

LIZARD LETTERS

Observations from the I.I.S. Conference in Belize, February 24–March 1, 1999

It was a leap of faith—going to a country I had never seen with people that I had not previously met—but it promised to be an adventure. How refreshing it was to find people who loved lizards and didn't laugh about going to an iguana conference, as my musician friends had!

From the start, Belize fascinated me, and the more I knew about Belize, the more I admired it. The study of any life form is incomplete without studying its environment, the climate, and other living things, including indigenous people. I admired the fact that as a developing country, Belize is striving to build a strong economic base while balancing human needs with those of its natural resources. Few, if any, developed nations have come close to achieving this goal, and it is exciting to witness the efforts of the Belizean government and various conservation agencies in making this a reality.

Approximately sixty-five percent of Belize is completely undeveloped. The remainder is put to urban and agricultural use. Fishing, lumber, sugar, citrus, corn, beans, livestock, and tourism are the main sources of income for this little country. The people are ethnically diverse, and include Carib blacks, Mayan

Indians, Creoles, Spanish, Mennonite and a small percentage of Caucasians. While most Belizeans speak English, many also speak a second or third language according to their ethnicity.

The name "Belize" is Mayan for "muddy water," and was adopted in 1973. It encompasses some 8,867 square miles, which consist of coastal plain, swamp, mountains, and rain forest. The main topographical feature is the Maya Mountain range, which rises to a height of 3,862 feet at Richardson Peak. Belize's population is approximately 230,000.

From time to time, hurricanes cause extensive damage. Belize City, the former capital of Belize, was extensively damaged by a hurricane in 1961. With a grant from the British government, the new capital of Belmopan was built further west, on the Hummingbird Highway. This is the current governmental seat.

British loggers settled in Belize during the seventeenth century, under repeated attacks from the Spanish, who felt that they had a claim on the region. In 1862, the British declared that British Honduras (as Belize was known at the time) was a crown colony and it became part of the Commonwealth. The British government granted autonomy to British Honduras in 1964, but Guatemala, citing a provision of an 1859 treaty, challenged it. Shortly before Belize's independence was celebrated, Guatemala broke off diplomatic ties with Britain. Britain's



Counter-clockwise: I.I.S. members crossing a small creek on the Tiger Fern Trail in Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary; an adventurous canoeing duo sets out; one of the *Ctenosaura similis* released at Red Creek Biological Reserve. Photographs: Angela Saunders



LIZARD LETTERS

Right: Iguana enclosures at the Tropical Education Center's Green Iguana Breeding Project. *Below:* Incubators for hatching the captive-bred green iguanas. *Photographs: Angela Saunders*



response was to maintain a military force in Belize to forestall an invasion by Guatemala. In September 1991, Guatemala recognized Belize as a sovereign state and established diplomatic relations with it.

A friend told me before I left that Belize is a third world country. This implies that the nation is in the process of establishing its economic growth and that conditions are primitive. I would rather say that parts of Belize are in a sort of time warp, doing business in ways that the rural United States did, say, 30 years ago. The market, particularly in rural areas, is informal, and many goods and services are traded on a barter system. Of course, this makes it difficult to calculate a country's gross domestic product! The minimum wage in Belize is about 80 U.S. cents per hour, and although goods are priced about the same as for the U.S., they are, of course, a lot more expensive to Belizeans.

The infrastructure is still a work in progress, as witnessed by the condition of major highways, and the I.I.S. members' enthusiastic response to a road crew laying tarmac on a major dirt road. Electricity is apparently available to most areas, but it is expensive to Belizeans and is contracted from Mexico. The local tap water at Toucan Sittee (where some of us lodged) was potable and good. Most villages have their own water tower, supplied by groundwater.

Public transportation is available even in rural areas but I cannot say how reliable or frequent it is. Travelling on dirt roads in a school bus (as we did) takes some adjustment, but the locals appear to take

the rough ride in stride.

I.I.S. conferees were treated to a first-hand transportation experience on the trip to our accommodations at Toucan Sittee and Sandy Beach (both in the Stann Creek District) from the airport in Belize City. While most of the roads in and around Belize City were paved, once we were out

of the metropolitan area they were gravel.

Our first sightseeing destination was Altun Ha, a Mayan ruin close to Belize City. I leave it to others to relate the history of this settlement, but I did pick up a few tidbits of information from Matt Miller, our faithful guide and bus driver extraordinaire. A number of small, spiral snails were seen in the ruins themselves, attached to the stones. The Maya harvested countless numbers of these mollusk shells and ground them to make mortar for building. An attractive, red-flowered epiphyte was growing in a tree and Matt identified it as a bromeliad. Deep in the plants are little pools of water where insects are trapped and subsequently drowned.

The first full day of the conference was spent at Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, a refuge for jaguars and many forms of wildlife. A steamy hike up the Tiger Fern Trail gave us some excellent views across the basin. The forest was surprisingly cool and pleasant, in contrast to the more open areas. It was like walking through a greenhouse with philodendrons hanging from trees usually found only in greenhouses in less tropical climes.

After a descent for lunch, several of us took a short hike to a river, which wound through the heart of Cockscomb. The water was clear and cool, and populated with schools of fish, which were just as curious about us as we were about them. A visit to the river later in the week revealed regurgitated material on the rocks in the river, which Matt suggested had come from otters. I looked for other otter evidence but didn't find any. Wendy Townsend found a basilisk on some debris by the side of the river. Two more basilisks were also found. On the trail to and from the river there was an ant "turnpike," where thousands of leaf-cutter ants carried leaf fragments to large mounds. Their travels had worn a bare strip across the trail.

The second full day was highlighted by a boat ride up the Sittee River. I was one of the fortunate few who didn't have to paddle. We spotted a number of

LIZARD LETTERS

green iguanas in trees overhanging the river. A large male was sighted near the Toucan Sittee resort, and a very gravid female was seen further upriver. The highlight of the ride was the sight of a single Morelet's crocodile basking in shallow water. It was very wary of our approach and swam to safety before I could photograph it.

One of the special purposes of the conference was the release of *Ctenosaura similis* at the Red Creek Biological Reserve in Stann Creek. This property is adjacent to Cockscomb and is the site of a large tract of tropical forest. Bob Ehrig and Richard Moyroud have purchased 605 acres to enhance and enlarge the Cockscomb area set aside for wildlife. Two ctenosaurs were tagged, had blood drawn for DNA testing, and released on this site. One took off in the direction of Bob's proposed lizard lounge, which is exactly what I would have done, given the circumstances.

We returned to Belize District for a visit to the zoo, which displays only indigenous fauna. The zoo is the inspiration of the late naturalist Gerald Durrell, and it is well laid out. It gave us the opportunity to see some of the animals close up (including some Morelet's crocodiles), and it served as a reminder for all of us to be good stewards of our environment. Another stop was the Tropical Education Center, which houses a green iguana-breeding project.

On the way back to Toucan Sittee/Sandy Beach, we stopped at Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, whose director (and our bus driver), Matt Miller, explained the watershed project undertaken there. Water

and energy conservation is a way of life at Monkey Bay with constant reminders of the ways in which we can minimize our impact on the environment.

The last full day was spent at Cockscomb, with the group splitting into several smaller groups. One went to look at the wreck of Alan Rabinowitz' plane from 1984, which crashed while tracking jaguars over the forest. The crew survived. On the way back to Sandy Beach, we stopped at a sugar mill to examine a tree full of bats, a couple of herps and the workings of a nineteenth-century sugar mill.

The Garifuna Women's Cooperative hosted our last evening in Belize at Sandy Beach. A few of us swam before dinner in the tepid ocean. After dinner, we were entertained by a Garifuna "orchestra" of a large drum (these were used in African villages as signaling devices), drums of hollow logs, and songs. The Garifuna women, who would haul reluctant male dancers to the dance floor, allowed no party poopers. The *Ctenosaura similis*, which live on and around the buildings at Sandy Beach, are probably still discussing the party.

Sighting ctenosaurs parked on tombstones in cemeteries highlighted the return trip to Belize City. The flight back to the States was uneventful, with entertainment provided by John Bendon. By way of a postscript, I have been blessed with the adoption of a *Ctenosaura similis* shortly after my return to Memphis. She serves as a permanent reminder of a splendid conference in Belize. My thanks and appreciation go to all those who made it happen.

Respectfully submitted, April 14, 1999

Angela G. Saunders



Clockwise: A giant Ficus tree stands amidst the ruins at an old sugar mill; brown bats sleep while clinging to the trunk of the tree; and Steve Reichling examines a red-rumped tarantula, *Brachypelma vagans*. Photographs: Angela Saunders