

BELIZE

Employing Conservation Strategies as Diverse as the Country's Landscape



conservation profile

action areas Gulf of Honduras, Meso-American Reef, Maya Mountain Marine Corridor, Maya Forest

targets manatees, tropical rain forests, sea turtles, coral reefs, mangroves, 4,000 flowering plant species, crocodiles, lobster, jaguars, dolphins, whale sharks, scarlet macaw, mahogany, grouper, snapper, permit, bonefish, tarpon, tapirs, keel-billed motmots, black and white hawk eagles, anchovies

stresses unregulated tourism, overfishing, farm and factory pollution, slash and burn agriculture, unsustainable logging, urban development

strategies implement educational programs, develop ecotourism, establish boat patrols, nature land trusts, organize debt-for-nature swaps, pursue carbon-sequestration projects

results establishment of 11 new marine protected areas, strengthened land trusts, reduced manatee poaching, linkage of private lands through new conservation tools, retrained fishermen as fishing guides and research technicians

partners Toledo Institute for Development and Environment, (TIDE), Programme for Belize, Friends of Nature, Belize Audubon Society (BAS)



Pelicans break from the mangroves on the Belizean coast. © Will Heyman/The Nature Conservancy

Relatively speaking, Belize hasn't been on the world map for too long. The former British Honduras gained independence from the United Kingdom and became Belize in 1981 after territorial disputes were settled.

Remarkably diverse tropical rain forests cover more than 90 percent of Belize, feature more than 4,000 species of native flowering plants, including 250 orchid species and 700 types of trees. Five species of large cats, giant anteaters, tapirs and howler monkeys are just a few of the at-risk mammals that count on the forests for food and shelter. The country's Caribbean coastline, made up of mangroves, seagrass beds, coral reefs and

atolls supports a wealth of species including manatees, hawksbill turtles, dolphins and whale sharks.

Belize's small, essentially private enterprise economy is based primarily on agriculture and agro-based industry, with tourism and construction rapidly gaining ground. Sugar, the chief crop, accounts for nearly half of the country's exports, and the banana industry is Belize's largest employer.

Although 263,000 people live in Belize but easy accessibility to this Massachusetts-size country wedged between Mexico and Guatemala has put native plants and animals in jeopardy. Unmanaged logging, unregulated tourism, overfishing and water pollution from



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sewage, farm and factory runoff are threatening the nation's forests and coral reefs.

While protecting land through purchase is a practical strategy in the United States, in most cases The Nature Conservancy cannot own land overseas.

That's why it's vital for the Conservancy to network with private and public Belize-based partners. Working there since 1989, the Conservancy has helped other organizations purchase land and create protection plans for four major regions: the Maya Forest, the Meso-American Reef, the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor and the Gulf of Honduras.

Conservation strategies are as diverse as Belize's landscape. They include protecting forests to alleviate global warming, developing a fire regime to save the yellow-headed parrot and other birds, teaching fishermen new ways to earn their livings and patrolling coastal waters to protect endangered manatees. By working with partners on jointly-agreed-upon conservation goals, the Conservancy can have a long-lasting and far-reaching impact across Belize.

Maya Forest

The Maya Forest stretches from Mexico's southern Yucatan Peninsula, throughout Belize and into northern Guatemala. That makes it the largest con-

tiguous tropical rain forest in all of Mexico and Central America. In addition to its impressive natural abundance, it is the site of numerous archeological sites from the ancient Mayan civilization.

By linking with local partner organizations the Conservancy is helping to protect this vital lowland jungle, which includes the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area in Belize, the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico and the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala. The area is threatened by land clearing for agriculture and cattle ranching, water pollution caused by agricultural run-off, a growing human population and poaching.

Conservancy projects in the Maya Forest focus on building an ecotourism program centered around migratory birds, involving United States and Canadian energy companies in an effort to curb global warming, improving agricultural practices and helping partners purchase development rights and crucial lands.

Meso-American Reef

The 400-plus mile (644-plus kilometer) Meso-American Reef, the second largest in the world, hugs the Caribbean coasts of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. About half of this barrier reef-180 miles (290 kilometers)-is located off Belize's coast.

By collaborating with several local conservation organizations and the Belizian government, the Conservancy is building a network of marine protected areas along the entire reef. Conservation efforts center around protecting whale sharks and endangered reef fish, and creating a national marine park that can be used as a model throughout Central America.

Maya Mountain Marine Corridor

This section of southern Belize spans from Maya Mountain oak and pine forests at elevations of 4,000 feet to the mangrove swamps, seagrass beds and offshore cays of Port Honduras in the Caribbean Sea. In between, pine savannas and six major watersheds intermingle amidst a tropical jungle.

Overfishing by Belizeans, Guatemalans and Hondurans has taken its toll on the Gulf of Honduras. Slash and burn subsistence farming by local farmers has strained the abutting tropical forests. Coastal shrimp farms, unsustainable mahogany logging, poaching of jaguars and illegal fishing for the live reef fish trade also are formidable threats.

The Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) is the Conservancy's partner in the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor. Together, the two organizations are employing innovative efforts such as debt-for-nature swaps, fishermen gill-net buyback exchanges and the establishment land trusts to protect Belize's biological diversity.

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