

BELIZE CONSERVATION FUND

NEWSLETTER

December 2011



TO HELP:

Please send contributions to
Belize Conservation Fund
c/o Massachusetts Audubon Society
208 South Great Road,
Lincoln, MA 01773
Or call Bancroft Poor /Karen O'Neill
at 800-289-9504

Enhancing the Visitor's Experience at La Milpa and Hillbank

By Lucy Gertz

When you visit a wildlife refuge, or a Mass Audubon sanctuary, for example, you will find signs, posters, identification tags, maps, handouts, and many other materials that will help you understand where you are and what you are looking at. Today, when guests arrive at the Programme for Belize lodges, they will be greeted and guided by the knowledgeable and talented field station staff.

But, we know that we can make the guests' experiences even richer by offering opportunities for them to explore the area and learn on their own.

In the summer of 2011, I began to create an interpretive format for Pfb. Plans such as these are used at 12 Mass Audubon wildlife sanctuaries. These plans help identify resources needed to improve facilities and amenities to support enhanced visitor experiences. Interpretative plans include: recommendations for creating online visitor resources, designing and installing exhibit spaces, and producing signs, booklets, and other publications. The plans also direct us to create improved accessibility of buildings and trails, and a suite of self-guided

visitor experience resources for each site.

Interpretive planning looks at:

- The unique combination of available and desired resources, experiences, stories, and messages
- Audience groups
- What media will best target each audience groups

Pfb's Interpretive Plan is still in progress, but there are some things we have learned. La Milpa Ecolodge and Research Center and Hillbank Field Station are uniquely positioned to inspire guests to observe, understand, and protect the biologically rich and globally significant Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (RBCMA). Enhancing the visitor experience with interpretation, online visitor information, and self-guided resources will provide avenues for further visitor engagement before, during, and after a visit. Establishing display areas, updating signage, and creating safe and appropriate self-guided resources to supplement the guided experiences will all be proposed and prioritized in the interpretive plan.

(Continued)



Experiencing Belize for the First Time

By Willow Gertz (age 18)

From the moment I stepped off the airplane, I knew I was going on an adventure I would never forget. I was excited about traveling in another country for the first time—especially one with warm weather, palm trees, and crystal-clear Caribbean waters. We were greeted by two friendly Belizeans who would be our guides.

After a wonderful guided visit to the Belize Zoo, we drove through the country for several hours and reached La Milpa. I had trouble sleeping the first night because of the incredible sounds of the forest – a gecko chirping loudly, foliage rustling, a howler monkey roaring. The next morning, from the porch of our cabin, I saw that we were in a clearing surrounded by tall palms, ferns, and tropical foliage. We stayed at La Milpa for three days, walking the trails, looking at ruins, and enjoying the delicious native foods.

The next stop was Hillbank. We arrived there by motorboat since it is located on the banks of the New River. Different from La Milpa, Hillbank Field Station has more people staying there, working and studying. During our trip, a mother monkey threw sticks at me to warn me to stay away from her baby, I climbed an ancient Mayan temple, I went crocodile watching on a moonlit lagoon, and watched a Morelet's crocodile swim under our boat.

Belize was a great place to visit and I hope to go back.

Enhancing the Visitor's Experience at La Milpa and Hillbank

By Lucy Gertz (Continued from cover)

Some of the tools to be developed for PfB:

- Online information – site maps, trail info, biota checklists, and interpretive publications
- Field station maps – large copy to be displayed in Center, downloadable version to be available online, printed copies available for guests
- Updated wayfinding, regulatory, road, and trail signage
- Information on the natural history immediately around the Field Stations
- Enhanced wildlife sighting record boards
- Bird and other biota checklists and additional wildlife observation/identification resources
- Display of RBCMA including a map of Belize showing the Rio Bravo property
- Kid-friendly experiences, resources, and materials
- Museum spaces and displays
- Interpretation of weather station, green features, plantings, and forestry artifacts

Over the next year, Mass Audubon staff will continue to work with the Programme for Belize to complete the plan and priority projects, raise funds, and produce materials and media that will provide exciting, educational, and important educational experiences for La Milpa and Hillbank guests.



Photo by M. Gray

Thank you to Birders' Exchange and Betty and Wayne Petersen for the donation of binoculars, telescope, tripod and carrying case. These essential tools were critically needed and are much appreciated by researchers at Hillbank and TIDE. For more information about Birders' Exchange please visit: www.aba.org/bex

Experience Belize for yourself!

Contact the Programme for Belize: www.pfbelize.org
or Mass Audubon Tours: 800-289-9504 or
travel@massaudubon.org



A BIRD IN THE HAND

On December 10, 2010, a total of 24 students from the local community primary schools at San Felipe and August Pine Ridge visited the La Milpa Ecolodge and Research Center for an inspiring day of mist-netting and banding birds and taking their understanding of the natural world to the next level.

Working in collaboration with conservation partner the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the students learned about bird monitoring activities and contributed to an important legacy of research while deepening their knowledge of bird species, bird banding techniques, migration patterns, and much more.

There were some wonderful moments during the day, particularly when the kids had opportunities to release the birds after they were banded and catalogued.



Donations support scholarship programs and the next generation.

SCHOLARSHIPS TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

On November 16 and 17, 2011, Programme for Belize's staff members Herbert Haylock and Jorge Estrella visited two schools to present scholarship awards to 3 deserving students at each respective school: the Belize Rural High School in the community of Double Head Cabbage and the Belize High School of Agriculture in the community of Trinidad.

These scholarships were made possible by the generosity of donors to the Belize Conservation Fund.

The six winning students were awarded scholarships for the school year 2011-2012 and selected based on merit, need, and academic scoring. The scholarship awards totaling US \$1,000.00 were distributed to the schools on the six students' behalf in short ceremonies held on the respective school grounds.

The three winners from the Belize High School of Agriculture were: Brenda Hernandez from the village of San Felipe, Gissellie Tillett from the village of San Lazaro, and Nancy

Martinez from the village of San Lazaro.

The three winners from the Belize Rural High School were: Natalie Pratt from the village of Bermudian Landing, Zamaria Ferguson from the village of Rancho Dolores, and Lorena Vasquez from the village of Rhaburn's Ridge.

This third round of scholarship grant funds has continued to nurture and expand the positive relationships between the Programme for Belize and the neighboring towns. Programme for Belize would like to extend its heartfelt thanks to all those who donated to the Belize Conservation Fund. Without the support of the Fund, these grant funds would not be available to these talented students. Thank you!



INTERNS ESTABLISH THE MEDICINAL GARDEN AT THE LA MILPA ECOLOGE AND RESEARCH CENTER – JUNE 2011

Thanks to the generosity of donors, in June 2011, four student interns from the Quebec-Labrador Foundation arrived at the La Milpa Ecolodge and Research Center to begin a two week summer internship program. The purpose of the program was to offer the interns an opportunity to participate in Programme for Belize programs and activities and then assist in creating educational and collateral materials for use by the Programme. During this time, the interns also learned much about the Belizean culture, concerns, and its people.

The students provided GIS mapping work, took photos for PFB use, and re-established the medicinal garden.

Thanks to the interns, the La Milpa Ecolodge and Research Center now has an active medicinal garden, new presentations for the site manager, and a new trail map.

PfB is very grateful for the opportunity to have worked with the Quebec-Labrador Foundation. This was the first internship experience for PFB, and we hope to develop similar programs for other international students.

Our special thanks to interns Conner, Charley, Elizabeth, Chessye, and Graham for all the hard work, effort, and dedication. Special thanks also to Beth Alling for supporting this program and collaborating with PFB to make it a reality.

Belize Conservation Fund supports the Toledo Institute for the Environment (TIDE)

ABALONE CAYE IN DANGER

Abalone Caye is the site of the Port Honduras Marine Reserve (PHMR) Ranger Station, managed in partnership by TIDE and the Belize Fisheries Department. Abalone Caye has recently suffered severe coastal erosion that threatens the existence of the Ranger Station, and the safety of the rangers on Abalone Caye. TIDE is actively pursuing solutions and funding to protect the use of Abalone Caye as a research and Ranger Station, and to continue the use of the island as a crucial conservation and education platform. The erosion of the island has accelerated in recent years due to destructive wave patterns, winds, and water currents. Without intervention, the Ranger Station is in imminent danger of being lost, potentially in the next major storm or hurricane.

Abalone Caye is vitally important to the health of the Port Honduras Marine Reserve, which covers 160 square miles of high biodiversity, including a robust belt of mangroves and sandy coasts that provide a critical link between terrestrial and marine ecosystems. Abalone Caye is the base for regular patrols by TIDE rangers, and joint patrols with the Belize Defense Force, fisheries, and others. Ensuring legal fishing and marine ecosystem health begins here.

Donations to the Belize Conservation Fund raised \$2,000 for TIDE to partially fund some intervention methods, including stabilizing the current landmass of the caye, reinforcing the Ranger Station, and constructing a physical defense. After these stages are complete, the team will begin the reforestation of the island and reestablish the mangroves, which will protect against future erosion and provide key habitat. A feasibility study, habitat and bathymetric survey, environmental impact assessment, and consultation with an engineer are being conducted in order to determine the short- and long-term consequences of constructing the physical defense.

Additional funds are needed to continue this work.



YOUTH CONSERVATION COMPETITION OCTOBER 2011

The fifth annual TIDE Weekend in Punta Gorda highlights the conservation efforts in Southern Belize, celebrates the International Year of Forests, provides a multitude of education and conservation activities, and gives local fisher folk, artisans, and restaurant and hotel owners the opportunity to make some income and welcome in the 2012 tourist season.

One of the highlights of the weekend is the Youth Conservation Competition, during which youths compete for Associate Degree Scholarships by making stage presentations on this year's theme, "The Value of Forests." This competition allows the contestants and audience to learn about the work of participating conservation organizations and to learn about forests and the impacts of climate change.

The Youth Conservation Competition has proven to be an innovative way of reaching out to the masses in creative ways, learning about the work of conservation groups in Belize, and most of all assisting youths in developing a deeper appreciation for the environment. Participants get the opportunity to win tertiary level scholarships as their prize for being in the competition. Scholarship funds are donated by the Belize Conservation Fund.

Participants included Emily Evans of St. Catherine Academy representing Belize Audubon Society, Tanisha Cal of Julain

Cho Technical High School representing Sustainable Harvest International (SHI) – Belize, Brittney Logan of Independence High School representing Southern Environmental Association, Cordelia Kile of Toledo Community College representing Colombia River Cooperative (CRC), Rudolph Parham of Toledo Community College representing TIDE, and for the first time we had an international candidate from Guatemala who was Michael Josue Mendez Parham of Instituto Nacional de Educación Básica, representing FUNDAECO.

For the year 2011 to 2012, we are proud to report that Mr. Rudolph Parham representing TIDE won this year's title for the Youth Conservation Competition, with Tanisha Cal from SHI - Belize taking second place and Cordelia Kile from CRC taking third place.

The TIDE Weekend is an empowering, positive, community-oriented display of conservation that promotes individual environmental action and the support of local youth. This event has been a huge success in the past and is the perfect education and outreach platform to meet a variety of age groups about the importance of conservation. To see more including photos go to: www.tidebelize.org/en/article/nov_2011/tide-weekend-2011-report.

MAKE A DONATION

To make a donation to the *Programme for Belize (PFB)* or to the Toledo Institute for Developmental and Environment (TIDE), please complete this form and return to:

**Massachusetts Audubon Society
Belize Conservation Fund
208 South Great Road
Lincoln, MA 01773**

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Yes, I would like to make a donation

Donation Information

Enclosed check _____

*Checks should be made payable to
Mass Audubon –Belize Conservation Fund*

or please charge my credit card for the amount of _____

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MORELET'S CROCODILE

In April 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a proposal to remove the Morelet's crocodile from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) resulting from recovery of the species. The species is found in Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala.

The Morelet's crocodile was listed as endangered throughout its entire range on June 2, 1970. The overharvest for commercial purposes was the primary reason for the Morelet's crocodile being listed. However, as a result of the species' improved status, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the species is no longer threatened with extinction. This proposed rule, if made final, would remove the Morelet's crocodile from the list throughout its range.

The Morelet's crocodile was named after a French naturalist, P.M.A. Morelet, who discovered the species in Mexico in 1850. It is relatively smaller than other crocodiles such as the American crocodile, with most wild adults usually ranging in length from just 6.6 to 8.2 feet. It is generally found in freshwater environments such as lakes, swamps, and slow-moving rivers. The majority of the Morelet's crocodile population occurs in Mexico and Belize (87 percent), and those two countries hold the majority of the potentially suitable habitat (81 percent) throughout the species' range. Guatemala contains the remaining 13 percent of the wild Morelet's crocodiles and the remaining 19 percent of the potentially suitable habitat throughout the species' range.

Travelers to Hillbank and the Lamanai ruins frequently see Morelet's crocodiles in the New River.



The Belize Conservation Fund recently purchased four sets of snake tongs for PFB staff to help relocate snakes.



Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE)

The Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) was founded in 1997 to meet the growing environmental and development needs of the Toledo District, the southernmost district of Belize. TIDE was conceived as a grassroots initiative in response to the negative environmental effects from activities such as manatee poaching, illegal fishing, illegal logging, destructive farming methods, and other types of unsustainable development. Initially started by volunteers, TIDE has now grown to include 20 paid staff.

TIDE's mission is to research, monitor, and help manage Toledo's natural resources. The Maya Mountain Marine Area Corridor stretches from the lush pristine forests of the Maya Mountains to the white sand beaches and spectacular array of colors of

the Belize Barrier Reef System World Heritage Site. In addition, TIDE assists with planning responsible tourism and other environmentally sustainable economic alternatives by providing training and support to local residents.

Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) also leads ecotourism expeditions throughout Belize, in addition to other wildlife conservation and monitoring activities.

Contact Information:

Celia Mahung, Executive Director
Toledo Institute for
Development and Environment,
Punta Gorda Town, Belize
www.tidebelize.org



PROGRAMME FOR BELIZE

The *Programme for Belize* (PFB) is a Belizean, nonprofit organization, established in 1988, to conserve the natural heritage of Belize and to promote wise use of its natural resources. The Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (RBCMA) is its flagship project where *Programme for Belize* demonstrates the practical application of its principles.

Since its inception, PFB has secured 260,000 acres of forest in northwestern Belize that was otherwise destined for clearance. The RBCMA represents approximately 4 percent of Belize's total land area and is home to a rich sample of biodiversity including: 400 species of birds, 200 species of trees, 70 species of mammals and 12 endangered animal species. On

the RBCMA, PFB conducts research, conservation education, professional training, and promotes environmental awareness among visitors. In addition, the forests of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area are important sites for a carbon sequestration project. Here, four million tons of carbon will be sequestered for generations to come.

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