

FCD Tracks

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Promoting Core Conservation

Photo by Tony Rath

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Bald Hills Under Threat



The Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve (MPFR) was first declared a protected area in 1944. By 1977, the reserve was comprised of 127,203 acres. The latest known gazette, SI 43 of 2012 puts the acreage of MPFR at 106,457.60 acres. The Bald Hills, located on the eastern edge, is characterized by few pine trees, short grass/sedge dominated cover over undulating slopes.

The Bald Hills occupies a ridge that defines the upper boundary of the headwaters for four river systems. The eastern and north-eastern portion of the Bald Hills drains into the Sibun River and Cave's Branch, respectively. The northern side drains into Roaring River and the southern side is part of the Macal River Watershed, both river systems being tributaries of the Greater Belize River. Given that this area composes the upper boundary of four watersheds, it is an important contributor to rainwater discharge and potentially sediment transport to these river systems. For this reason, and given the threats of further de-reservation and land subdivision of the sensitive ecosystem on the Bald Hills, FCD has presented to the Government of Belize a concept for reclassifying the category of the Bald Hills to a Natural Monument.

The concept note presented to the CEO responsible for protected areas, Dr. Percival Cho, once approved would secure in posterity this nationally significant natural feature and provide opportunities for interpretation, research and public appreciation.

Binational Efforts Report Card

Since 2007 when FCD started co-managing the Chiquibul National Park, it became obvious that a partnership with Guatemalan organizations would be an important strategy. This led to the first bi-national agreement reached between four institutions. Since then FCD has maintained a strong binational element on all its programs, ranging from education and monitoring to enforcement and fundraising.

In order to describe the successes and state of affairs, FCD and Asociacion Balam hosted a Chiquibul-Maya Mountain Binational Forum on the 24th of November, 2017 with the financial support of the British High Commission Office in Belize. During this event, attended by 72 delegates, both FCD and Balam's Executive Director, Mr. Rafael Manzanero and Mr. Bayron Castellanos reported that several cross-border threats have been contained such as xate extraction and illegal logging, and that working with local communities in Guatemala on alternative sustainable livelihood programs have significantly helped reduce incursions. However, more



effort is needed, therefore both institutions outlined 13 recommendations which subsequently have been presented to authorities from both Belize and Guatemala. At this event, British High Commissioner to Belize, Mr. Peter Hughes and Ambassador David Gibson were named FCD Champions due to their support in helping mobilize, guide and mentor FCD's binational efforts over the years.

Joint Security Strategy



In 2013, xate extraction, illegal logging, poaching, looting, agricultural farming, and gold panning were intensively taking place in the jungles of the Chiquibul, at the hands of Guatemalan local people. Although some positive strides were documented, largely containment of these diverse threats was difficult. This led to the development of a binational environmental security strategy that would create new platforms of actions across borders. The US

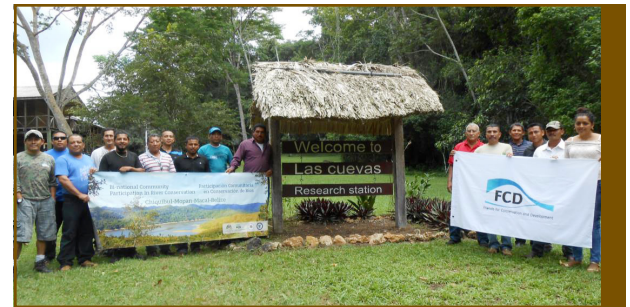
Department of the Interior was instrumental on this endeavour.

In recent times, however, there has been an evolving trend of illicit activities along the western flank of the Chiquibul Forest, and this requires new strategies. As a result, a workshop to review the binational security action plan was conducted on the 29th of November, 2017 at Log Cabins. Attending the workshop were representatives from the Belize Defence Force, Police Department, Forest Department and FCD, while from Guatemala, a team comprised of Asociacion Balam, Foro de Justicia Ambiental and Guatemala Futura joined. Both teams reported on the actions undertaken, results obtained and key areas for future collaboration. Include with the insights collected, FCD and Balam, identified strategic components, particularly those that addresses the new trends of gold panning and cattle ranching, as well as expanding the joint efforts beyond the Chiquibul Forest to the Vaca and Columbia River Forest Reserves.

Planning for River Conservation

The Greater Belize Watershed is comprised of four main rivers; these are the Chiquibul, Mopan, Macal and Belize. Approximately one third of the watershed occurs in Guatemala with the Chiquibul and Mopan Rivers providing water to various communities in Southern Peten, Guatemala.

Since 2010, FCD started working with nine Guatemalan communities located along the Chiquibul and Mopan Rivers, while another ten joined from Belize to form the binational watershed alliance. The work of the alliance primarily includes public outreach, reforestation and clean up campaigns at the community level. Over the last seven years, the community involvement has grown significantly to a point where each of the communities annually undertakes several activities on their own to protect their rivers. But how are these results presented and familiarized among members? To do this, FCD convenes annually all the members. This time on the 4th and 5th of November, 2017 members presented their achievements and planned for 2018 at Las Cuevas Research Station.



Although it is difficult to validate the results of the community involvement in river conservation, we are confident that the local people from the 19 communities are more conscious of the importance of river conservation; are aware of the methods to protect the rivers and are engaged with their community leaders in maintaining a cleaner river. FCD reaffirmed its support to the binational alliance and has sought to support the activities outlined during the two-day workshop.

FCD Trains Rangers



The job of a ranger is to operate safely and effectively in the jungles of Chiquibul, aimed at protecting the wild

animals and plants. Unlike other protected areas in Belize, FCD takes special attention in safeguarding species from a diverse set of threats. On a daily basis, the work of an FCD ranger is both demanding and challenging, and to prepare staff for the job, a basic first aid and rescue training is provided.

During this period, four new park rangers took the rigorous training. This was implemented by Chief Ranger Wendy Garcia, who is an FCD Instructor, specializing on First Aid and Rescue. The contents of the training included: Physical, Navigation, First Aid, Patrolling and Weapon Handling. By the end of the training, the new field staff felt better prepared for operating in the jungle and FCD certified them successfully to join the cohort of rangers in the Chiquibul National Park.

Bike Adventure Reaches Chiquibul



FCD first made contact with Paul Lester, Founder and CEO of The European Nature Trust (TENT) some 4 years ago. This time around, Paul came to Belize with a dozen bikers on its quest to fundraise for FCD. You may wonder how? Well, after getting a donation of 16 bicycles from a TENT supporter, and having them moved to the

Mountain Equestrian Trail under the watch of Jim Bevis, Paul on the other hand conducted a marketing drive to get bikers from Europe and the U.S to do a biking experience through the wild lands of Belize. This trip took bikers to various areas starting from the northern region of Belize and ending at Las Cuevas Research Station.

The unique event; however, had one condition. All the bikers had to raise funds for FCD's tourism development program at Las Cuevas. In appreciation of this venture, FCD's Executive Director greeted the bikers and explained the FCD work and the challenges faced. Participants were amazed at the greenery landscape of the Chiquibul Forest, as well as the beauty that Belize as a country has to offer. This Bike Belize experience is the first one of its type but certainly not the last one. Before the end of the year, we anticipate having another two bike activities.

Binational Youth Exchange

In 1989, the Youth Environmental Action Group (YEAG) was formed. This eventually became the Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD) by 1999. However, the youth arm did not disappear, and instead has moved forward with the key motive of building a conservation ethic and love for the land among young people.

With the technology of today and in our changing times, keeping a youth movement is not as easy as in the 80's. In those times, camping and outdoors was the most exciting activity that one could do; and YEAG capitalized on this. Our annual activities in the 80's and into the 90's consisted of planting trees, conducting clean up campaigns, hiking to the Vaca and Chiquibul Forests, doing amateur photography and visiting schools.

In the spirit of reviving this concept and promoting it in Peten, Guatemala, on the month of December a binational youth group exchange was held with FCD youth members and youth invited from Guatemalan communities.



Presentations and guided tours to various locations at the Las Cuevas Research Station were made and FCD youth reported on their work. By the end of the session, the Executive body of the FCD youth group was formalized and the Guatemalan youth were compelled to develop their own youth group. FCD on the other hand expressed its desire and support to organize the youth group in Melchor de Mencos and promote more exchange visits.

Forecastle Foundation Support



For more than a year, FCD remained without a tractor due to repair costs. This created multiple problems on the ground for FCD and the security agencies that needed to be mobilized into the remote, southern Chiquibul, where human incursions are high. Insertion and extraction of enforcement personnel occurs every 2 weeks and every time this becomes an arduous task given that no transportation has been available. This changed earlier this year when Forecastle Foundation (FF), based in Kentucky funded the repairs of the tractor, *Jumping Viper*. The FF mission

is to protect and connect the world's natural awesome by shining a light on biodiversity hotspots - the richest reservoirs of life. FF makes an impact by partnering with, and supporting like-minded organizations. At this time, the Foundation works with five organizations, including the Kentucky Natural Lands Trust, The Nature Conservancy and FCD.

Forecastle Foundation raises funds through the Forecastle Foundation Festival and other avenues, which then makes its finances available to its few selected partner organizations. Since our engagement with FF, they have helped us in vehicle maintenance. Their most recent assistance gave us the ability to repair the John Deere tractor that was down for many months. Now that the tractor is up and running, it has been assigned to an FCD Driver/Ranger to keep this well maintained and is helping mobilize FCD Rangers into the Ceibo Chico Conservation Post and other remote areas of the Chiquibul jungle. FCD remains grateful to the Forecastle Foundation for this support.

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18th AGM Celebrated



Before the end of every year, FCD conducts its Annual General Meeting. This is a time to report to all FCD members and to elect Board members. This time around the 18th AGM took place at the San Ignacio Hotel and Resort on the 3rd of December, 2017. After weeks of preparations we culminated with a full house of over 70 enthusiastic young and adult FCD members!!

Park Manager, Mr. Derric Chan, served as the Facilitator with special guest, Minister of Fisheries, Forestry, Environment and Sustainable Development, Dr. Omar

Figuroa giving the main remarks. He reiterated his support to FCD and informed that although a new co-management framework is being developed, FCD can be assured that the partnership will continue. He praised the work of FCD, noting that safeguarding the Chiquibul ecosystem is essential to the integrity of the interior protected areas. The annual report was given by FCD's Executive Director, Rafael Manzanero, while the financial report was given by FCD's Finance Manager, Miss Luceli Itza.

During this event, two new Board members were selected, namely photographer, Mr. Tony Rath and Ambassador, Mr. David Gibson. FCD gave thankful awards to the departing board members, Dr. Filiberto Penados and Major Oscar Mira (Retired). Awards were also given to staff members who excelled this year, namely Miss Luceli Itza, Mr. Derric Chan, Mrs. Felipa Morales, Mr. Carlos Cocom and Mr. Marco Diaz.

Annual Reports were made available to members and appreciations were made to BRC Printing Company and San Ignacio Hotel and Resort for their sponsorship of this year's AGM.

Discovering Chiquibul

The vastness of the Chiquibul Forest is impressive, but more impressive is what appears to be hidden under its forest canopy. Archaeologist, Dr. Anabel Ford has used LIDAR to get semblances of ancient Maya monuments and settlements from the region of Caracol and further north. This leaves the southern part of Chiquibul with more intrigue and many unknowns.

The work of the Karst Management Unit (KMU) has been centered at monitoring and documenting the Chiquibul Cave System. To do this the region of the cave system has been compartmentalized into sections. The team has been reporting that illegal activities have lessened, with encroachments becoming more limited to the western border. Given this situation, the KMU has had more time to investigate several karstic features across the limestone landscape. With the data coming



in, FCD has seen it critical to identify professionals who can analyse and interpret the findings. If you know any specialist who can assist us, please contact us at FCD.

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