

# Friends *for* Conservation and Development

*Forging Connections in a Living Landscape*

**ANNUAL REPORT 2025**





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# MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT



Dear Friends,

It is a privilege to address you at this year's Annual General Meeting as we reflect on a year marked by perseverance, transformation, and continued commitment to **conserving the natural and cultural resources of the Chiquibul–Maya Mountains**. Through every challenge and transition, FCD has continued to demonstrate the strength of its mission and the dedication of its people.

One of the year's most meaningful achievements was the success of our scarlet macaw program. Forty chicks made it safely into the wild—one of the strongest outcomes in recent years – though regulatory constraints prevented FCD from carrying out its traditional antipoaching deployments. This outcome speaks to both the resilience of the species and the unwavering commitment of our staff. Equally inspiring was the confirmation, through our research and monitoring work, that the headwaters of the Chiquibul remain healthy. This affirmation underscores the continued integrity of the birthplace of Belize's water resources and the importance of long-term stewardship.

Our work in archaeology also reached a significant milestone. Decades of responsible scientific work, along with advocating and collaborating with national partners, led to FCD's formal invitation by the Institute of Archaeology to serve on the national Technical Working Committee guiding Belize's submissions to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List. This recognition reflects the credibility our team has built through years of careful scientific work and responsible stewardship of the cultural resources within the Chiquibul Complex.

This year also marked the establishment of our new Ranger Headquarters near Guacamallo, made possible through the support of the Ministry of National Defense and Border Security and the Ministry of Sustainable Development, Climate Change, and Solid Waste Management. Strategically located and well-suited to our operational needs, this site represents a major strengthening of our capacity in the field. What stood out most, however, was how our team moved through the initial difficulty of this transition and rallied when it was most needed. Facing tight deadlines and sudden logistical changes, our Rangers and other staff worked closely together and supported one another at every step. Their unity, readiness to adapt, and continued strong field performance reflected not only resilience, but remarkable growth—a transformation that speaks to the maturity of FCD.

Across the wider landscape, we continued advancing environmental education, community outreach, research, enforcement, and ecological monitoring. Opportunities are also emerging for the future, with partners expressing interest in collaborative initiatives that could deepen public engagement and scientific understanding in the Chiquibul–Maya Mountains. As these possibilities take shape, FCD remains committed to ensuring that every partnership honors the integrity of the protected area and contributes meaningfully to long-term conservation.

In the year ahead, I look forward to strengthening FCD's governance and institutional foundations, ensuring that our organization remains resilient, well-guided, and fully equipped to steward the Chiquibul–Maya Mountains for generations to come. With the collective commitment of our staff, board members, and partners, I am confident that we will continue to transform challenges into opportunities and build on the work that has carried us this far.

**Susana D. Vanzie**  
FCD Board President



# MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



**Last** year I discussed the persistency of FCD on remaining focused on its mission despite the challenges faced. For those who have worked with us, it is well understood that FCD has always been on an uphill battle. A battle that we have persisted time and time again. This time I want to highlight the importance of **perseverance**. FCD has a clear vision and mission. It is the conviction of keeping the principles alive and strong that makes us persevere. The road can be bumpy, but FCD perseveres.

True to this conviction, FCD has proudly named the new Park Ranger base, **Perseverance Camp**. This will serve as a testament and a reminder that safeguarding our ideals can and will be tested but we must persevere. Protecting biodiversity in the Chiquibul National Park and in the wider Maya Mountains will continuously bring challenges and threats but we must persevere; and even internally as we discuss our aspirations, dreams and interventions, we must persevere on our values.

FCD as a mature organization conducting protected area management and other environmental conservation efforts at the landscape level in central Belize has expanded its partnerships and is resourceful. It has coined well its adaptive management techniques that have proven successful in natural resource conservation and cultural resource management; and it has built confidence and trust among its partners and donors due to its steady reporting systems and ability of its staff to run the various programs. The certificates of Good Standing received from the Government of Belize, on a consistent manner, speaks volumes of FCD's perseverance of maintaining its due diligence in the areas where it operates.

Protecting and caring for the environment is more difficult as time passes. In the early 80's – during the days of the late Sharon Matola, Chris Minty and Bruce Miller, the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains was one of exploration. They discovered the magnificence and uniqueness of the Chiquibul ecosystem. They wrote of this beautiful and rich place in Central Belize. But the mountains were also seen as one to be exploited – primarily for timber and chicle. By the mid-90's new instruments of management were established, which gave rise to the declaration of the Chiquibul National Park for headwater and biodiversity protection. By the mid-20's FCD appeared on the scene. The effort became one of reducing the illegal exploitation of natural resources by Guatemalan encroachers. The battle was won but it took a decade and more to contain it. There are still transborder problems but the landscape is better secured and safe.

Today, there appears to be another round of economic interests on the horizon. This time, based on the lessons learnt, FCD is hopeful that it will be under improved, sustainable management principles, taking into account that the Maya Mountains have passed through several stages of pressures. The pressures will grow and our values will be tested, and it is under this reality that FCD need to persevere on its conviction.

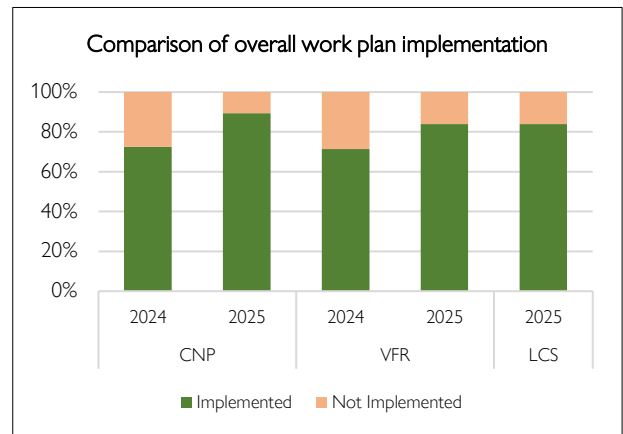
**Rafael Manzanero**



FCD aims to conserve the natural and cultural resources of the western Chiquibul-  
Maya Mountains for the sustainable development of Belize.

# Annual Operation Evaluation

In the realm of environmental protection many plans and strategies are developed constantly, but are these ever put into implementation and if so, are they evaluated to assess effectiveness? At FCD we take evaluation very seriously. Through the constant assessments conducted by the Western Maya Mountains Landscape Manager, FCD is able to quantify the degree of the actions met on a quarterly basis. The assessment is vital for understanding how well we are meeting the Chiquibul National Park Management Plan recommended actions and identify areas for improvement.



Workplans for three working areas were prepared by the FCD team this year (Nov. 2024 to Oct. 2025). The Chiquibul National Park (CNP) Annual Operation Plan consisted of 208 management activities, the Vaca Forest Reserve (VFR) with 56, and the Landscape Communication Strategy (LCS) with 31 actions.

Compared to last year, implementation of work plans was more successful this fiscal year; implementation success for the CNP rose from 73% in 2024 to 89%; VFR from 71% to 84%, and the LCS is at 84% during its first year of implementation. This year's success is attributed to improved planning which considers FCD's financial resources, technical capacity and human resources; timely quarterly monitoring and reporting; as well as improved coordination between programs.

## Recommendations:

- Continue collaboration and engagement with stakeholders to strengthen governance and decision making in the Western Maya Mountains.
- Conduct a mid-term revision of 2023-2028 CNP Management Plan to adjust scope of management actions.
- Continue quarterly monitoring and evaluation of AOP and engage in inter-programme coordination efforts for timely planning for delayed management actions.
- Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to identify financial gaps.
- Strengthen staff retention packages and conduct targeted training for new and current staff to improve performance.



# Enforcement and Monitoring

This year brought new challenges to the Chiquibul National Park Rangers as we had to vacate Tapir Camp, which had been their home for the last 18 years. But with this change, new opportunities and a new chapter have been opened for FCD. Perseverance Camp located at Guacamallo Bridge is the new headquarter base for the Park Rangers, thanks to the Prime Minister's Office and Ministry of National Defence and Border Security who welcomed our presence at the entrance of the Chiquibul National Park northern boundary. The base is operational and work continues. In the Vaca Forest Reserve meanwhile, the Rangers now have a fully operational Ranger Outpost with endorsement from the Forest Department and with financial support from PACT.



*Perseverance Camp*

FCD park rangers spend most of their time at five Conservation Posts, located in the Chiquibul National Park and Caracol, where they operate as a Joint Unit with the Belize Defence Force. This year a total of 3 expeditions were conducted to the far distant areas of Doyles Delight covering 75 hours of patrols. Eleven operations were jointly conducted with BDF particularly to address cattle ranching totaling 121 hours. In addition, 130 recces were conducted to monitor human footprint and maintaining a presence, totaling 736 hours and 1,335 kilometers

covered. There appears to be an upsurge of illegal activity. Primarily in illegal logging and poaching, while cattle ranching and gold panning persists as an environmental threat.

FCD also maintains a Ranger presence in the Vaca Forest Reserve and the Baldy Beacon region of the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve. However, in these areas Rangers have the duty to document and report to the Forest Department any illegal activity. No enforcement activity is conducted. For the 2025 period, Rangers in Vaca conducted 126 patrols totaling 646 patrol hours and 2,873 kilometers covered, while at the Bald Hills, a total of 304 patrols were undertaken totaling 1,715 active hours of patrols and a coverage of 18,128 kilometers.



*Vaca Ranger Outpost*

FCD

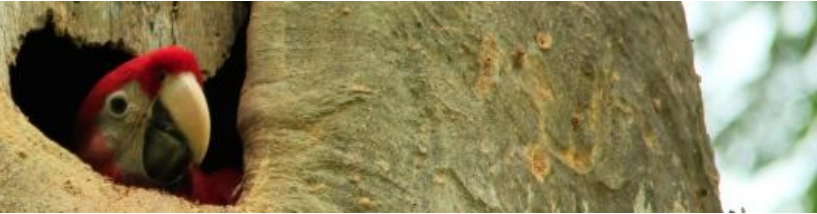
This year, three overflights were undertaken to document Guatemalan incursions from Vaca to Chiquibul National Park covering a distance of 59 kilometers on each flight. The information generated helped FCD and the BDF to identify hotspot areas and conduct operations and targeted patrols as a joint unit.







# Research and Monitoring



FCD's Research team is responsible for conducting research and biological monitoring activities using carefully designed methodologies. These methods stand the rigor of analysis and validation. The purpose of the team is to generate and interpret the data which provides a status report and conditions of the conservation targets identified in the Chiquibul National Park Management Plan. These targets include: Tropical Broadleaved Forest, Aquatic Systems, Scarlet Macaw, Jaguar and Upper Elevation Amphibians.

In the Chiquibul, for the 2025 scarlet macaw nesting season a total of 78 eggs were laid, out of which 48 eggs hatched. Of these a total of 24 chicks fledged from natural cavities along the Raspaculo and Macal Rivers which is equivalent to 50.0% fledging rate. A total of 16 chicks fledged from the In-Situ laboratory. The documented total number of eggs laid was highest in 2025, since monitoring started in 2012, while the hatching rate was the second highest since 2016, where there was a 77.8% hatching rate.

In terms of forest cover, the August 2025 human footprint report notes that in the Chiquibul Ecosystem based on data from 2020 to 2024, approximately 11,773.00 hectares of the Chiquibul National Park have been impacted by human activities, accounting for 11.02% of the park's total area. Most of the impact caused by wildfires signify that although these areas are not used, the forest cover was damaged. However, it is estimated that up to 71.14% of what was impacted is recovering in the park, due to continuous patrols and law enforcement activities.



*Biomonitoring scarlet macaws*



*Water quality testing*

The research team also conducted this year a study on the impacts of gold panning in the Rio-Ceibo Sub-Watershed which includes Ceibo Grande, Ceibo Chico, Malpago and South Chiquibul streams. Analysis of the quantitative data indicate that the overall acreage being negatively impacted by illegal gold panning activities was 169.10 acres in 2021 and 248 acres in 2025, an increase of 80.90 acres (46.6%). Both surveys highlight the Ceibo Chico Creek, as the area of priority for patrolling efforts.

To monitor wildlife, 25 camera stations were established this year. The white lipped peccary, great curassow and brockett deer appear to have the healthiest population occupancy rate. Jaguar research is recommended for expansion to a wider landscape which promises to generate more representative data of the feline population.



*At the Bald Hills region, more frequent observations of white tail deer are being documented*



*With the acquisition of wildlife cameras, a total of 80 cameras will improve jaguar research*





# Community Development and Extension

The primary area where FCD has nearby communities as key stakeholders to the natural resources is the Vaca Forest Reserve (VFR). As a result, an extension program and community development has been a central intervention and engagement with farmers who operate inside and nearby the reserve. Four communities are the beneficiaries of such interventions, namely Arenal, Vaca plateau, Benque Viejo del Carmen and San Jose Succotz.



This year, the FCD Landscape Technician convened two sessions with farmers which resulted on a Climate Adaptation Action Plan. This plan outlines several actions that supports farmers to adapt in the face of climate change. FCD, therefore with support from the Biodiverse Landscape Fund, assisted 9 farmers. The materials and supplies enabled farmers to engage in agroforestry practices, vermi-compost and efficient irrigation systems. Community conservation agreements were reached with the farmers, which enabled for

them to better engage and promote the best practice.

In the village of Arenal, work was started with a group of women with the aim of building their capabilities as entrepreneurs. Financing was provided for them to start raising chicken. Other women from San Jose Succotz have also joined on the training.

The Friends of the Vaca Forest Reserve (FVFR) conducted meetings to re-establish a working Committee and training on fire prevention and combat was provided to them. 19 men from both Arenal Belize and Guatemala likewise took the basic training.



The demonstration plots being promoted at the field farm school has generated partnerships with the Belize Botanical Garden and the University of Belize – Agriculture Campus. The expectation is for the area to showpiece different best use practices and methods such as alley cropping, agroforestry and integrated farming systems.

The Extension Technician during this year provided extension services, primarily working with famers inside the reserve. His effort lays central to the letter of understanding reached with the Forest Department since 2016 which requests for us to promote climate smart agro-ecological strategies among the FVFR and other stakeholders to reduce agricultural expansion in the reserve.



*Heavily hunted in the past the peccaries are returning back to the Chiquibul jungles.*



*Belize's national animal is having a safer environment in the Chiquibul National Park*





*FCD celebrated World Ranger Day on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July in company of all field staff*



*The Park Ranger Training, funded by PACT, took place from 20<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> of October*







FCD field staff endure long periods in the midst of the Chiquibul jungle,  
at the frontline protecting biodiversity.



*The five species of cats are known to occur in the Chiquibul National Park*



*The Great Curassow was a game bird heavily hunted by poachers.*





# Community Outreach and Education

FCD's environmental education has been as busy as ever promoting the beauty of the Chiquibul National Park, forest fire prevention, importance of the Belize River and highlighting the work of FCD throughout the Cayo and Belize Districts.

Prior to the dry season and threats of forest fires, the educator reached out to 40 Vaca farmers and residents living near the Vaca Forest Reserve (VFR). The message was

simple: Reduce Forest Fires by preventing unattended fires. Farmers depend on their crops or cattle but unattended fires dramatically alter the landscape by impacting the forest cover. In fact, the 2020 and 2024 fires have been the main cause for the disappearance of 67% of the forest cover in the VFR. According to FCD's Consolidated Human Activities in the Western Maya Mountains Report, a total of 6,037.46 hectares within the Vaca Forest Reserve were affected by forest fires in 2024. This year; however, with the lower temperatures, more moisture and community support there

was a significant reduction of fire incidences in the VFR, with only 205.38 hectares (about 1.2% of the reserve) affected.

In the Belize River Valley by the end of September 2025, an overall total of 1,649 children, 753 youths and over 568 adults were sensitized about the importance of the Belize River using the GEF6 project outreach campaign titled: "Healthy River, Healthy Environment, Healthy People". This program has targeted 13 communities located along the Belize River. Two nurseries have also been established to help reforest the river bank. Community enthusiasm and support have been galvanized and as the outreach ends, it is certain that communities are more knowledgeable about the importance of the river, its threats, and are excited to enter into action to more proactively protect the Belize River. The educator also played a critical role in advancing knowledge about the beauty of the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains by interpreting to 147 students, 120 youth and 110 adults who visited the Chiquibul National Park during school trips.

With a safer environment and a paved road, FCD sees the opportunity for interpretive-guided hikes and trekking in the Chiquibul National Park, which will further generate support or the protection of these areas. In the end it will be the people of Belize who will put a stand to ensure the proper use of these resources.



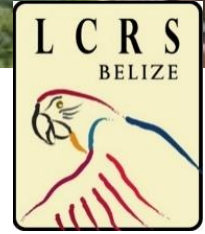
*Scouts visiting the Chiquibul*



*Community outreach in Belize River Valley*



# Recreation and Public Use



On the 15th September, 2015 a ten-year Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Government of Belize and FCD to continue scientific research and education in order to contribute and facilitate the Government's commitment to the Convention of Biodiversity, advance the recommendations of the National Protected Areas Policy and Action Plan, and the long-term protection, conservation, education and management of Belize's biodiversity and cultural heritage.



*Construction of LCRS in 1994*



*LCRS after 30 years of existence*

To achieve this, FCD would operate, manage and oversee the development of Las Cuevas Research Station (LCRS) as a research station to conduct natural science and cultural research as well as education, training and specialty tourism.

With the ending of this ten-year agreement, FCD submitted this year a ten-year summary report, ten-year audited statements, letters of recommendations and a formal request to the Government of Belize for continuation of management of the LCRS facility. With an improved security and stability of the Chiquibul ecosystem, the LCRS outlook is promising for research in the natural and cultural sciences. As we look to the future, FCD envisions LCRS as a premier research and educational facility that fosters collaboration, innovation, and conservation.

For the 2025 period, 11 Universities visited LCRS including Universities from the United States, the United Kingdom and Belize, totaling 163 students and 37 faculty/instructors. In addition, 289 other guests stayed at LCRS to enjoy the natural wonders of the Maya Mountains.

Since 2016, over 3,850 researchers and students have visited Las Cuevas, gaining invaluable experience through field courses and knowledge exchanged by FCD staff. Multiple research projects have also been conducted ranging from bat biology and archaeological studies to plant inventory and ecosystem management.



*FCD staff participated on several expos highlighting the various program areas*



*Field staff described the duty of Park Rangers for visiting schools at the Chiquibul National Park*





# Buffer Protection

It is widely known that to protect the nucleus one must act on the periphery and adjacent surrounding. Such is the case in protected area management. The buffer to the areas where FCD operates in the Maya Mountains fringes with Guatemalan communities to the west and on the northern area with Vaca plateau residents and farmers. Private owners are also found in the Mountain Pine Ridge such as Hidden Valley and BullRun Farms. Further south are the Mayan communities such as Red Bank. Capturing their interest and support means working closely with them to develop a win-win situation.

For more than a decade FCD has worked with Asociacion Balam and municipal alcaldes in Peten, Guatemala. This year FCD supported the municipality of Melchor de Mencos with fire tools and equipment as part of the binational effort to manage forest fires across borders. Meanwhile Balam continued working with targeted communities in southern Peten on sustainable livelihood initiatives.



*Hydro facility on the Matcal River*

This year also marked the signing of another three-year agreement with Fortis Belize to continue the program of eco-guarding on the three main hydro facilities, namely Chalillo, Mollejon and Vaca Dams. The work of FCD is to manage the entry points and patrol on over 1,700 acres of forests that makes their 'property'. As a result, the forest cover is protected and wildlife is more obvious in these areas.

At the Bald Hills FCD has explored a formal partnership with BullRun Farms and communication has been maintained with the Mennonite community located in these elevated areas which harbor four sub-watersheds. Meanwhile with Itzamna Society, co-manager of Don Elijio Panti National Park, the partnership continues with training and communication systems.

Across the main divide, FCD's Community Outreach technician conducted one to one consultation with community members of Red Bank to gather opinions regarding a protected area for safeguarding the scarlet macaws that migrate for five months to the Eastern Maya Mountains. The results were extremely encouraging.



*Water from the Chiquibul-Maya Mountains*





*Cultural Heritage Coordinator conducting inventory at Putz Bak cave*



# Inventory and Mapping

The ongoing inventory efforts in the Chiquibul National Park have provided an insight on the park's rich cultural heritage. Blocks inventoried have documented unique architectural structures of abandoned sites, such as causeways, terraces, house



*Karst team exploring a shaft*

mounds- structures, modified reservoirs, caves with modified architectures (walls, terraces, platforms), tombs, caches, ceremonial dumps, polychrome vessels, jade ear flares, pots, plates, obsidian blades, worked shells (beads, spindle whirls), grinding stones (manos and metate), modified bones (needles) and Mayan remains.

During the period of November 2024 to October of 2025, the Karst Management Unit (KMU) conducted a total of 63 monitoring-day patrols. Monitoring efforts were focused on fifteen (15) key target areas identified.

These areas included: Actun Kabal, Actun Tunkul, Nohoch Ch'en, "The Rock", Cebada, Dead Horse Camp Cave, Kump' Site, Putz Bak Zone, Zotz Cave, LCRS Cave, Guacamallo Cave, Cave 01-B0 2-S01-NCNP, Site 01-S03-B05-NWCNP, Actun Uo, and Retiro Junction. In addition, the KMU conducted a total of 43 Inventory days within 17 inventory blocks that were explored and documented in the North and north-west of the Chiquibul National Park.



*Exploring Putz Bak Cave*

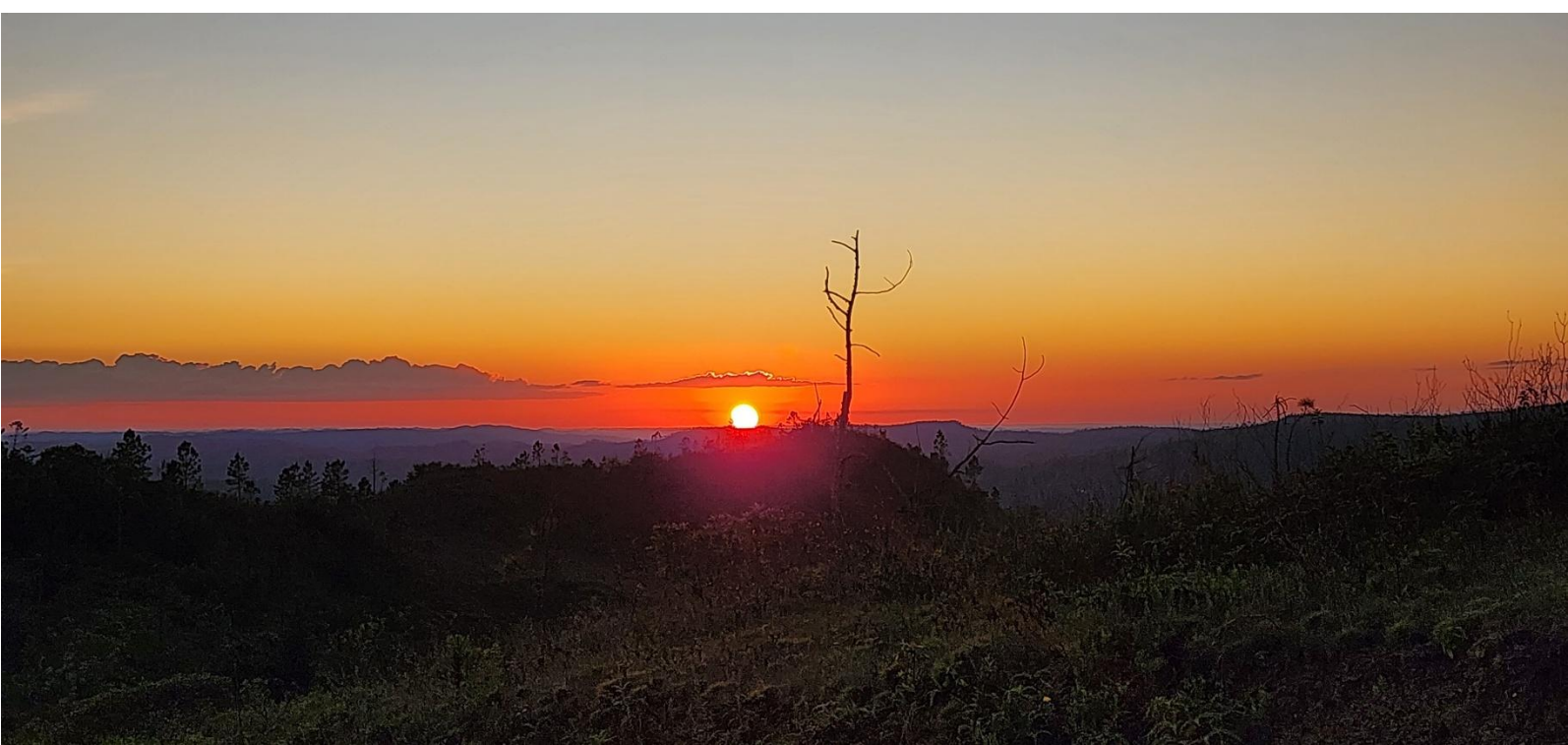
A joint exploration and mapping project, aimed at linking the Putz Bak cave system was conducted in partnership with Institute of Archaeology and the Boundary Fault Karst Project team.

While recent monitoring efforts show no ongoing looting at most sites, the long-term impacts of previous unauthorized excavations underscore the need for continued surveillance and improved site protection.

This year also saw FCD communicating with the Institute of Archaeology (IA) for a renewed co-management of the Chiquibul Cave System; and has been in contact with the Institute in support of establishing a platform for identifying potential areas for world heritage status. It has been a vision developed since 2008 with the then IA Director, Dr, Jaime Awe and propelled by the new Director, Dr. Melissa Badillo.



*Sunrise and sunsets over the Maya Mountains are spectacular sights*



*With approximately 350 individuals left in Belize the quest is on to improve the species*





# Partnerships

FCD is honored to have worked with more than 90 partner institutions from Belize and abroad. From the private sector and community-based organizations to government and international organizations, they have made our work more effective and result oriented.

## GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES

Belize Defence Force  
Belize Forest Department  
Belize Police Department  
Immigration Department  
Institute of Archaeology  
Agriculture Department  
Belize Tourism Board  
Hydrology Unit  
Department of the Environment  
National Biodiversity Office  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Ministry of National Defence and Border Security  
Ministry of SD, Climate Change & Solid Waste Mngt  
Ministry of Works and Infrastructure  
Ministry of Economic Development  
US Forest Service  
British High Commission of Belize  
British Army Training Support Unit Belize  
Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (Guatemala)  
Organization of American States  
Protected Areas Conservation Trust  
Ministry of Education (Cayo District)  
Commonwealth of Municipalities of Southern Peten



## COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Caretakers for Our Rivers & Environment  
Grupo Integral para Conservación de las Cuencas  
Todos Por Un Mundo Verde  
FCD Environmental Youth Group  
Friends of Vaca Forest Reserve  
Friends of Lower Dover  
Itzamna Society  
Maya Leaders Alliance  
Julian Cho Society  
Upper Macal Watershed Working Group  
Red Bank Bed and Breakfast  
Southern Mo' Working Group

Exploring Solutions Past ~ The Maya Forest Alliance  
Mesa Integral de Tierra y Medio Ambiente  
Cooma Cairn Mennonite Community



## NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Association of Protected Area Management Organizations  
Asociación Balam  
Programme for Belize  
Belize Maya Forest Trust  
Engaged Scholarship & Service Learning  
Foro de Justicia Ambiental  
Belize Wildlife and Referral Clinic  
The Belize Zoo and TEC  
Harvest Caye Conservation Foundation  
Chaa Creek Foundation  
Wildtracks  
Institute for Social and Cultural Research  
Natural History Museum of Belize



## INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS



United Nations Development Program  
The European Nature Trust  
Snowy Owl Foundation  
Sisters of Nazareth  
The Nature Trust of the Americas  
Toucan Education Programs  
Wildlife Conservation Society  
World Wildlife Fund  
GIZ-Selva Maya  
Global Financial Integrity  
The Nature Conservancy

## PRIVATE SECTOR

Belize Communication Services Limited  
Fortis Belize Limited  
Cisco Road Construction  
Chaa Creek Inland Expeditions  
Hidden Valley Inn  
Blancaneaux Lodge  
John and Susana Vanzie  
Bull Run Farms  
Pacific Heights  
Cayo Cargo  
Turtle Inn  
GAIA River Lodge  
Channel 5 Belize  
Channel 7 TV  
Bissystems  
RST Consulting





ACADEMIA



Denver University  
Manchester University  
Toucan Education Program  
University of Belize  
Galen University  
University of South Wales  
University of Southampton  
Rice University  
University of Florida  
Wildlands  
Bohart Museum  
Durham University



*BLF, British High Commission, WCS and FCD staff at FCD head Office © FCD*



# Board and FCD Staff

## STRATEGIC GOAL

FCD aims to conserve the natural and cultural resources of the western Chiquibul Maya Mountains for the sustainable development of Belize.

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