

## Wow, oh wow! It's a Mountain Cow



2011 was truly a "baby boom" year for the TBZ. It seemed that everyone, from crocs to deer to mottled owls, was bringing new life into this world. The landmark birth this year, however, happened on March 15th. Zoo staff had been crossing their fingers for months before, ever since Veterinarian Dr George Kolias, of Cornell University in New York, had confirmed our 5 year old Tapir "Navidad" to indeed be with calf! So, on this wonderful day, Navidad added a new member to the TBZ Tapir squad, and the first Tapir ever born at the Zoo, "Marchismo"!

The Zoo staff was thrilled beyond words at this monumental birth, and watched as Navidad "cleaned" her newborn with gentle licks, then nudged him to take his first few steps. First time momma Navidad was a bit unsure of herself at first, but, under the expert guidance of the Zoo's animal management staff, soon became a phenomenal mother; nursing her son, taking him to the pond for baths, and teaching him all things "tapir".

Little Marchismo doesn't know it yet, but he is a VIA-Very Important Animal. The Baird's Tapir is the national animal of Belize, and is also listed as Endangered by the IUCN. The largest land mammal in Central America is seeing a major population decline of its species, due to habitat loss, hunting, and even traffic collisions, as has happened too many times right on Belize's Western Highway.

In El Salvador, the Baird's Tapir is no more, and its status is unknown in Ecuador. As for many species, Belize may be one of the last strongholds for "mountain cows". Marchismo's birth is a great victory for their conservation, and one more beacon of hope for the survival this powerful mammal, whose great strength and toughness make it a worthy opponent for a Jaguar, but no match for bullets and machines.

Some day soon, Marchismo will have to accept his VIA status, and take up the mantle of Tapir Ambassador, like April and all the mountain cows before him, teaching TBZ visitors about the importance of Tapirs as seed predators and dispersers, and key nutrient recyclers in our forests. For now, he will continue bonding with his loving mom, as tapirs tend to do for a year or more in the wild, and learning to be a fully fledged Tapir.