

Newlyweds Explore Chiquibul

To many people the Chiquibul Forest represents a forest under siege; however, the Chiquibul due to its extensive area has more to offer to the local and international public with its rich wildlife, pristine jungles and untouched biological diversity.

Eco-Quest Expedition, whose specialty is to share the wilderness experiences of the Chiquibul Forest, has worked in partnership with several tour operators to share this opportunity and expose the beauty of this forest.

In May we worked for the second year with a French Tour Operator, Wildlife Travel Tours Belize. Initially, we were amazed that this newlywed couple would be more interested in spending 11 days and 10 nights in the Chiquibul, than relaxing on the beach,

at a five star hotel. Instead, their romantic getaway was a jungle expedition, which included rigorous hiking through the Chiquibul - visiting the largest cave system in Central America, The Chiquibul Cave System and camping at the Natural Arch with an early start for bird watching. The couple camped at the Bald Hills recreation area, which offered spectacular views of the Maya Mountains and star gazing at night. They canoed through the Upper Macal River and Raspaculo Branch; and enjoyed the view of scarlet macaws flying freely over the pristine jungle. They also watched the Baird Tapir roaming along the river banks.

By the end of the trip, Mr. and Mrs. Dessinger commented "Thank you (FCD) for these beautiful days in Belize". We hope that wherever they are



– their remembrances of the Chiquibul forest remains alive and have made them stringer believers on protection of planet earth.

If you are ready to hike and climb the Chiquibul contact us at ecoquestexpeditions@yahoo.com

Distant Rio Blanco C.P.



The Rio Blanco Conservation Post is the remotest conservation base located in the Chiquibul National

Park, nearby the western border. The post was inaugurated in March 2008, since then the Belize Defence Force and the Special Patrol Unit of the Police Department have maintained a presence in order to prevent the further expansion of the agricultural frontier inside the park. During the month of September a site visit was made in order to assess the status of the building and to identify areas for improvement of the structure. The Rio Blanco C.P is certainly in need of repairs and upgrade. We are thankful

to the personnel who maintain vigilance and who have helped curb the encroachments. The trekking to this base is rugged and marked with high mountains.

This part of the Chiquibul forest is highly pristine and just a look across the border into Guatemala demonstrates the pattern that can occur once this area is unregulated. FCD is pledging to upgrade the building and make the site more functional for the conservation of this important part of the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains.

Be Part of Our Effort

For many Belizeans, FCD appears as a new organization based in the Cayo District, but in reality FCD's movement on environmental conservation started since 1989. Since then we have had a membership program. The purpose of the membership as described in our recent membership handbook is in order for people of all different walks of life to find a channel whereby they can support conservation issues important for the appropriate development of the country and thus they can become an important voice for defending particular positions. An organization with members can have more power, since numbers can play a crucial role in reaching or



curving decisions. From a member's viewpoint, joining an organization provides an avenue for doing conservation action and a channel for voicing opinions.

Doing conservation action and voicing opinions is now more than ever important to us as we see the scale of the problems faced in the protected areas nationwide. At FCD we live these experiences everyday and we have reached to the conclusion that more Belizeans and foreign supporters are needed to spread our words of caution, our phrases of desperation and our discourse of challenges faced. We are troubled at the magnitude of the environmental problems and you as a student, head of family, government employee, private sector worker or laborer who have heard or read about the challenges and our work – we welcome you to support us. You can do that by becoming one of our members.

For more information contact:

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Mitigating Illegal Logging



A recent paper produced by the World Bank titled Justice for Forests notes that every two seconds, across the world, an area of forest the size of a football field is clear cut by illegal loggers. In some countries, up to 90% of all logging is illegal. Belize also suffers from illegal logging though it is not clear how much forest

is lost annually as a result of this practice. In the case of Chiquibul, FCD has observed the damage that this causes, and the complexity of the matter due to the fact that this is caused by Guatemalan nationals.

The FAO/FLEGT Program has been instrumental in helping FCD mitigate the impacts of illegal logging for the last two years and even though there have been major milestones achieved, the problem still continues, necessitating further efforts in the Chiquibul forest. Thanks to the FAO/FLEGT supported project we have enabled to put boots on the ground, generated better knowledge about the area, started up support systems in Guatemala, generated awareness about the present problem and improved our human capabilities to deal with this problem. For FCD, illegal logging is of serious concern and are requesting from the Forest Department to obtain international support through the CITES Secretariat in order to investigate the actual situation. To learn more on CITES go to www.cites.org

Cebada Cave In Peril

The Chiquibul Cave System consists of four sets of caverns. The third in the series is named Cebada. Cebada is found nearby the western border – an area that has been rarely visited due to its remoteness.

In August, with financial assistance from Rufford Foundation, an expedition was undertaken to learn more about the conditions of this Cave. Three major threats were identified, namely, illegal logging, agricultural encroachments and poaching. Illegal logging was observed to be occurring at a high intensity around the



area. The most severe threat for maintaining the ecological and cultural integrity of Cebada Cave is the agricultural encroachment. Farm clearings are recorded to be more than 15 hectares in size, and at least one is just 50 meters away from the main cave entrance.

These findings suggest that effective management measures need to be urgently undertaken in order to safeguard the ecological and cultural integrity of the Cebada Cave. At this time FCD is seeking funds to institute a full-fledged ranger unit to deal with the management of this cave system. If you learn of any possibility to fundraise for this program, please inform us at fcd@btl.net

Villagers Protect Macal & Mopan Rivers

Efforts to protect and improve the conditions of the Macal and Mopan Rivers in the communities of Cristo Rey and Calla Creek are being made possible through the financial assistance of RARE. In order for people to understand the importance of reforestation, FCD is taking a proactive approach by involving the people to become more conscious and better equipped with knowledge on how to restore and protect river bank areas in their communities that are affected or polluted.

In June, a reforestation workshop was held in the village of Cristo Rey. Over 40 enthusiastic villagers from Calla Creek and Cristo Rey took part in this fruitful endeavor. At the end of the workshop, the participants had a

better understanding of what reforestation and deforestation is. They also learnt about the different factors contributing to deforestation and the benefits that they can reap as a result of reforestation. To compliment this workshop a reforestation brochure was developed and distributed amongst the participants and other villagers from these two communities. Other activities such as clean up campaigns, sign placing and installation of drums in strategic areas on the village are also ongoing to promote this initiative. It is highly anticipated that with the vast knowledge acquired by the participants through this workshop, and other ongoing conservation initiatives, the affected and deforested areas in their communities will be restored and improved. FCD is grateful to the villagers that have attended

these activities and encourages everyone to plant trees. It is good for all of us.



Employee of the Quarter

Michael Burton joined FCD as the Chief Ranger (Archaeology) and was designated to head the protection of the Chiquibul Cave System (CCS). Burton has an Associate Degree in Environmental Science and comes from the village of Bullet Tree. Since joining FCD, Michael Burton has demonstrated a high level of seriousness on the job and has demonstrated competence in leading a team. As a Chief Ranger, Michael is responsible

for planning, implementing and reporting patrol activities on a biweekly basis. The task of managing the CCS has been difficult for him particularly as he counts with limited resources. But FCD is committed together with the Institute of Archaeology in protecting this great cultural heritage, and we are confident that Michael will continue being at the forefront of this task. Congratulations Michael for a job well done!!!



Wildlife Bits Scarlet Macaw

The Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao cyanoptera*) is one of the largest birds and the largest of the parrots in Belize. This specie is the most widely distributed (Mexico to Brazil) of the 17 existing macaw species. In Belize its numbers is estimated to be fewer than 200 individuals; whilst it was once thought to occur over much of the central forested areas of Belize. This magnificent bird is said to be confined to the Chiquibul/Maya Mountains; this lush forested area is home to this beautiful bird.

The diet of Scarlet Macaws is usually composed of seed, fruits, flowers and plant shoots. In Belize, Scarlet Macaws feed



on 15 different plant species. These fruits, seeds and flowers are abundant in the flood plains of the Macal and Raspaculo Branch in the Chiquibul forest.

In Belize, the macaw breeding season is from February to September. These birds live between 40 – 50 years in the wild, reaching sexual maturity at 4 – 8 years. The macaws lay one to four eggs in a tree cavity which average

to 20 m high. Eggs hatch after 22 days; after hatching the chicks fledge after approximately 75 days. During the period when chicks are nesting, they are at a higher risk of being stolen or killed by macaw poachers. The scarlet macaw is endangered throughout its range and is listed in the IUCN Red List, due to habitat modification and the pet trade.

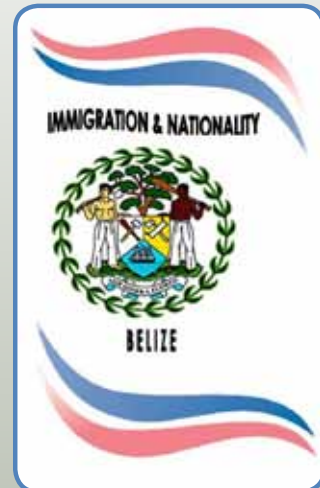
Over the last four year FCD has been monitoring the nesting activity of the species in the Chiquibul forest primarily in the areas of the flood plains of the Macal River and Raspaculo Branch. FCD has an enthusiastic scarlet macaw monitoring program led by Ranger Larry Santos Jr. to safeguard the survival of this diminishing wildlife. This year the data collected indicates that several chicks were able to fly wild and free thanks to the support provided by ORVIS and PACT.

Partner's Spotlight Department of Immigration

Over the years that FCD has been managing the Chiquibul National Park, we have come about many Guatemalan nationals that cross the western border seeking to pillage the natural and cultural resources of Belize. As they do so, they enter illegally into Belize, and this is where the Department of Immigration becomes involved. Illegal entry into Belize is a crime.

FCD has selected the Department of Immigration as our Partners Spotlight due to their efficiency and strong support they have provided us in processing illegal

poachers, miners and loggers who have been detained in the Chiquibul Forest. We particularly commend the work of the Department of Immigration personnel located at the Benque Viejo Western Border who have expeditiously and on every occasion appeared at the San Ignacio Police Station to press charges of illegal entry to those caught conducting environmentally crime. This action, we are certain, discourages marauders, thereby helping protect the country's wealth. We appreciate their efficacy and dedication in upholding Belize's laws and regulations.



Farmers Protect Vaca

FCD believes that a healthy environment is critical for the survival of humankind. A healthy environment means having forested areas, but this has not been the case for the Vaca Forest Reserve. This motivated FCD to work with the newly formed Friends of Vaca Forest Reserve in areas of mixed farming and reforestation.

A mixed farm consists of a system where more than one crop is cultivated in the same parcel of land at the same time. This mixed cropping system, provide farmers with multiple crops for home and market use, short, medium and long term crops, food and resources, innovative

product and makes use of natural fertility cycles. Such a practice is now ongoing in the Vaca with nine farmers. In addition to the traditional cultivation of grains, farmers have incorporated vegetables, coco yam, plantain and pineapple as well as the rearing of local chicken and pigs.

This strategic action is complemented with the setting of a nursery which is geared to reforest the denuded lands in the Vaca Forest Reserve. Farmers working inside and near the reserve were the deforesters of this land and now it is them who are part of the solution by preparing to reforest Vaca once more. With the help of the Forest Department, farmers feel confident that the



new approach will make them continue operating in the reserve, though under strict guidelines and open a new frontier of management and utilization of a forest reserve for the long term maintenance of this protected area.

Las Cuevas under New Management

to the inner depths of our forest and by no one other than Chapal." Nicodemus "Chapal" Bol gave much of his life to the development of Las Cuevas Research Station and with his passing away, there remained concerns about the future of Las Cuevas. For FCD it was clear that the maintenance of Chapal's vision was imperative to continue and would support it in any way regardless of who would remain in the area.

On the 4th of July, a site visit was made to Las Cuevas Research Station (LCRS) by the Hon Senator and Minister for Forestry, Fisheries and Sustainable Development along with the Chief Forest Officer and the Fisheries Administrator.

On such an occasion the Minister granted FCD a letter providing the legal mandate to assume administration and management of the LCRS. Thus began a new program for FCD and a challenge in keeping up with the vision and hard work developed by Chapal over the years. The mission and purpose of Las Cuevas is to document and make known the biodiversity of the Maya Forest and contribute practical knowledge to the sustainable development and conservation of the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains Key Biodiversity Area. To do this the station caters for universities and institutions who wish to conduct research. To learn more about what Las Cuevas offers contact fcd.lcrs@gmail.com



In March, 2012 the Hon. Senator Lisel Alamilla wrote, "Las Cuevas has a special place in my heart. It was the first place where I was introduced

Bi-National Work Continues

In August, a new project titled, Enabling long term sustenance of Cooperation In the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains was began with the financial assistance of the British Embassy. The purpose of the project is to mobilize support structures in Guatemala and enable the development of joint conservation programs. By the end of the project FCD expects to formalize a coalition of conservation organizations that support the protection of the Chiquibul forest; institute a sister community program between Belize and Guatemala; three sustainable livelihood projects are conducted in hotspot communities; and the Belize Watershed Alliance is strengthened.



This project has a strong bi-national component on all of its various activities. This is an important pillar of FCD's work that has been ongoing for the last three years with the aim of building programs of cooperation among Guatemalan institutions, community leaders and municipal alcaldes that care for the protection of the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains and the sustainable development of the inhabitants that depend on these ecosystems. We are extremely grateful to the British Embassy for the confidence and the opportunity to continue the bi-national work.

Second Joint Forces Unit Activated

protected areas with the purpose of improving environmental enforcement. Since then FCD mobilized its resources and efforts to create the Ceibo Chico Conservation Post in South Chiquibul and activate the second joint forces unit. The launching of this conservation post took place in March and was made possible through the support of various institutions, including the Forest Department, Belize Defence Force and the Police Department. Financial support was provided by the Protected Areas Conservation Trust and the FAO/FLEGT Program. The guest speaker for the event was the Minister for Forestry, Fisheries

and Sustainable Development, Hon Senator Lisel Alamilla.

To date the conservation post is indeed serving the purpose of protecting the biodiversity and ecosystems located in South Chiquibul. From this outpost FCD rangers together with BDF and Police personnel are day to day engaged in monitoring and enforcing regulations that provide for the protection of wild animals and plants of the Chiquibul National Park. Our kudos goes to all the enforcement personnel that are now active in that distant location ensuring that this beautiful country remains a jewel.



In November of 2011, Cabinet endorsed the creation of other conservation posts in three

Visit the Bald Hills

The Bald Hills is a spectacular region of the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve, unknown to most Belizeans. For FCD this is a special place since the entire Chiquibul forest can be observed from this high point, and even Victoria Peak can be seen standing out in the horizon. The area carries the name Bald Hills since the temperatures there are extreme and trees grow short and the grass take over most of the area. The FCD Youth members took time out in August to visit

the area. They were astounded at the site, and did some cool work. FCD together with Pine Lumber Company have three buildings that are managed and being prepared for visitors who wish to admire the beauty of western Belize. If you find yourselves thinking where to spend some holidays in a cool, windy environment and in solitude – we can bet that this is the area. Call us at 823-2657 to make any reservations or write to ecoquestexpeditions.org

