



Promoting Core Conservation

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## TENT to the Rescue



The European Nature Trust (TENT) came at the nick of time to the rescue of scarlet macaws. Poachers become more active at breeding sites of macaws during the months of April to August. Yet as we entered the nesting peak season and poaching activities this year, our staff relied on canoes to paddle up the nesting sites used by macaws. This

took our research team hours and even days to constantly be on the trail of poachers. Certainly, this was not a reliable method, but with no other means of transport, we had to rely on the commitment and energy of staff to paddle and do the work.

This changed dramatically, thanks to TENT and consequently Bowen and Bowen Limited and BenQuip who assisted in acquiring a 50 horsepower Honda engine for our skiff. The skiff, named DAVE has been operating for more than five years, making biological monitoring possible but the engine started to fail. With a new engine in place and the skiff operational, the FCD teams have demonstrated a higher level of presence and efficiency in monitoring the nesting sites of macaws. Poaching is the main threat to wild macaws, thus FCD undertakes a seven month biological monitoring program annually with the purpose of safeguarding active nests of this emblematic species in the Chiquibul Forest.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Chiquibul Marathon – A Success

With the arrival of the dry season, came also much excitement in the Chiquibul Forest. This time the Second Chiquibul Challenge Marathon took place on the 18th of March with 57 runners traversing 42 kilometers of undulating hills and broadleaf forest. Athletes left Las Cuevas Research Station at 4:30 a.m. towards Guacamallo Bridge in time for the half marathon which started at 6:30 a.m. At the same time the full marathon athletes left Las Cuevas running towards the bridge. Not before having a warm meal at Las Cuevas.

The marathon coordinated by the Belize Wildlife and Referral Clinic (BWRC) is a fundraising event as well as an educational opportunity for runners to learn of the beauty of the Chiquibul Forest. Justin Ford who represented the BWRC described the event: "Runners entered into 3 categories, the Half-Marathon, the Full-Marathon, and the Ranger Challenge. Runners traversed challenging terrain between Las Cuevas Research Station and Guacamallo Bridge in the Chiquibul Forest. The course features undulating mountains and over 4,000ft of elevation change



over the Half-Marathon course; and double the elevation change for the Full-Marathon course. This challenging terrain proved no match for the event winners, who completed the course in remarkable times." FCD is thankful to the athletes, sponsors and to BWRC for making this marathon possible. As a result of the race, BWRC presented to FCD a cheque totalling \$3,763.26 to be used for the protection of scarlet macaws.

## Tourism in the Maya Mountains



One of four nodes identified for tourism development in the country includes the Mountain Pine Ridge/Caracol/Chiquibul Complex. The ambitious plan is to enhance tourism experiences within the protected areas in the Cayo District, with the pavement of the A-10 Road and infrastructure development in the Mountain Pine Ridge. But many stakeholders in the tourism sector are concerned, since driving tourism into protected areas and particularly wilderness areas in the Chiquibul can have a

negative impact on the natural and cultural environment. With this in mind, Mick Fleming of Chaa Creek prepared a stakeholder session. Mr. Abil Castaneda, Director in the Ministry of Tourism presented the vision and objectives of the Sustainable Tourism Programme Phase II, and opened the floor for concerns, opinions and suggestions.

An overview of the current situation in the Chiquibul and Sustainable Forestry with an open discussion amongst attendees of strategies that could bolster the future potential of the Maya Massif, including proper management, integrated planning and a holistic approach was presented. Speakers included Amin Bedran of Pine Lumber Company Limited and Neil Rogers of Rogers & Co.

By the end of the reunion it was resolved that a working group to further explore sustainable tourism in the region be created, and be tasked with the development of a concept paper that explores consolidation of the Western Maya Mountains protected areas. The Ministry of Tourism expressed its interest in understanding the actual management regimes and help support a tourism development scheme that is respectful of the natural environment.

## Agroecology Practices Extend

With the Global Environmental Facility – Small Grants Programme, FCD has activated a vibrant agroecological and climate smart project in the Vaca Forest Reserve. The project titled, *Community Capacity Building and Climate-Smart Innovative Agroecological Practices In the Vaca Forest Reserve*, launched a year ago worked with 15 farmers in various pilot projects including use of organic fertilizer, establishment of protein and energy banks, installation of efficient irrigation systems, improvement of water sources, cover structures, reforestation and restoration of the landscape.

Farmers from the nearby village of Arenal who saw the innovative practices benefitting Vaca plateau famers, were encouraged to request for technical assistance from FCD. This was warmly welcomed by FCD and since then the FCD Landscape Manager has imparted several sessions. The farm school methodology which teaches farmers to learn



by doing is now being put into practice in Arenal among 12 farmers, and agroecological methods are being employed.

For FCD, Arenal is a strategic community to work with since the village is located proximate to the Vaca Forest Reserve and has exerted impacts on the protected area over many years. The recent management plan for this reserve identifies the need to work closely with this community.

## FF and the Chiquibul KBA



The mission of Forecastle Foundation (FF) based in Kentucky is to protect and connect the world's natural awesome. This it does by shining a light on biodiversity hotspots - the richest reservoirs of life. FF makes an impact by partnering with, and supporting like-minded organizations.

We are pleased to be a part of the FF family. And we were honored to host Eric Blair who visited Belize to see the work of FCD during the month of April. Eric stayed in the jungle with field staff for three days. During this time, he visited Las Cuevas, Cebada, Bald Hills and met with several field staff. On his return back to Kentucky, Eric wrote the following: "In my days in the field with FCD I learned all about the good projects they have going on. More impressive than those projects was the hard work they put in order to realize those projects. These guys are passionate, well-disciplined and absolutely focused on making sure the Chiquibul jungle is protected and properly opened to those interested in getting to know this fascinating area through tourism."

From all of us here at FCD, we are thankful to FF for selecting the Chiquibul Forest as one of the hotspots for their financial support.

## Headwater Compromised?



Illegal gold panning is widely known to be one of the highest threats to the Chiquibul headwaters. However, gold mining in the Chiquibul also poses another problem through a government sanctioned company. For more than 30 years the Government of Belize has granted licences for exploration and mining of mineral deposits in the furthest areas of Chiquibul.

This year Boiton Mineral concluded its environmental impact assessment for tunnel core mining in the volcanic regions of the Chiquibul. Like most of these developments, time was not on our side to analyze properly the documentation, call on stakeholders or lobby the public.

The Department of the Environment conducted a poorly planned stakeholder meeting in the rural community of San Antonio with low attendance. The consultants presented a superficial summary of the project and limited time for questions were given. In the end, the National Environmental Appraisal Committee, who were privy of FCD's concerns, placed no major reservations to the proposed gold mining activity on the Chiquibul headwater, and moved to grant the green light. FCD's primary concern relates to the fact that regulatory agencies do not do proper monitoring, and without any mechanisms to ensure compliance in these remote areas, the headwaters may well be compromised.

## Watershed Campaign Concludes in City

The Bi-National Watershed Outreach Campaign has now been completed in the Belize District. The goal was to promote awareness of the condition and importance of the Chiquibul-Mopan-Macal-Belize Watershed (CMMBW) and encourage Belizeans to be a part of river conservation activities. During the presentations, FCD's environmental educator informed students and teachers about the multiple benefits obtained from the rivers; methods on how to protect and conserve rivers and methods of using the water resource in a sustainable manner. The school presentation culminated with an extended invitation for schools to visit the Chiquibul Forest. The power-point and video presentation was 45 minutes long and was planned along the lines of the Ministry of Education curriculum guide.

For this school calendar year, FCD' environmental education unit visited a total of 8,286 students and 457 teachers from within the Cayo and Belize District who were imparted with knowledge of the watersheds and its importance to Belize. The



outreach was made possible with support from the Ministry of Education, Catholic Primary School Management, Belize Seventh Day Adventist School Management, Methodist School Management, Anglican Diocese School Management, Nazarene School Management, Principals and teachers. The British High Commission Office in Belize, FYFFES and the Sister of Nazareth Charity contributed financially to make this program possible.

## Climate Smart Project Systematized



With funding from the Global Environmental Facility – Small Grants Programme, FCD has put into effect a unique bio-cultural programme in the Vaca Forest Reserve (VFR) using agroecological and climate smart innovative practices among local farmers.

At the conclusion of the project, a systematization of lessons learnt was conducted. The results show that members of the Friends of VFR are demonstrating great enthusiasm in applying new and innovative practices. These include use of drip irrigation, cover structures, protein banks for livestock

and better water management systems. The findings demonstrate that farmers are already benefitting in tangible and intangible ways. In addition it was found out that at the Friends of Vaca Forest Reserve level, over the past two years the organization has made some progress in strengthening its internal operations, including leadership; however, members acknowledge that while they can play an increasingly active role in guiding activities in the VFR, they do not foresee any point in the near future when they will be responsible for managing the entire reserve.

The report also notes that only within the last two years has agroecology started to emerge as a viable strategy for conservation and food security, thus it has not been given great prominence in national development strategies and plans. It is therefore recommended that FCD liaises with like-minded organizations in developing a position paper on agroecology. Whereas sectors often operate in silos, it is further recommended that efforts be made to demonstrate the full benefits of agroecology, such as the impacts on human health by reducing the use of carcinogenic agrochemicals in food production.

## Visiting QCC in London



The Queen's Commonwealth Canopy (QCC) has been heralded as one of those unique endeavors championed by the Queen of England aimed at bringing together the family of Commonwealth nations to protect their forest resources. For Belize, the Chiquibul National Park was accepted as part of the QCC initiative. Since

its acceptance, however, two years ago, not much has been heard of it.

During the recent trip to London by the Executive Director of FCD, he visited the offices of the QCC to appraise the personnel and to seek advice as to how to promulgate this initiative locally and regionally. The QCC office has recently been created, however, we were assured that the QCC initiative will be highlighted more and that FCD could use the seal for publishing the work being undertaken in the Chiquibul Forest. As a QCC site, Government has the commitment to safeguard this forest.

The FCD Executive Director also visited Mrs Perla Perdomo, High Commissioner of Belize to the United Kingdom to update her on the challenges still facing the Chiquibul Forest and the steps being undertaken by Maya 2020, whose aim is to generate the finances that will support the monitoring and enforcement program. Maya 2020 is led by the Executive Director of Selvana Ltd, Mr. Chris Minty.

## Cebada C.P Launched

After 5 years of planning, reconnaissance and eventual endorsement, the last of three conservation posts is up and operational. The Prime Minister of Belize, Right Honorable Dean Barrow had committed his Government to the manning of Valentin, Caballo and Cebada Conservation Posts by security forces once these were operational. Valentin was launched in 2014, Caballo in 2017 and on the 14th of June of this year the Cebada Conservation Post was inaugurated by the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Forestry. Finances for this conservation post was obtained from PACT and the Environmental Management Fund.

Conservation posts are the first line for containment of incursions into the Chiquibul Forest and are strategically placed in hotspot areas. The Cebada Conservation Post has two main objectives to meet: protection of the Cebada caves from agricultural farming expansion and prevention of poachers and other marauders into the Chiquibul National Park. Over most recent observations, the area of Cebada



is also being used for cattle ranching and marijuana cultivation by Guatemalans.

Now that the Cebada C.P is operational a team of Belize Defence Force, Police and park rangers comprise the unit. In addition, FCD is launching patrols from there to conduct further reconnaissance deeper into that area. As a result, two farmers have been apprehended and charged for illegal cultivation and illegal entry into a national park.

E-Bulletin Funded by:



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