



Belize 2022 Symposium: Celebrate, Collaborate, Conserve

Executive Summary

From Sunday 30th January to Tuesday 1st February, Blancaneaux Lodge in the Mountain Pine Ridge of Belize came alive with more than 40 Belizean and international NGOs, policymakers and community leaders. The symposium brought together a diverse group to support the conservation of the country's natural wealth. Belize's heritage in nature conservation quickly revealed itself as NGOs gathered to **celebrate, collaborate and conserve**.

Belize is a country that has retained much of its natural resources. The pride in this heritage of stewardship was palpable. Innovative finance mechanisms, community-led conservation, UNESCO World Heritage site designations, successful wildlife rehabilitation programmes; there are endless causes for **celebration** in Belize's evolving history of conservation.

Belizean NGOs had the opportunity to share their work with conservation colleagues through panel discussions and short presentations and films. Networking opportunities and celebrations helped spur new and lasting connections. A team of international speakers brought their experience from abroad to bring new ideas to Belize's conservation challenges, and to learn from the conservation groups of Belize. In the complex world of conservation, **collaboration** is critical – this was a key takeaway from the three days.

Ideas were exchanged to solve age-old and emerging problems. Key themes included the threat of invasive species, overdevelopment, mass market tourism, rising threats from deforestation and forest degradation, enforcement challenges, and the need to equitably involve Indigenous communities in the management of protected areas. The conference was testament to the cohesion and shared vision of Belize's conservation groups. New opportunities are arising to marry conservation with development, leveraged with innovative green and blue carbon financing. Now, Belize has the opportunity to be a global model for sustainable **conservation**.

The European Nature Trust would like to thank all those who attended, and all those who made the event possible, including: The Family Coppola Hideaways, Capital Orthopaedics, Bowen & Bowen Ltd., Copalli Rum, Hidden Valley Inn & Reserve, and Gaia Riverlodge.

Attending NGOs

Attending conservation groups active in Belize:

[Belize Audobon Society](#)

[Fauna & Flora International](#)

[Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association](#)

[Wildlife Conservation Society](#)

[Silk Grass Wildlife Preserve](#)

[Fragments of Hope](#)

[Maya Leader Alliance](#)

[The Belize Zoo](#)

[The Nature Conservancy](#)

[Programme for Belize](#)

[Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development](#)

[Ya'axche Conservation Trust](#)

[Toledo Institute for Development and Environment](#)

[Virginia Tech University](#)

[Protected Areas Management Organisation](#)

[Blue Ventures](#)

[Oceana](#)

[Crocodile Research Coalition](#)

[Community Baboon Sanctuary](#)

[Wildtracks](#)

[Clearwater Marine Aquarium](#)

[Mar Alliance](#)

[Belize Maya Forest Trust](#)

[Foundation for Wildlife Conservation](#)

Attending Hospitality & Ecotourism Groups:

[The Family Coppola Hideaways](#)

[Chan Chich Lodge](#)

[Hidden Valley Inn](#)

[Turtle Inn](#)

[Chaa Creek](#)

[Hamanasi](#)

Attending Belizean Ministries and policymakers:

Ministry of Blue Economy

Belize Tourism Board

Belize Forest Department

Ministry of Sustainable Development

Attending International Conservation Groups:

WildCRU

Tompkins Conservation

Australian Wildlife Conservancy

Foundation Conservation Carpathia

The Lifescape Project

Fundación Global Nature

Key Findings

DAY 1

Presentations

Jamal Galves – ‘Manatee Man’, National Oceanographic Explorer, Clearwater Aquarium

Belize is home to the largest population of Antillean manatees, but they are under increasing pressure. Recently, manatee deaths have been rising due to increased boat usage in their habitats, causing an increase in the number of collisions.

Clearwater Aquarium, as part of a wide-ranging conservation program, is monitoring the health of manatee populations and using satellite tagging to track their movements and threats. The organisation is working to establish manatee friendly policies within port authorities; build education and awareness of manatees within communities.

Celia Mahung – Executive Director of the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment

TIDE works to protect terrestrial and marine resources. Effective management stewards the long-term future of commercial species and water quality. TIDE is engaging young people as community researchers to help conservation.

Joel Verde – Executive Director of Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development

SACD focuses on strengthening ecosystem resilience and community participation in conservation in the Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. It was established during a time of difficult relationships between fishing communities and conservation groups. Today, fishing livelihoods are being strengthened, and communities are being nourished with new economic opportunities. The focus is on sustainability and education rather than limiting access or restricting catch; fishermen have been using these waters decades before conservation NGOs, and are critical stakeholders in marine resources.

Nicole Solano – Belize Tourism Board

Tourism is an essential part of conservation; tour guides must have knowledge of Belize. ‘It’s only in knowing and cherishing our country that we can be good tour guides’.

Belize has a small budget for marketing campaigns, it is crucial to have a strong relationship with the private sector, driven by common values. Robust action plans can help to engage Belizeans with the country’s natural wealth.

In discussion, it was noted that Belize has uniquely robust training and certification requirements for tour guides, resulting in a high level of knowledge and service orientation. It was suggested that through better marketing, this could be incorporated into Belize's tourism brand.

Valdemar Andrade – Executive Director of the Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association

TASA's vision is to make Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve the model protected marine reserve where fishermen are key stakeholders in the conservation of the resources, and where technology empowers enforcement and resource management.

Increasingly NGOs are required to build income streams that are reliable and predictable. TASA have sought a blend of income streams from user fees, grants and blue carbon investments. Valdemar discussed the importance of a cash reserve to improve resilience in times of economic difficulty, such as during Covid-19.

Tax breaks for co-managed NGOs that protect natural resources, from which the government of Belize benefits, were discussed.

Kenrick Williams – Ministry of Sustainable Development –

Kenrick emphasised the need for NGOs to create the enabling environment for conservation funding and participation.

There are growing opportunities with green and blue bond financing to support NGOs, but there is need for more effective risk financing to help NGOs manage disaster risks. In discussion, Valdemar noted that TASA is examining the possibility of a parametric insurance policy, modelled on the example from Quintana Roo, in Mexico wherein Cancun hotel developers are paying the premiums for a policy to insure the barrier reef against hurricane damage.

Keynote Speaker: Sebastian di Martino, Tompkins Conservation

Argentina has a long history of defaunation. Although the country has a network of national parks, the ecosystems were already depleted when they were created. Keystone species in particular were removed during the defaunation process. But because they are often large mammals, it is more difficult to garner the social and political support for their reintroduction.

Rewilding Argentina are reintroducing missing species and building social and economic participation with communities. The organisation has achieved remarkable reintroduction success in Iberá National Park: Giant anteater, red and green macaws, collared peccaries, and now – the jaguar. Iberá focuses not just on species presence, but their presence at numbers that enable functionality within the ecosystem.

Protected areas with public use infrastructure have become engines for local development. Tourism revenues are enriched by ‘abundant and observable wildlife populations’. Local community members are being trained to become wildlife guides and other tourism industry jobs.

Rewilding Argentina have changed the discussion around nature. ‘The economy of nature’, as they call it, centres on wildlife *production* as a means to empower local communities and build relationships with governments and industries. This is central to political and social support for wildlife reintroductions.

Blue Panel Discussion

Participants:

Phil Karp (moderator)

Kennedy Carillo, Ministry of Blue Economy

Janelle Chanona, Oceana

Julie Robinson, The Nature Conservancy

Rachel Graham, the MAR Alliance

The Blue Economy: The blue economy has the mandate of growing GDP while using and sustainably managing Belize’s marine resources – a gymnastic feat.

The Blue Bond: The blue bond freed Belize from 200 million in sovereign debt that will now be mobilised for conservation, and in return there have been 12 major marine conservation commitments that must now be met. 30% of Belize’s waters now have to be protected, from shorelines to the 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Commitments also include 100 percent protection of mangroves on all public land in protected areas. The integrated endowment fund is the largest ever made for conservation. A critical challenge is now for NGOs to access these funds and use them in a sustainable way. The blue bond is deserving of celebration: it is testament to the close relationship between government and co-managerial NGOs. ‘It’s not a TNC victory, it’s a victory for Belize’.

Marine Resource Management: Few other countries have successfully protected the spawning aggregation locations for commercial species like snappers and groupers. Engagement with fishing communities, as knowledge groups, is critical to marine resource protection.

Shark Tourism: There is a huge opportunity for Belize to become the number one destination in the Americas for shark tourism, following what the Bahamas have done to generate \$113 million per year with just 100,000 annual visitors. 85% of marine tour operators in Belize already say that sharks are crucial to their business. The current attraction which features interaction with nurse sharks is geared primarily to snorkelers. With proper protection of other species such as reef, hammerhead, and lemon sharks, Belize has potential to develop scuba dive-based shark tourism which is even more lucrative.

Blue Carbon: Belize is one of the only countries that has integrated blue carbon into its commitment for the Paris Agreement. The value of Belize’s blue capital needs to be more effectively communicated with the public. Not only does protection of mangroves and

seagrass result in high levels of carbon sequestration, these habitats also support marine biodiversity and protect against storm damage.

DAY 2

Presentations

Jessie Young – Community Baboon Sanctuary

Community Baboon Sanctuary was the first conservation initiative in Belize to be women-led. Today, women are trained in sustainability, organic farming, and many other fields that contribute to both conservation and community development.

Marisa Tellez – Crocodile Research Coalition

The preservation of the Placencia Lagoon and the crocodile species of Belize is critical to the national identity. Today, American and Morelet's crocodiles are becoming hybridised, and their habitats are becoming threatened through overdevelopment.

As well as the foundational conservation work conducted by CRC, the long-term success of their conservation depends on building wildlife advocates in the community. The young people of Belize are critical stakeholders in the future of Belize's natural resources.

Jacob Marlin – BFREE

BFREE leases and manages 1,153 acres of tropical rainforest. Education is a large part of achieving BFREE's purpose. The organisation partners with over 50 colleges, universities and high schools, now hosting 10–15 field courses and 200 undergraduate students per year. The discovery of wild cacao at the Bladen Nature Reserve became an opportunity for economic growth for environmental benefit.

Darby MacPhail – Virginia Tech University

Jaguars are a keystone species in forest ecosystems. Their conservation is crucial to the top-down regulatory control of energy distribution across trophic levels. However, in Belize, they are facing intensifying threats from human conflict, which is exacerbated by agricultural expansion.

Cristina Coc – Maya Forest Alliance

Cristina Coc highlighted the need for listening and understanding to effectively build partnerships with Indigenous Communities of Belize. The Mayan people depend on the land and the forests for shelter, food, and identity. There is a shared vision between the Mayan philosophies and needs, and the visions of many of Belize's conservation groups. Belize, by championing Indigenous Peoples as stewards of its natural resources, has the opportunity to lead in the global movement to recognise the rights and guardianship of Indigenous Peoples.

Lisa Carne – Fragments of Hope

Reef restoration initiatives are paramount to shoreline protection. FOH is engaged in one of the largest and most successful coral restoration programs in the Caribbean. Yet, Lisa stressed the need for patience and long-term planning for reef restoration programmes. Even in FOH's fast-growing sites, it's taken 4 years to see results.

Funding is a critical limiting factor for reef restoration. Technology however, is an increasingly *enabling* factor: FOH have used Phantom drones to survey and demonstrate reef recovery.

Celso Poot – Belize Zoo

Celso highlighted that the Belize Zoo is unique in its generation of conservation science and community participation with conservation. Public engagement has been critical to the Belize Zoo; work with local schoolchildren, birthday parties and access to the physically challenged has enabled conservation to reach marginalised and challenged communities.

Lisel Alamilla – Fauna & Flora International

FFI manage two biological corridor areas in northern Belize. The group recently purchased 13,800 acres in Toledo district to the south, which would otherwise have been converted to banana farmland. The ultimate aim is now to preserve this area for use as a southern biological corridor.

Zoe Walker – Wildtracks

Zoe highlighted the need for a broad base of stakeholder engagement; that everyone from government, to NGOs, to natural resource users needs to be involved in conservation. She stressed the need to improve the national recognition of biodiversity's value. A targeted and cohesive education campaign for Belizean communities was a key topic of the discussion.

Mandy Cabot – Silk Grass Wildlife Preserve

Many brought a perspective from the for-profit sector. The Silk Grass Wildlife Preserve (SGWP) is an example of where agricultural production can ally with effective conservation. At SGWP, forest protection is upheld through capital raised from resource production. Through this model, Mandy stressed that with effective management and a long-term vision, conservation can be compatible with capitalism.

The company became Belize's first and only 'B-corp' organisation. Minimum waste and resource circularity is at the core of SGWP's business. Ecosystem resilience in preserved areas within the property is a key focus.

Eddie Romero – Programme For Belize

The Rio Bravo Conservation Management Area (RBCMA) spared 110,000 acres that would otherwise have been converted to agriculture. Yet, logging within RBCMA is increasing.

Eddie stressed that the RBCMA shows what is possible with carbon financing to secure funds for land purchase agreements. He highlighted that riparian corridors are a critical missing area in Belize's Protected Area System management strategy.

Nayari Diaz Perez – Protected Area Conservation Trust

PACT's mission is to contribute to effective management of the National Protected Areas System through high-impact investments and partnerships. There are currently 9 targeted investment programmes under implementation.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: Ignacio Jimenez – Conservationist, author of *Effective Conservation*

Ignacio highlighted the core successes of key conservation groups: Rewilding Argentina, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, Australian Wildlife Conservancy, and African Parks.

There are key running threads that create the DNA of success for conservation groups.

Strong senior leadership and a shared vision for success is paramount. These people are outcome-orientated, focusing on biodiversity as measures of success. These organisations all have the ability to connect social problems with conservation. They are communications savvy, producing a clear and well-communicated message that is regularly shared. Effective communications can garner donor interest.

Belize has all the ingredients to become a global conservation leader, with a culture of stewardship and pride in natural wealth. The country is English speaking; there are coral reefs and manatees, jaguars and tropical forests; and NGOs respect each other and work together. Pride in this natural heritage is critical to the successful creation and management of protected areas.

DISCUSSION: David MacDonald, Conservationist, in conversation with Ross Westgate, broadcaster and journalist

In David's experience, nature storytelling captures the imagination of the public. David spoke of his non-anthropocentric view of nature conservation; that nature, in and of itself, is an entity and not merely 'bankers chips'.

The natural world affords us the opportunity to understand ourselves.

David stressed the need for gratitude and humility in conservation. Only by empowering local communities through genuine inclusivity, can we deliver effective conservation. Science is a crucial part of the process – it can increase the chances of a political outcome that favours

nature and its protection. But it can only take us so far; then, it is a question of ethics and guiding policy through ethical conservation principles.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS: Barbara and Christoph Promberger – Foundation Conservation Carpathia

Europe is still missing the national parks that have become iconic of Africa and America. They identified that Romania does not lead on GDP, but it leads on biodiversity and natural capital. However, since the restitution of formerly nationalised lands into private ownership with the fall of communism, thousands of hectares have been clear cut.

Christoph and Barbara founded Carpathia with the ambition of creating a new national park for Romania. It started as a pure land acquisition project, but has evolved into a holistic conservation project that integrates local communities as critical stakeholders.

A key focus is on conflict mitigation, ceasing hunting, and reintroducing missing keystone species. The development of ecotourism, agriculture and craftsmanship enterprises within the project area has helped the project to grow, broadening political and social support.

Christoph had key advice for conservation projects. Firstly, put yourselves in the shoes of the people in the community; top-down conservation doesn't work. People have enough problems, so be realistic about what you expect from others – conservation is not the primary focus of many stakeholder groups.

You have to think outside the box. As an example, Carpathia have collaborated with a local football team to develop a new logo that champions the communities commitment to nature – a mutually beneficial initiative.

NGOs have to develop networks and use business tools.

There were key practical takeaways for fundraising initiatives:

- Don't trust donors to stick with you throughout the project duration.
- Seek a mixture of private and public funding.
- Put yourself into the shoes of the person who decides about the grant, and tailor your fundraising presentation to them.
- The people behind the project are often the story that can entice funders.
- Remember, you are not asking for money – you are offering a service.
- Tailor your approach to public or private partnerships.

Green Panel Discussion

Participants:

Ross Westgate, The European Nature Trust (moderator)

Elma Kay, Belize Maya Forest Trust
Rafael Manzanero, Friends for Conservation and Development
Christina Garcia, Ya'axche Conservation Trust
John Pinelo, Belize Forest Department

Maya Forest Corridor: The region, sitting outside the system of Belize's protected areas, has become an epicentre of deforestation and agricultural development. Belize's western connection to the trinational Selva Maya Forest Block through Guatemala has been lost. As such, the connectivity of Belize's southern forest blocks to those in the north hinges on the protection of the Maya Forest corridor. Elma highlighted that the pursuit of private purchase agreements through the Maya Forest Corridor Trust is not the ideal solution, but it is a necessary one: 'it's not what is easy to do, but it's what we must do.'

Forest Degradation: The more insidious threat from deforestation is forest degradation, said John. Belize's system of protected areas has done a great job of protecting forests within protected areas, but outside, degradation has risen to 180,000 hectares. Efforts are needed to improve the health of Belize's forests.

Chiquibul Forest: Rafael highlighted that if the Chiquibul Forest resources are lost to Guatemalan incursions, then the integrity of Belizean identity is at stake. The Chiquibul is Belize, he said.

Linkage with marine conservation: The panel highlighted the positive developments coming from the marine conservation side, and stressed the need for reef to ridge approaches and greater cohesion between the terrestrial and marine management strategies.

DAY 3

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: Jamie Dunlop – Australian Wildlife Conservancy

Australia is experiencing the greatest extinction crisis across the world. Business as usual using the government-funded national park system will lead to more extinctions.

AWC manage a portfolio of 31 properties, across 6.5 million hectares. These are vast properties, and Jamie shared his views on how AWC have managed to achieve such scale.

Jamie urged Belizean conservation groups to be mindful of invasive species; in Australia, they have decimated native ecosystems. Jamie recommended that monitoring work of the biodiversity of Belize's cayes and littoral forests be conducted to gauge the extinction threat for biodiversity of endemic and migratory species.

Establishing a strong scientific grounding for active management of invasive species is essential.

AWC has experience in partnering with Indigenous groups, which was a key theme of some Belizean NGO presentations.

Presentations

Maritza Rodriguez – Blue Ventures

Lionfish have become a key threat to Belizean marine ecosystems. Blue Ventures are scaling up control of lionfish, working with co-management agencies and local communities in each of the marine protected areas.

A key theme of discussion was whether a dependency on lionfish could inadvertently be created by advocating their consumption. However, it was noted that fishers target lionfish to supplement other species catches.

For some groups, lionfish have created an opportunity to engage in partnerships with local fishers.

In some areas, lionfish are being fed to sharks in an effort to induce them to prey on lionfish on their own. It was noted that this practice is now widely discouraged as it has created negative interactions that are increasing shark presence on dives and making it dangerous for fishers to harvest lionfish.

Paul Walker – Wildtracks

Paul highlighted that wildlife rehabilitation is commonly seen as a welfare issue, but it can actually help to meet conservation goals.

Successful rehabilitation of injured Antillean manatees at Wildtracks has helped to bolster the Belizean population. Through rehabilitation the area coverage of species can increase; in the case of manatees and howler monkeys, Paul argued that this helped to improve the population resilience to anthropogenic and natural threats.

Discussion and Exchange Session

Ignacio recommended that Belize dropped the narrative around being a ‘small country’, when used in an apologetic context. He advocated that the nation should talk with real pride about the country’s natural heritage.

Communication methods between NGOs and with the hotels and tourist destinations would help to secure tourism-related income streams for conservation. To this end, the possibility of a platform – potentially in the form of a website or dedicated community of practice – was discussed.

NGOs advocated that the Belize Tourism Board should capitalise and market the high education and environmental standards of Belize’s tour guides and operators.

Summary of the Conference: David MacDonald

David started by emphasising the need for gratitude and humility: that the team of international conservationists assembled for the conference have more to learn from Belizean NGOs than the lessons they can give. However, David offered pearls of wisdom.

Conservation is adapting to a transdisciplinary, modern world. Increasingly conservation has been catapulted into a political subject of real concern in centres of power. Conservation must be looked at from varying perspectives, ranging from detail to generality. We should build understanding and empathy by walking a mile in each other's shoes.

Belizean NGOs are constituted by world-class professionals. The calibre of their work is high, and the national pride should reflect it.

Belize's size can bring risks and frailties, but it can also bring strong advantages: at the horizontal level, everybody knows each other; and at the vertical level, there is great linkage between NGOs and real centres of power in governmental and policy divisions.

Tourism can be a blessing and a curse. The threat of mass tourism looms in Belize, which can dampen the individuality of an experience in nature. Marketing will be an important mechanism to navigate the mass market tourism threat. A powerful education campaign will help to lure the right kinds of tourists.

Belize is poised to become an example of how conservation can and development can be married under a shared vision.