

Hector the Hicatee



Some of the coolest members of The Belize Zoo are rarely seen. Hector the Hicatee is a perfect example. He is always in our large fish pond; a happy Hicatee, but out of view.....Let's have a look at this unique turtle. The Central American River Turtle, or "Hicatee" as called in Belize, is a special species, and one that has been given the unfortunate status by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN, as **critically endangered**. There is a current listing of the top 25 most endangered turtles in the world. Hector's species is among them.

Hicatees only live in a few freshwater areas of Belize, Guatemala and Mexico. Belize remains their last stronghold in the entire region. And what a beauty Hector's species is! With their large bodies (up to 40lbs), small heads and upturned snouts, the Hicatee is a turtle of character. They are mainly active at night, searching around their river homes for fallen fruits and leaves to feast upon.

Speaking of feasting upon.....Hector was astonished and vexed to learn that his species was purposely hunted for feasting upon during the recent La Ruta Maya river race! Under the guise of a "cultural" tradition, the important hunting moratorium, established to protect our Hicatees, was lifted. As a result, many Hicatees ended up on the grill during this river race.

La Ruta Maya began, years ago, as an event which was aimed at drawing attention to our important riverine habitats, and the need to keep these rivers in outstanding condition. Hector strongly believes that if La Ruta Maya participants had known that their riverside feasting was directly and sadly contributing to the further decline of this critically endangered turtle, then they would have preferred eating our traditional chicken, rice and beans.

A conservation campaign with this in mind was started just in time for La Ruta Maya, and involved handing out flyers and stickers, as well as banners being put up on the highways, stating the status and regulations protecting the Central American River Turtle. And that's not

all! Hector himself made two very important public appearances. One was on March 23rd on Love FM's Morning Show, Belize leading news station, alongside Hicatee Field Researcher, Dr. Thomas Rainwater, and local Hicatee expert, Tony Garel. The other was at University of Belize's Earth Day Fair!

It isn't too late to save the Hicatee. Strict conservation laws need to be maintained and respected. Our grandchildren deserve to know that such a special turtle shares their nation. Let's not wipe out such a cool part of our natural heritage.