

FCD *Tracks*

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Forging Connections in a Living Landscape

In This Issue

Research Permit Issued

Page 2

Vaca Outpost Inaugurated

Page 2

Rangers Undergo Training

Page 2

Supporting Women Groups

Page 3

FCD Institutes Lead Rangers

Page 3

New Leadership for FVFR

Page 3

BLF Guests Visit FCD

Page 4

Rangers Join APAMO Forum

Page 4

Vietnam Congress Attended

Page 4

Joining WHS Technical Committee



The first meeting of the World Heritage Site Technical Committee was held on the 3rd of December at George Price Center in Belmopan chaired by the Institute of Archaeology/NICH. During this meeting Dr. Melissa Badillo, Director of the Institute of Archaeology explained

the objectives and several invited guests including Dr. Jaime Awe, Arreini Palacio Morgan and Yasser Musa presented on the dynamics and procedures of identifying and listing potential sites.

The key subject was to present the Chiquibul-Caracol complex as a site of interest for possible world heritage status. Although the Institute of Archaeology has identified other important cultural areas, this time the discussion focused on the Caracol temples, the forests of Chiquibul and the caverns as unique features. This concept has come up over the years, but it was until now that the subject was being presented and discussed through a specific technical committee, with a defined Terms of Reference.

By the end of the session, it was clear that further discussions will be necessary, since the subject introduced would involve multiple stakeholders. FCD supports the idea and hopes that the concept does become a reality since it can help secure the long-term viability of the identified natural and cultural iconic features.

Successful 26th AGM



been dormant; in which case partnerships at civil society level become more crucial than ever.

Despite two Board members culminating their 6 years tenure, the FCD membership approved an extension of two more years for them with the intent of keeping key leaders at a time when FCD has been furthering discussions with the Government on a multitude of governance issues.

The 26th Annual General Meeting (AGM) took place on the 6th of December at the San Ignacio Hotel and Resort. Over 80 members and supporters attended the session. The welcome remarks were given by FCD's Board President, Ms. Susana Vanzie, while the Annual Technical and Financial Report was presented by the Programs Director and Finance Manager. A video summed up the major accomplishments.

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, Education, Culture, Science and Technology, Honorable Francis Fonseca was the guest speaker at the event where he outlined the work of FCD and the importance of environmental protection. He summed in two parts the importance of FCD's work, based on his assessment. First, FCD's biodiversity research helps his Ministry understand the impact and scale of the human footprint in the wider Chiquibul area; and FCD's collaboration with Guatemalan conservation NGOs at a time when the charter on sustainable development has

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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.



After much anxiety and anticipation FCD has obtained endorsement for the continuation of biomonitoring and in-situ management of scarlet macaws for the period 2026. With the permit provided by the Forest Department,

the four-person team will start to conduct reconnaissance of the targeted areas where macaws are known to nest annually.

Since 2008, FCD has been investing much effort and resources with the purpose of increasing the population of macaws in the country. This goal has taken the FCD staff to engage annually for a period of 7 months – monitoring and safeguarding nests until the time when the chicks fledge from their nests which are found on tall emergent Quamwoods along the banks of key rivers in the Chiquibul ecosystem.

The search and cleaning of nests is the first phase of the program which enables for macaws to have secure nests for the season. Cleaning nests from leaves, vines and even bees and wasps signify the climbing of trees and documenting the state of potential nests.

Vaca Outpost Inaugurated

The 26th of November marked an important day in the history of the Vaca Forest Reserve. Minister of Sustainable Development, Climate Change and Solid Waste Management, Honorable Orlando Habet made us the honor of inaugurating the Ranger Outpost and Field Farm School.

This event being planned for weeks, brought together PACT representatives as the primary donor, farmers who live inside and nearby the forest reserve, key partners including the Forest Department, Belize Defence Force and the Police Department. Hon. Habet on his remarks encouraged farmers to be good stewards of the reserve and noted that these green areas can provide economical benefits to the people once the resources are sustainably managed. He also noted that farmers can add value to the products since these are derived from a protected area, takes into account gender issues and are produced by rural communities.

With the construction of the Ranger Outpost and Field Farm School, this infrastructure provides for a permanent



base of operations for the FCD staff whose mandate is to promote agroecological methods in the area among farmers and monitor for any illegal activities in the 40,303 acres of the northernmost protected area of the Maya Mountain Massif.

Rangers Undergo Training



Unlike other Rangers, FCD's Park Rangers operate closely with Belize Defence Force (BDF) elements. This has been the case since 2007 when FCD took over co-management responsibilities of the Chiquibul National Park. To keep them fine tuned and operational, the Rangers undergo rigorous training throughout the year. The CHEST

training held annually towards the end of the calendar year is a difficult two-week test to evaluate the leadership, physical and mental capabilities of the Ranger Units.

This October, the training was undertaken at Las Cuevas Research Station. First Aid was provided by members of the BDF while the physical, navigation and leadership tests were conducted by FCD Trainers. By the end of the training, the top four Rangers were awarded for their overall competence in meeting the rigors of training.

Over the most recent months, FCD has documented a resurgence of illegal activities along the western flank of the national park, including illegal logging, extraction of copal resin and poaching. Rangers, therefore, have to be prepared to operate in remote areas with high leadership capabilities to address these environmental threats. Training is a constant, and after assessing the results of the annual training, there is a high level of confidence that the Ranger Unit has competent, serious and disciplined Rangers to meet the tasks at hand.

Supporting Women Groups



Funding from the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, through the Biodiverse Landscapes Fund (BLF) started since 2023. One of the components of the project relates to building entrepreneurship skills among women, primarily in communities surrounding targeted protected areas. In the case of Belize, the Vaca

Forest Reserve is a key area, and the community of Arenal and San Jose Succotz were identified as beneficiaries.

By December three of four trainings had been conducted for women in Arenal. These women identified chicken rearing as the method for promoting a local income. The participants learnt techniques in Aviary Health Management focusing on the diseases common in chickens and the prevention and cure best practices. The women also got an opportunity to vaccinate the chickens for the prevention of diseases. Heat lamps and bulbs, feeders for chicks and hens and starter feed for chicks were acquired. Then on the 17th of December the handover of chicks and supplies was made to 8 women in Arenal and 6 women and 1 man in San Jose Succotz totaling 15 persons receiving support through the BLF project.

Each of the 15 persons signed an agreement where they committed themselves to participate on trainings, support the Vaca Forest Reserve and report to FCD on their entrepreneur experiences.

FCD Institutes Lead Rangers

With the intent of moving Rangers up the ranks and promoting leaders, during the month of December, three Rangers were moved up the level and given the title of Lead Rangers. As Lead Rangers, these young men are expected to operate more independently and capable of leading a small Ranger Unit.

Since COVID, there appears to be a scarcity of identifying good, solid young men to serve as Chiquibul Park Rangers. For those who have passed the tests; however, there is high expectation at FCD of forging strong leaders with the right discipline, commitment and courage to withstand the rigors of duty at the frontline.

Becoming a Lead Ranger signified passing through several physical, character and field tests, evaluated by FCD's Chief



Rangers over a time period. Congratulations to these fine young Lead Rangers for moving up the ranks!!

New Leadership for FVFR



The Friends of the Vaca Forest Reserve (FVFR) has had its highs and lows. Depending on who stays at the helm, makes the difference. The group remained dormant for more than a year; therefore, it was important to take

measures to revive the group. During the month of October, at a meeting attended by approximately 22 participants it was agreed that the current Executive Committee of FVFR would remain in place and that elections would be held at the next session.

So, it became that on November 25th, the farmers in Vaca elected members of the Executive Committee as part of the process to reorganize the Friends of Vaca Forest Reserve. Both, FCD's Programs Director, Mrs. Esther Sanchez Sho and Mr. Wilfredo Zetina, Officer in Charge of the San Ignacio Range of the Belize Forest Department did oversight of the election process. By the end of the elections, members of the farmers group elected a President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and three councilors.

FCD has the commitment to work with this group, by promoting its capabilities through training and exchanges, while building a sense of stewardship for the natural resources of the Vaca Forest Reserve.

BLF Guests Visit FCD



During the month of October FCD had the privilege of hosting the Biodiverse Landscape Fund (BLF) representatives representing the BLF head office staff from London and Guatemala City, the British Embassy in Belize

and Wildlife Conservation Society of both Guatemala and Belize.

On this visit, time was taken to provide an illustrated update of the project results after two years of project execution, and then the group departed to visit the farm of Roberto Melendez in the Vaca plateau. This farm is a model, highlighting integrated farming systems as a sustainable and efficient practice on the use of the land, forest and water resources. The BLF project has financed a vermi-compost system for Melendez which will provide rich nutrients sufficient enough for his crops and other farmers in the vicinity.

Melendez is one of 8 farmers who have been direct beneficiaries of the BLF support. The purpose of the support is to promote alternative livelihoods that are respectful of the natural environment whilst improving the quality of life among key stakeholders.

Rangers Join APAMO Forum



For the FCD staff it was an opportunity to learn from others, understand the common challenges facing other Rangers and Ranger conditions in the different parts of the country.

On the month of October FCD renewed its membership at the Association of Protected Area Management Organizations (APAMO) after an absence of more than 10 years. FCD had actually been a founding member of APAMO in 2007. Given the changing in-country challenges facing co-managers, it was timely to join the Association once more.

As a member, Chiquibul National Park Rangers participated on the APAMO Ranger Forum which was held at Bocawina National Park on the 30th of November. The day event centered on Ranger experiences and challenges. FCD's Park Manager and Chief Rangers described their work, their values and aspirations.

Vietnam Congress Attended



The Congress attended by FCD's BRIM Technician, Wilmer Guerra took place on the 2nd to 8th of November. The event which took place in Vietnam was held by SERCA (SMART-Earth Ranger Conservation Alliance). The focus of the congress was to display technology used in the field of conservation.

FCD has been using SMART among all field teams as a system to document patrols and threats identified. At the Congress it was learnt that SMART will no longer exist

as a single app but rather will be incorporated with Earth Ranger to form SERCA. The new program will allow updates for both field staff and data managers.

Guerra learnt of several systems and met institutions where potential partnerships may be formed. BirdNet has a system that identifies acoustic sounds. In theory, this could be used to identify the presence of both Scarlet Macaws and humans (via the identification of voices, gunshot, chainsaw) in areas that are seldomly monitored or patrolled.

Wildlife Protection Services also expressed interest in partnering with FCD to insert a Camera Trap in the field with the capacity of providing live and real time data to headquarters. They have installed cameras in Guatemala with great results and are now looking to expand in areas of the Selva Maya Region.

Guerra came back with much excitement of the new technology learnt and its applicability of this in the landscape where FCD works.

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