



Photo by Tony Rath

Promoting Core Conservation

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FCD Tracks goes Online

For sometime now, FCD's Newsletter, *FCD Tracks* has not reached you. Practically we stalled the publication since we were aiming to have it produced electronically. To do this we had to remodel our website to make it more interactive. During this time several developments have taken place at FCD and we are back, eager to inform you of the ongoing developments. Over this time, however, you may have caught sight of the FCD Facebook page and kept track of FCD's ongoing efforts.

We want to thank you for your unwavering support and interest maintained on FCD, and we trust you will find our success stories with an alleviating

optimism. This condition has been attained due to your support and encouragement. The successes are not only ours, but yours also as we move further in the mission of core conservation.

Now that we are back - this time Online, the *FCD Tracks* will be published once every four months. The narratives will be aimed at summarizing the main conservation actions undertaken by FCD in the Cayo District. Please share the stories and encourage your friends and colleagues to join us. Anyone can easily join us with a couple of clicks at www.fcdbelize.org

Karst Management Up and Climbing

Climbing the karst regions of the Chiquibul Forest requires a special set of aptitudes, skills, expertise and equipment. We had longed for some time, the identification of a set of individuals who could possess those traits. Fortunately enough with support from the Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT), the necessary finance was obtained for activating a three man Karst Management Unit.



Gliss Penados, born in San Jose Succotz and member of FCD since the early days of the organization in the

1980's was hired to lead the team. Gliss' aspiration has been to learn as much of the Chiquibul Cave System (CCS) and document the state of the system in order to give it an appropriate management. This is not an easy task, given that the CCS is highly unexplored and unknown. In addition, Belize has not charted a way on how best to manage a system like this, which led us to explore partnerships elsewhere. The newcomers to our aid have become the Western Kentucky University. Also FCD instituted a CCS Working Group in May 2015, whose primary aim is to assist and guide FCD in the appropriate management of the caverns.

With the expertise from Dr. Jason Polk and Dr. Leslie North a karst management training program for the FCD staff was begun. Gliss' team obtained a holistic view of karst management and learnt the use of a data entry form, so as to facilitate a systematic compilation of field information. This training came on the heels of a collaborative agreement signed between FCD and the Western Kentucky University. See <https://wkunews.wordpress.com/2015/06/10/belize-partnership/>

FCD Mission

FCD is a non-profit, non-governmental organization whose primary goal is to protect and manage the natural environment through adaptive resource management, conservation awareness and development of the human resource.

Vaca Forest Reserve Disaster

The last time we reported on the Vaca Forest Reserve, there was a vibrant movement with farmers learning new methods on the use of the land with support from the German based organization, GIZ. But by December the project closed down and FCD's Extension Technician was unable to continue operating in the area.

With the onset of the dry season, the fear of a forest fire in the area became a reality. During the month of May, uncontrolled wild fires devastated the area. A few members of the Friends of the



Vaca Forest Reserve were impacted as they lost crops and shelters including bubble houses, which had previously been funded through the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme.

As it stands now, FCD has been in contact with the Forest Department with a view of outlining steps forward. With a new upgrading of the road in the middle of the reserve, it is advisable that an improved monitoring program be put in place and a rigorous set of guidelines be provided to farmers inside and nearby the reserve. It goes without saying that forested areas does require a presence. For FCD, a major lesson learnt is that one person operating in these forested areas can make a major difference. We suspect that the absence of FCD's Extension Technician, made farmers lose their 'guard' and become less careful in the use of the land. The impacts are severe and the Forest Department together with FCD have the challenge now to rebuild the vibrant movement that once existed in the Vaca.

The Magic of the Chiquibul Telethon

In 2013 one of our wildest dreams was to have 18 park rangers in place at FCD. The Park Manager, Derric Chan, being a vociferous leader, repeatedly made it known that to cover the range and to have a more impact oriented enforcement program it was vital to have more rangers. But the limiting factor was the finance. Then there came the idea of a Chiquibul Telethon; an idea put into effect by the Friends of the Chiquibul, led by Mrs. Valerie Smith.

The event brought out people from all different walks of life. The media gave an astounding elevated platform to the actual situation of Chiquibul and the Friends of Chiquibul came out in great glamore. Volunteers from various institutions rallied behind us with one single objective, namely to get the cohort of Chiquibul Rangers, badly needed to safeguard the natural and cultural resource of the Chiquibul Forest.

The result was an exceptional success. By November of 2014, out of over 115 applicants to the job, the next set of Park Rangers were screened and hired. Thus began a new era for FCD. The training was intensive and the rangers

were subjected to first aid, natural history, ropes, tactical interventions and skills at arms. In the end 12 new rangers joined the 6 senior rangers. Since then the park rangers are deployed into the remotest areas of the Chiquibul and our presence is now felt throughout the Chiquibul Forest, where these rangers operate closely with the personnel of the Belize Defence Force and the Special Patrol Unit of the Police Department.



FCD remains grateful to the Friends of the Chiquibul and all those individuals and companies who assisted financially to make our dreams come true. The challenge is now keeping this robust team of rangers in the long term.

The New face of Las Cuevas

Boris Arevalo, Biologist and Research Station Manager at FCD has always maintained that the Las Cuevas Research Station, immersed in the heart of the Chiquibul Forest, makes the station an ideal location for research and education. But making it accessible to students throughout the year has been challenging due to the road conditions. Special interest was placed this year to upgrade the road and with the finance provided by the Dutch Army, the road was brought up to an improved standard. Last year the Dutch Army had used it and had destroyed it, thus we had solicited their assistance.

FCD also concentrated efforts in upgrading the facilities at Las Cuevas, through the support obtained from PACT and Viaventures Tour Company. By the time the students arrived this year in January, the LCRS looked shiny and new. The buildings were painted, new mattress and curtains were acquired, a riding lawn mower made the chopping more efficient and a solar panel was installed. The LCRS primarily



caters for researchers and University students who undergo training in tropical ecology. This current year, eight universities visited the facility and University of Florida students are conducting ongoing wildlife research. However, we are now welcoming other visitors who wish to overnight in the Chiquibul and enjoy the wonders of nature in the Western Maya Mountains. To learn more on this facility write us at fcd.lcrs@gmail.com

Conservation Posts on the Frontline

The 2013 address of the Prime Minister, in commemoration of Independence Day, Honourable Dean Barrow announced the creation of three conservation posts in the Chiquibul Forest. The new additions were to complement the three other posts, namely Tapir Camp, Ceibo Chico and Rio Blanco. Since then the arduous work began to identify the ideal point where to install these conservation posts. The first one installed in the remote area of the Chiquibul Forest, the Rio Blanco Conservation Post in 2008, has proven to be successful though it brought many lessons learnt.



The concept of a conservation post in the Caracol area, at Valentin was proposed since 2010. After the fatal injury of a Special Constable in Caracol, in a few weeks the Valentin Conservation Post was erected in late 2014. Several patrols have also been undertaken to find the ideal location for the second of three posts.

Together with Belize Defence Force personnel, air and ground reconnaissance we feel confident the setting is ready for the erection of the next conservation post. However, access to the remote area is difficult and a major challenge will be the movement of materials, due to a badly deteriorating forest road in Chiquibul.

The concept of conservation posts in the Chiquibul Forest, came about due to the remoteness, inaccessibility and human footprint impacts in desolated areas of the park. So instead of moving security agents from town to far distant areas, it made more sense to have the forces on the ground at a ready instant to detect and address incursions. Thanks to the Ministry of National Security, the concept is now a reality that has taken hold and signs of recovery of the forest, reduction of human footprint related to incursions and prevention of further expansion is now more evident. For example in the area of Rio Blanco, there has been a gain of 224 ha. (553.51 acres) of secondary forest. This gain was attributed to milpa abandonment. The next steps to strengthen the relationships among the Belize Defence Force, Police Department, Forest Department and FCD appears to be the revision of the conservation post protocols which outlines roles and responsibilities, and the activation of a Conservation Post Commission that can evaluate results and improve effectiveness over time.

FCD Programs

Protection & Enforcement

Community Development

Education & Public Awareness

Karst Management

Research & Monitoring

Landscape Management

Monitoring & Evaluation

Financial Sustainability

Exploring the Largest Sinkhole

During the month of February, after two preparatory reconnaissance expeditions, a team of explorers led by Jim Bevis of Mountain Equestrian Trails climbed down into the largest sinkhole located in the Chiquibul Forest. The sinkhole known as Nohoch Ch'en, is part of the Chiquibul Cave System. Like the Blue Hole in the Caribbean Sea the Nohoch Ch'en stands out several miles above. To the naked



Photo by Torly Rath

eye standing at the rim of the sinkhole is breath taking and one must have 'guts' to climb down as it is a free fall of over 450 ft down to the bottom where a forest covers the bottom. The purpose of the expedition was to document one of the most remote, rugged and unexplored locations in Belize and to hopefully further justify the uniqueness and value of this region as a potential World Heritage Site.

The Nohoch Ch'en sinkhole, the largest of 49 collapsed doline formations, is located in an area where surface water is very scarce, making it challenging to explore for long periods of time. Very little scientific information has been available for this region of the Chiquibul National Park, let alone the forest environment at the bottom of the 650 ft wide and 450 ft deep sinkhole. In the year 2000, several members of the Millennium Expedition descended by rope into the sinkhole and made brief observations, but time did not permit exploration and little data was collected.

Once the explorers went inside the sinkhole, they were constantly at work searching for epiphytes. Bruce Holst, of Marie Selby Botanical Gardens (MSBG) is perhaps the world's top specialist in epiphytes and other tropical forest plant species. He has been conducting research in Belize for over 20 years and has collected and catalogued over 10,000 species of different flora. Specimens collected by Holst are now being identified at MSBG. At the bottom they discovered large boulders covered with mosses, ferns, and orchids, and a profusion of epiphytes, proving the rich biodiversity potential of the Chiquibul Forest.

Getting to the bottom of the sinkhole was not easy. A Harken winch helped to lower people down to a ledge about a third of the way down into the hole and from there carefully made their way to the bottom.

New Hope for Scarlet Macaws

Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao cyanoptera*) 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 area. Based on studies conducted by the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Chiquibul Forest is considered to be a critical habitat for Scarlet Macaw conservation due to its high carrying capacity.

For more than five years FCD has been working in the protection of these parrots. During this time we have documented the loss of many nests and the manner how poachers decisively move through the jungle seeking the young birds. At first Guatemalans seeking the xate leaves, would accidentally also target macaws but after some years we observed "specialized" groups of people coming in specifically for the birds. Despite putting in effect a presence in the area to deter poachers, we would still document losses, due to the inability for the FCD field team and Scarlet 6 team to monitor the entire breeding area used by macaws.

As a result this year, with an endorsement from the Forest Department, an in-situ conservation program has begun. The objective of the program is to remove



macaw chicks from the wild that are considered to be at high risk of being stolen, and hand rear them in a contained environment. In order to get this endorsed FCD with support from Scarlet Six Bio-monitoring Team and the Belize Wildlife and Referral Clinic developed a proposal, outlining the protocols to be followed. Three months into the program, we are happy to say that all of the chicks are healthy. This has been possible through the finances provided from various institutions as well as the cohort of volunteers that have joined to make this program a success. With this new intervention it is our hope that more macaws will be able to fly wild and free, and that the population will subsequently become more healthy.

Join Us in the Effort!

Every so often people would ask us how best they can help. Although the areas we work would seem to be remote and distant, you can be connected to the work we do through a variety of ways. The following are various ways you can join us in the conservation effort:

1. If you have friends who are University professors encourage them to visit the Las Cuevas Research Station website www.lascuevas.org and to make this research station their next destination point for tropical studies.
2. Visit our website www.fcdbelize.org and join us as a member or write us at fcd@btl.net and ask for your membership form.
3. Make a donation Online by visiting our website.
4. Join our Facebook page



E-Bulletin Funded by



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