

## **December 2010 Letter From Zoo Director, Sharon Matola**

The year 2010 saw The Belize Zoo riding a wave of "moving forward" with creative programs forming, and the strengthening of our entire institution. Two books appeared in September.

Both were about "Jaguar Ambassador," Junior Buddy, and we were excited to present these at an official book launching in early November. The introduction of our new and extremely important poster on behalf of Jaguar conservation, HELP ME OR HURT ME, was also scheduled to be introduced that day. This poster draws attention to the illegal sale of jaguar body parts, i.e. teeth for jewelry, and is the first of its kind anywhere. It promises to draw hard attention to a chronic and sad situation: Exploitation of this endangered wild cat for an artifact trade that needs to be totally phased out. The local schoolchildren were excited about coming to see Junior on that scheduled day, the press was ready and waiting, energies were high....then WHAM! Life changed overnight for us on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October. Hurricane Richard paid a visit, and this windy fellow created a scene of devastation at the Zoo. Giant trees were felled and sent crashing through exhibits. This alone would have been enough of a challenge to counter. But Hurricane Richard also ripped apart aviaries, collapsed enclosures, and covered the entire pathway route with trees and fallen vegetation.

So what to do? It was decided that no mere hurricane would hold back TBZ. Strategies formed and the goal to re-open the Zoo on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December was set. With the good help of so many, efforts were consolidated and the Zoo DID meet the challenge. We re-opened to the public on December 1<sup>st</sup>, combined with our book launching and the introduction of our HELP ME OR HURT ME poster. And what initially appeared to be a total disaster, is now appearing to be one of those "blessings in disguise." Funds raised from our Hurricane Richard Relief Campaign has made possible new and exciting changes. The Zoo is looking better than ever. Creative design is at our forefront, and our "new look" is one that is drawing many compliments from Zoo visitors. While the press referred to our quick comeback as a "miracle", I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone, both here in Belize and abroad, who saw the severe urgency of our challenge, and provided support.

The consolidated effort came from those of us who realize how important this little zoo is. The Belize Zoo has had an immense impact on the nation, geared towards the raising of environmental awareness. Keeping this momentum "alive and kicking" is a big priority. Our supporters agree, and, working together, we achieved what most said was impossible. Are we truly all healed and where we want to be? Not at all. A lot of work is necessary to polish off the footprint of Hurricane Richard. But we are getting there, and getting there with soaring gusto. As we begin a New Year, we are starting with creative energy and spirit, and ensuring to all that we are, indeed, the "Best Little Zoo in the World" A very happy and healthy 2011 to all!

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