

Panama is doing fine at 9!

It seems like only yesterday when Panama the Harpy Eagle arrived to The Belize Zoo, in “chick mode”, all white and fluffy. He was supposed to be a part of the Belize Harpy Eagle Restoration Program, BHERP. “Panama”, hatched in captivity at The Peregrine Fund HQ in Panama, was scheduled for release into the tropical forests of Belize, but due to having a damaged eye upon hatching, he could not be a part of this progressive conservation program.

Program directors acknowledged that it would be unwise to release a “not-quite fully-fit” Harpy eagle into the wilds of Belize, and consequently, he was given to The Belize Zoo. Zoo officials were more than elated! It was immediately decided that Panama would become an “Ambassador” for all Harpy eagles, helping to bring attention to the beauty of his species, and the urgent need to protect our remaining Harpy eagles for the future. The program, now into its 9th year, has seen a total of 15 eagles released into the Selva Maya forests of Belize, and is still putting forward an energetic education program about our rare and stunning Harpies.

This mighty raptor has excelled at his job. Hand-raised by his good friend, Zoo Director Sharon Matola, “Panama” the Harpy eagle remains comfortable around people, and is not shy about showing off just how beautiful these regal eagles are. “Panama’s” behavior is unusual. It was underscored that close encounters with the mighty bird could last, for the most part, only two years. After that, it was predicted by raptor experts, that “Panama” would become aggressive and lose his people-friendly attitude. Not so! As time passes, “Panama” appears to become more and more amicable, which is good news! Given that the Harpy eagle is considered to be “nearly extinct in Central America”, the value of his education profile at the Zoo, along with his “people-are-my-buds” attitude, provides an invaluable learning experience for all visitors. Both “Panama” and his mate-to-be, “Da Queen”, are easily seen from the ground, as well as from our beautiful aerial walkways.

Part of the education awareness strategy is to have a birthday party for “Panama” each November. There is always a school group in attendance, and “Panama” seems to enjoy all of the attention. Also, like many of the other zoo animals, “Panama” has his own song, which is expertly performed by the pre-schoolers from nearby La Democracia village. The Belize Zoo believes that learning should be a fun and memorable experience. Not only do birthday party guests meet and greet the stunning and entertaining “Panama”, but the kids, after their snacks (kids get cake, eagle gets a rat), also receive posters of the famous “Panama”. Finally, a

surprise appearance from “too-wild-for-words” “Hope” the Harpy eagle mascot, solidly reinforces to all that the Harpy eagle, a vital part of the natural heritage of Belize, should be admired, protected and respected by all. Happy 9th Hatch-day, Panama!

