

## A year in review: End of year report from Zoo Director Sharon Matola

For many, the year 2009 presented massive challenges due to stresses resulting from a global financial recession. However, even as we dealt with that difficulty from beginning to end of 2009, we also saw major positive advancements occur within our growing and important organization.



January had added joy due to a visit from long-time friend and colleague, Dr. Lee Durrell, the widow of Gerald Durrell and Honorary Director of the Durrell Conservation Trust in Jersey. She is a firm reminder of the strong influence Gerald Durrell had upon seeing The Belize Zoo established and continuing to develop with always a hint of his spirit.

To continue with the profile of conservation success, we released the 14th Harpy Eagle in mid-January, as part of the Belize Harpy Eagle Restoration Program, in the Rio Bravo Conservation Management Area, with the full support of the Government of Belize, the Peregrine Fund, and Programme for Belize. We are happy to add that our collaboration with the Mennonite community of Blue Creek is increasing and their involvement with this important work is growing at an enthusiastic level.

Sadly, the springtime of 2009 saw us saying farewell to Fallet Young, a long-time friend of The Belize Zoo, and along with Dr. Rob Horwich, the major force behind the beginning of the world-famous Community Baboon Sanctuary. His happy spirit continued on until his last days. This was captured on video, shared with all on the internet, and Fallet also contributed to my world-wide BBC broadcast, telling a huge audience about the magic of the Community Baboon Sanctuary and how it has enhanced the environmental profile of Belize.

Adding to the excitement of spring in Belize was the visit from Panthera CEO and author of the

book, JAGUAR, Dr. Alan Rabinowitz. The field research Dr. Rabinowitz undertook in the 1980's in the Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve, led to its becoming a well-established protected area, and known for its providing a safe home for jaguars in Belize, as well as a variety of other species of our native wildlife. With the fine support of British Forces, Dr. Rabinowitz, joined by the Minister of Natural Resources and Deputy Prime Minister, Hon. Gaspar Vega, as well as Minister Michael Hutchinson, Wildlife Officer George Hanson, and field researcher, Omar Figueroa, all flew over Victoria Peak and then landed in a remote Helicopter Landing Site within the Sanctuary. There, Alan provided the Ministers with a thorough interpretive address about the important role the Wildlife Sanctuary plays within the entire scope of protecting Jaguars in Belize. This historic "Jaguar Journey" also flew over the Central Jaguar Corridor, the forested lands which lie north and south of the zoo, and lands which serve as a vital forest much-needed connected forest travel-path for Jaguars

The Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center was the proud recipient of the Belize Tourism Board, BTB, 9th National Tourism Award, "EDUCATIONAL AWARD OF THE YEAR." This prestigious award was given on the 22nd of April, and reflects the good work the zoo continues to put forward throughout the country.

Well-attended birthday parties for both "April the Tapir" and our star Jaguar, "Junior Buddy", brought additional attention to both of their species. "Jaguar Encounter", starring "Junior Buddy" continues to put hundreds of people in touch with this magnificent cat, teaching them about the stunning beauty and power of the Jaguar, and sealing their belief that this species simply should continue on forever. "Junior Buddy" is a true "spokes-cat" for his species, and is more of a positive influence on behalf of Jaguar conservation, than we ever thought would be possible!

In May, we successfully hatched and reared two Scarlet Macaws. Captive-bred and hand-raised, they would not be able to survive in the wild, however, these two beauties are our "Encounter Scarlet Macaws", allowing visitors the opportunity to get "up close and personal" with this beautiful and rare species. Speaking of Scarlet Macaw survival, the Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw continues to be a popular book and is now available in paperback. The Mallot Award was given to author Bruce Barcott for this important work, and I make an effort to update all with posted "Life After Last Flight" articles. In summary, the Chalillo Dam is both an environmental and economic disaster. The sorry predictions about the dam have been well-realized over the past five years, and we applaud the Belize Environmental Law and Policy Organization, BELPO, for continuing to bring the dam company, BECOL, and the Department of the Environment, DOE, to court over the glaring infractions which have added serious negative impact to our nation.

Working with the Forest Department, we provided important training for two of their officers this year, and we look forward to more of this important collaboration. Also important, is our growing relationship with Galen University and their veterinarian internship program. Hosting students from various universities, in conjunction with Galen University, has led to an empowered program, both here in Belize and within the United States vet school arena. Building upon this unique academic relationship, I gave presentations in New York to pre-vet students, as well as to vet students, about the possibilities for wildlife vet education enhancement right here at The Belize Zoo. Developing these academic internships will no doubt become a vibrant part of our future profile.

The year 2009 brought “Indy the Tapir” to the Zoo. Kept illegally as a pet, the Forest Department brought the little guy to us in June. He has become a big favourite for visitors, and will eventually be introduced to our “tapir troop.” And what fun kids have feeding “Indy” his much-loved “ba-ba”. The zoo held two parties in December for under-privileged kids in Belize, and bottle-feeding “Indy” as well as meeting Jaguars and Scarlet Macaws was a delightful end-of-year fun time for all.

Celso Poot, our Director of Education, is continuing to foster strong environmental education programs with Earth Expeditions. Thanks to a gift of valuable teleconferencing equipment from the Tully School system in New York, Celso will be bringing “door-to-door” scenes of The Belize Zoo to educational institutions far from our borders.

How did we end the year? With a smashing success of the release of “Hope” the Harpy Eagle into the forests of Rio Bravo! “Hope” was flown to Belize with the kind help of FedEx Express, and then on to Blue Creek with the fine assistance of the Belize Defence Force. “Hope” was accompanied by USA Ambassador, Mr. Vinai Thummalapally and his wife, Barbara, as well as the British High Commissioner, Mr. Pat Ashworth, and yes, a definite mission was clear. “Hope” and his entourage were focusing upon drawing additional attention to the serious issue of Climate Change. And how does this connection connect?

The emissions of carbon over the years have made definite and not-so-nice impact upon our climate. The modifications are noted on a regular basis. More carbon is released annually by forest degradation than from all cars, planes and trains on our planet. Cut down on carbon emissions? We must. What is the easiest way to approach this challenge? We need to protect and govern and manage our remaining forests. By doing so, we not only secure a healthier environmental future for all, but majestic species of wildlife, such as “Hope” the Harpy Eagle, have a greater chance of a successful future in the wild. “Hope” needs forests healthy and thriving. And so do we!

All at The Belize Zoo thank you for your support throughout the year 2009, and we look forward, with so much enthusiasm and confidence, to a remarkable New Year!