



Promoting Core Conservation

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## Local Partnership in Vaca Plateau



For a farmer, land is the most precious asset he can have. In 2003, approximately 11,625 acres were excised to provide agriculture land to farmers who had settled in the Vaca Forest Reserve. One of those farmers who benefitted was Mr. Juan Cruz. Today, Juan centers his effort in cattle ranching. With capacity building and training sessions provided by FCD and GIZ, he is one of the progressive members of the Friends of the Vaca Forest Reserve who is

involved in sustainable use of the land, and diversifying his farming practices into Agro-tourism.

During the month of September, FCD signed an agreement with him to develop and institute a Farm Field school on his land, whose purpose will be to further promote sustainable land use practices among farmers who are located inside or nearby the reserve. The location of the farm school is along the boundary of the reserve, thus standing as a sentinel in the midst of the surrounding mountains.

With support from the Global Environmental Facility/ Small Grants Programme, agro-ecological and agro-forestry practices were begun with farmers over 6 years ago. With added funds from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the British High Commission a full-fledged Bio-cultural Landscape Program based on sustainable practices is a sound model evolving in the Vaca plateau. The Farm School will serve as the central hub to enhance stewardship among farmers and propel a model of community participation in protected area conservation.

## Chalillo (Private) C.P Activated

The Chiquibul Forest is surrounded by several other protected areas including the Vaca Forest Reserve, Columbia River Forest Reserve and Mountain Pine Ridge (MPR) Forest Reserve. With the promotion of tourism activities in the MPR starting off this year with the announcement of the construction of a highway from San Ignacio to the Caracol Maya temples, we are certain that human induced threats such as forest fires, poaching and garbage will pose imminent dangers to the Chiquibul biodiversity. Practically, tourism has the potential of putting a myriad of hazards at the doorsteps of the Chiquibul frontier. Bearing this in mind, FCD has taken a proactive stance in engaging private partnerships who operate nearby the boundaries of the Chiquibul, thereby enabling a Buffer Protection Program with key stakeholders.

A private/NGO partnership, supported by the Ministry responsible for Protected Areas, was reached in August with the Belize Electric Company Limited (BECOL). The



agreement provides for FCD to man the Chalillo (Private) Conservation Post located at the Chalillo Lake with the purpose of monitoring and protecting the Chalillo Reservoir ecosystem. The Conservation Post is located on an area which is a "property" under a special agreement between BECOL and the Government of Belize in the Mountain Pine Ridge.

## Macaw Season 2018 Closes



Another year has come and gone in the caring of the scarlet macaw population in the Chiquibul. Annually, for seven months, FCD's Research Unit indulges in patrolling and monitoring the nesting site of these magnificent birds, that have become the emblematic species and symbols of this majestic forest.

A total of 11 active scarlet macaw nests were identified for the 2018 breeding season. Of these nests only 8 were systematically

monitored as the other cavities were located on snags, not fit for climbing and two nests had an Africanized bee hive about 5 feet above the cavity entrance. Monitored breeding pairs incubated a total of 23 eggs of which 13 hatched. Concentrated efforts, with volunteers and rangers securing the area, led to a zero poaching of macaws; however, it became clear that poachers kept aggressively targeting other areas and reports of birds being trafficked in Guatemala were confirmed.

Poaching is a major threat to the survival of Scarlet Macaws in Belize, as it can reduce nest survival below 0.55, the level needed to sustain a population. In 2011, nest poaching rates were 89%, but intensive management and conservation strategies were implemented reducing nest poaching to an average of 35% from 2012 to 2015 and achieved 0% of monitored scarlet macaw nests poached from 2015 to 2018. However, macaws have still been trafficked into Guatemala and until now it is not certain from which specific region they are being extracted from.

## Xate Research Results are In

For the third time since 2012, FCD's research team have concluded a research to assess the stock populations of chamaedorea in the Chiquibul Forest. The data collected served to do a comparative analysis for the periods 2012 to 2018. The genus, Chamaedorea (locally referred to as *xate*) is the largest palm genus in Central America with an estimated 75% of the species being threatened. In Belize, there are 12 reported species, including the three most favored species in the floral industry (*Chamaedorea elegans*, *C. ernesti-augustii* and *C. oblongata*) and harvested from the forests of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. The latter two species are known to be of high relative abundance in the Chiquibul Forest. Annual xate exports from Guatemala are estimated at USD 4 million, representing an important income source for many Guatemalan communities in the Department of Petén. Illegal xate harvesting in the Chiquibul Forest has been reported since the early 1970's but peaked in 2005-2010.

The results of this recent study funded by the Belize Nature Conservation Foundation, released in July, indicate a significant decrease in the density of illegally extracted xate leaves from 2012 to 2018 for both *C. ernesti-augustii* and *C. oblongata*. In 2012, an estimated total of 16,337,332 leaves of *C. ernesti-augustii* had been illegally extracted from the Chiquibul Forest, compared to 1,650,496 leaves in 2018, this is a 89.9% decrease. The decrease



in illegal harvesting also translates to a decrease in the economic value from \$US 724,288.40 in 2012 to \$US 73,171.99 in 2018. Some factors or a combination of them that may have attributed to the reduction in the illegal extraction of xate leaves include: Increase in the number and efficiency of law enforcement patrols within the area of influence; changes in international market price for xate; changes in certified NTFP exportation policies which makes it more difficult for illegal harvesters to 'laundry' their product into the certified market base; promotion of alternative livelihood projects in poor, rural communities in Peten, and maintenance of a robust binational conservation effort.

## Forests Recovering in The Chiquibul



Agricultural incursions in the Chiquibul landscape is recorded as far back as the 1980's. At this time the communities in Guatemala, nearby the border were being settled and the population was small compared to 30 years later. Today, five municipalities in Southern Peten border Belize, containing over 350 rural communities and an estimated 200,000 inhabitants. In 2008 to counter the ongoing degradation of the Chiquibul Forest, the first conservation post was built at Rio Blanco. Since then, the activation of conservation posts in hotspot areas and joint forces patrols have been the primary intervention to address agricultural expansion.

With support from the US Fish and Wildlife Service a comparative analysis primarily using satellite imagery was finalized in September. The satellite imagery analysis clearly shows a decrease in the accumulative deforested area from 2016 to 2018 and identifies the Caracol Archaeological Reserve and the Cebada area as being major deforestation hotspots. This analysis also shows that *milpa* farming is very dynamic and active fields tend to shift in both spatial locations and patch size from one year to the other. The number of patches under active *milpa* farms decreased from 2016 to 2018 but the total area occupied by these active *milpa* farms did not vary much during this period. When comparing the deforested area in 2012 (highest recorded deforested area) to 2018, there has been a marked decrease of 25.37%, which is equal to 982 ha of recovered early secondary growth forest. This is indicative that targeted efforts aimed at addressing deforestation are having positive impacts. However, it is important to realize that deforestation is dynamic and if efforts are not sustained, it will continue to increase in acreage rather abruptly.

## First Junior Ranger Course Held



For years, FCD had dreamt of conducting a Junior Ranger Summer Camp for children. This became a reality until this August. With the support from the British High Commission Office in Belize and Belize Eco-Cultural Tours, 12 children ranging from 10 to 12 years of age participated on a once in a lifetime experience, learning from rangers in the Chiquibul.

The four FCD team instructors developed the working module, developed insignias, prepared the grounds for the training and



screened the children who would best learn from the experience. Parents filled in the necessary paperwork and on the day of departure the anxious parents bid farewell to their child. At Las Cuevas Research Station the children were welcomed by the squawking of wild macaws and a mountain lion shadowed by a giant mahogany. The four-day activity was filled with nature interpretation, jungle craft, first aid, ranger skills and team work. At the end of the camp, the children shared their journals, expressed their marvels, and were certified with their awards, badge, t-shirts and caps.

Parents have since then shared their thoughts of the Summer Camp. The inputs received indicates that the instructors did a marvelous job in bringing to life nature; interpreting the necessities of mother earth, and instilling a protection ethics among the young children. This program for certain will be a continuous annual event.

## Binational Youth Movement: A Success

In 1989 the Youth Environmental Action Group (YEAG) was formed in the village of Succotz. Ten years later this group became FCD. But ever since, the youth arm has remained an essential part of the growth of the organization. With over 20 members, the group is fast and steadily formulating and implementing various conservation activities in their communities.

In August, the FCD Youth Environmental Group got a boost of energy through the financial support of the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. Not only were they able to secure funds for continuation of their conservation activities, but in addition, funds were obtained to formulate and launch an environmental youth group movement in the municipality of Melchor de Mencos, Peten, Guatemala. This has resulted in the creation of the youth group, Todos por un Mundo Verde. The group has a membership of 12 young people from various rural villages and their community education outreach has started to have success.



During October both groups came together at Las Cuevas Research Station to plan their one year conservation workplan and communication plan. The exercise demonstrated the ability of young people to plan and organize conservation tasks, and streamline binational efforts in favor for the protection of the environment. The protection of the Mopan River has for the longest period been a common area for collaboration and one that the youth across borders will advance.

## Searching New Nesting Areas



In 2014, FCD together with the Forest Department and Guatemalan institutions started a Ukaid/DEFRA supported project aimed at collaborating in tackling illegal wildlife trafficking. The main species that were known to be trafficked included wild cats, primates and parrots particularly scarlet macaws. The project had major achievements in reducing poaching of scarlet macaws in the main perimeter of our bio-monitoring efforts. But this did not signify that all was well for the macaw population. Elsewhere macaws were still being

targeted, robbed and trafficked into Guatemala. The question was: from where are these parrots being removed?

This query, propelled FCD to launch expeditions to identify and locate possible nesting areas in other remote areas of the Chiquibul. The two expeditions, funded by the British High Commission, have supported our anticipation that there are other nesting areas. The research team documented macaw activity, nesting areas and poaching activity. Cavities in trees shows that these have been used by parrots. Similarly, it was notable that trees have signs of spikes used to climb the trees by poachers. The race is therefore on, to secure these new areas. Resources are limited, but FCD is confident that a plan of action jointly with the Government of Belize can be achieved in order to safeguard nesting areas in 2019. Scarlet Macaws are the largest of the parrots in Belize, with a national population thought to be fewer than 200 individuals (Matola & Sho 2002). Whilst it was once thought to occur over much of the central forested areas of Belize, it is now considered to be restricted to the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains.

# IWT Conference London 2018

## FCD Programs

Protection & Enforcement

Community Development

Bi-national Relations

Education & Public Awareness

Karst Management

Research & Monitoring

Landscape Management

Monitoring & Evaluation

Financial Sustainability



All eyes of wildlife conservationists were centered on the Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Conference held in London on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of October. The Conference which brought together world leaders, environmentalists, technology companies and park managers resulted on a declaration from leaders in taking more specific actions

to curb the illegal trade of flora and fauna species and their products.

The Foreign Commonwealth Office through the British High Commission Office in Belize invited FCD to participate at this Conference. The speakers to the forum, such as those of Africa and Asia described dramatic loss of wildlife at the hand of traffickers, despite their efforts. Although several speakers centered their speech on the trade in ivory, the Conference provided the opportunity for Latin-American leaders to express their challenges faced. The Mexican delegates signaled the protection of scarlet macaws from a tri-national level and noted that cross border collaboration is key in curbing the illegal trade. The Guatemalan delegates assured that wildlife trade has connections to other organized criminal elements. For FCD, IWT issues are a reality and one that we will keep on monitoring and addressing in collaboration with Belizean authorities and Guatemalan counterparts.

## Ranger Training in the UK

Maya 2020 is a forward-thinking concept aimed at halting deforestation of the Chiquibul Forest by 2020. With friends from the United Kingdom such as Chris Minty, Richard Pyshorn, Christian Moore and Alexander Shakespeare the idea was formulated and launched in 2016 at an event hosted by Lord Guthrie in London. Maya 2020 would centre its support in building the ranger capabilities through training and expert mentorship.

With the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Maya 2020 support, Chief Ranger Diaz finally got the opportunity this October to obtain training on ranger module development and leadership in the United Kingdom. He spent a week with Richard Pyshorn who is a Belize veteran with a UK military background (RAF Regiment). His years of experience as a Jungle Warfare Instructor in Belize inspired him to establish Survival Wisdom, a



Cornwall based survival training school. On his return from training, Ranger Diaz has developed a stronger ranger training module that will test the fortitude and abilities of park rangers to new levels.

## You are Invited!!!

FCD's Annual General Meeting is coming up on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December. You are welcome to join us on this special event to be held at San Ignacio Hotel and Resort. For further information contact us at [fcd@btl.net](mailto:fcd@btl.net)

### E-Bulletin Funded by:



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