo District, flanked with the northern boundary line of the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. The temperatures at Cooma Cairn are always cool and even too cold for the typical Belizean. This community is primarily occupied by Mennonites who use their private lands as weekend retreats.

FCD's interest to partner with the Mennonite community is due to the fact that from these high elevated areas, there are four sub-watersheds that furnish water to the lower valleys, small communities and towns. Keeping the water fresh and plentiful is critical and the involvement of stakeholders such as the Mennonite community is essential. Thankfully, the community leaders have expressed their commitment to protecting the headwaters and taking precautions to keep the Cooma Cairn environment safe from forest fires, garbage and other pollutants.

On the 28th of February a meeting was held with Cooma Cairn community leaders, where FCD sought to get their support for water quality testing. At the meeting, FCD presented results of water quality analysis conducted in the Chiquibul and the Mountain Pine Ridge but emphasized the importance of establishing a baseline on the private lands in order to have a better understanding of the landscape conditions. The leaders agreed of the importance and expressed their support for initiating such research with adequate planning and coordination.

FCD Programs

Protection &
EnforcementCommunity
DevelopmentBi-national
RelationsEducation
& Public
AwarenessKarst
ManagementResearch &
MonitoringLandscape
ManagementMonitoring &
EvaluationFinancial
Sustainability

NBio Visits FCD



The National Biodiversity Office (NBio) is our primary tier one agency to report to in terms of park management. Therefore, we were pleased to host the NBio Director Mr. Saul Cruz and his other staff during the month of February at the FCD office. The opportunity was taken to appraise them of the 2023-2024 Management Plan implementation assessment, Annual Operations Plan 2024-2025, Management Plan challenges, Patrol Reporting, Data Sharing Agreement and park signage among other matters.

Regarding the 2023-2024 performance, NBio wrote the following. "It is encouraging to note that a total of 55% of activities have varying degrees of implementation; 37% of the implemented actions are either fully executed or are continuous activities and 18% being implemented showing FCD's commitment to achieving its annual goals and broader conservation goals. The office applauds FCD for its unwavering commitment to the protection of the Chiquibul National Park and reaffirms its commitment to support the FCD in achieving the share goal of biodiversity protection and management." The office further noted that for the 2024-2025 Annual Operational Plan presented, it "reaffirms its commitment to collaborating with the FCD in the management of the Chiquibul National Park."

From FCD's position, it is refreshing to see the importance given by NBio of a real partnership and collaboration that is necessary within the framework of an ongoing co-management agreement and we stand ready to maintain the due diligence required from such a partnership.

Vaca Plateau Community Development Plan

The Community Development Plan aimed at strengthening Climate Resilience was developed through a participatory approach with farmers from the Vaca plateau. Joining on the session were representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Belize Botanical Garden and Wildlife Conservation Society. The document which took several months to complete reflects the priorities of the community in terms of necessary actions and investments that can help them adapt to the impacts of climate change. The priorities are designed to promote sustainable development, increase their social resilience and the sustainable use of their natural resources, whilst contributing to the creation of more effective conditions for the conservation of biodiversity in the Vaca plateau.

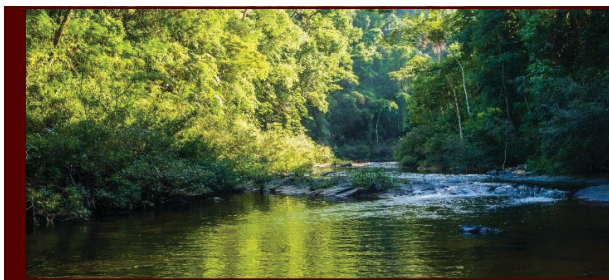
The development plan is a practical document which identifies areas for investment in aid. Known as key actions, these recommendations once implemented will reduce more than one problem caused by climate change. The key actions include: improvement in agriculture practices, prevention and



management of forest fires, improved sylvo-pastoral methods, water management, reforestation and forest restoration, multi-purpose building, alternative livelihoods, road access improvement and change in working schedules for farmers.

Armed with this document, FCD has a clearer roadmap for strengthening community assistance in the Vaca plateau and has identified at least 8 farmers as beneficiaries for such investments.

Tracking and Evaluating First Quarter



One of the most important tasks of the FCD Western Maya Mountains Landscape Manager is to track the advancement and implementation of FCD's Program Annual Operational Plan. FCD begins its calendar year in November, therefore by the end of January FCD was already ending its first quarter. Review

of tasks accomplished is done internally through a collective face to face technical sessions with Program Managers.

By the end of the quarter, it was found out that 72% of the 133 management actions were in progress: 31% successfully implemented, 18% requiring further effort, and 7% in the planning phase. Meanwhile, 16% remained at the planning stage, with over a quarter needing more coordination to start off.

The assessment tool is based on the methodology prescribed by the National Biodiversity Office and serves as a thermometer to gauge Annual Operational Plan implementation. Program Managers are the key pillars for progressively meeting the necessary outputs, while the multiple donors and supporters are the main institutions providing the financial inputs that enables the implementation of the actions.

E-Bulletin Funded by:

NTOTA
Nature Trust of The Americas, Inc

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