

THE BEGINNING OF AN ANIMAL ADVENTURE: THE BELIZE ZOO

Director Sharon Matola started the Belize Zoo in January 1983—the beginning of an accidental career. Coming to Belize to begin a zoo and build a wildlife-education program was not what she considered part of her destiny. She always loved animals and arrived in Belize to manage a small collection of local animals for a natural film company. However, after she had worked only five months on the project, funds were severely reduced, and it became evident that the group of animal "film stars" would have to be disbanded.

Get Rid of the Animals?

Sharon says that besides the fact that these wild cats, birds, anteaters, and snakes had become her friends and companions, logic entered the picture. Once a wild animal has become semi-tamed and dependent on people for care, returning to a life in the wild is impossible.

As an alternative, she decided, "This country has never had a zoo. Perhaps if I offered the chance for Belizeans to see these unique animals, their existence here could be permanently established."

And so a zoo was born. From the very beginning the amount of local interest shown in the zoo was incredible. The majority of the people in Belize live in urban areas, and their knowledge of the local fauna is minimal. The Belize Zoo offered many Belizeans the opportunity to see the animals that share their coun-

try. It was touching to see the looks on the faces of small children who were experiencing for the first time the animals of their homeland. The modest beginnings hinged on the simple idea that children deserved the chance to grow up knowing animals, especially those living in the thick forests and jungles not too many miles from their city homes.

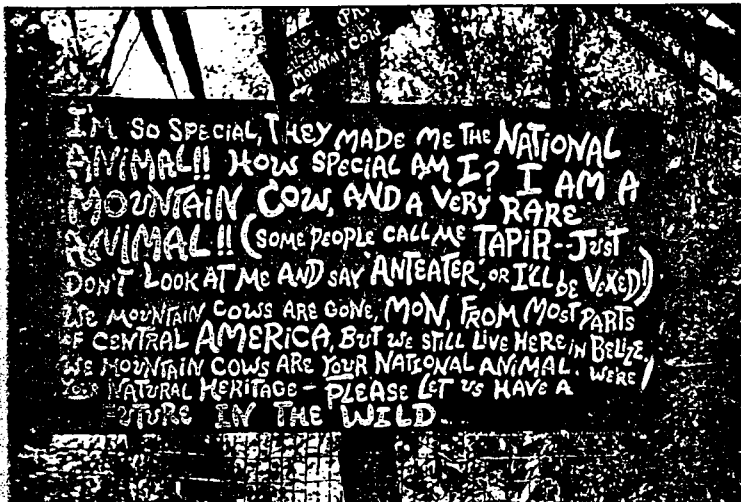
School Programs

This initial interest was exciting and prompted Sharon to begin a country-wide education program. She took colorful slides of the animals to schools along with invitations for the teachers to bring their students—free of charge—to the new zoo. Those modest beginnings have evolved into a major wildlife awareness program that has touched the hearts of thousands of children and adults throughout Belize. The zoo now has a collection of Belizean fauna that numbers well over one hundred species. The zoo staff is a dedicated crew of Belizean zookeepers who not only provide excellent care for the animals but also travel around the nation with wildlife-education programs.

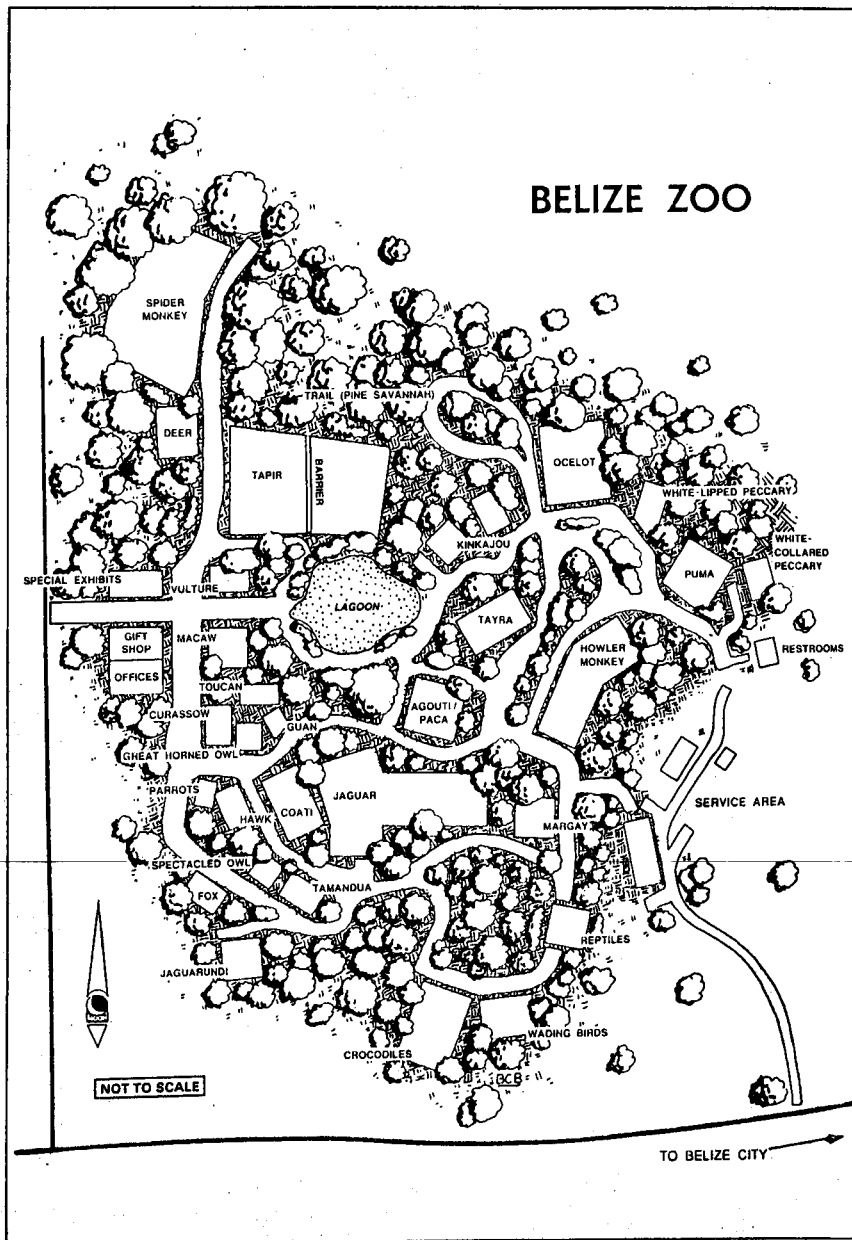
A Success Story

This type of progressive wildlife education has helped to bring about a growing pride among the people of Belize for the animals of their country. This sense of pride will lead to a feeling of propriety that will ultimately

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The "backyard" feeling is promoted by these clever signs at each exhibit.



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(continued)

mately help to ensure the animals' future in the Belizean wild. The zoo's success story will develop further, and the future is an exciting one. Using a master plan for development that was donated by zoo architects from Seattle, Washington, the goal is to display each Belizean animal in a natural, wild setting.

Of course, the usual problem prevailed: how to support this project. Raising money to implement this master plan has been a local as well as an interna-

tional effort. It wasn't easy, but slow and steady progress continues. A visit to the Belize Zoo is fun, inspiring, and educational for the local as well as foreign visitors. The funky, "down home" approach puts people from all walks of life in touch with the magic of the animals, which are the natural heritage of this unspoiled, tropical country, and more, natural treasures of the entire world. Thank you, Sharon Matola!



April, the national animal, loves the attention and TLC she gets at the Belize Zoo.

tically smile at you. The zoo is located on 1,600 acres and uses 29 acres to house 20 varieties of mammals, 12 bird species, and six types of reptiles. Over 125 creatures live and thrive here; all are native to Belize. The zoo keeps animals that were either orphaned, injured and rehabilitated, those born in the zoo, or are gifts from other zoos. The environment is as natural as possible, and each animal lives in its own shady jungle compound; no steel bars here.

Sharon Matola, the founding director of the Belize Zoo, tells the story of the zoo with affection and love: "Some people call it funky; others say that it's the best zoo they have ever seen, and everyone tells us that the animals who live at the Belize Zoo seem . . . well, they seem so happy. Wel-

come to the Belize Zoo!" This zoo is probably the single-most important educational tool of the country. Ten thousand children visit the zoo each year.

Many zoo supporters in and out of the country obtained pledges, raised contributions, and held fundraisers to build successful new housing for the animals. Since the zoo moved to its new headquarters in 1991, it has added a spacious waterbird compound (in 1993), and several valuable new boarders have moved in: two jabiru storks; Ellen the black jaguar; C.T. Katun, a male spotted jaguar; and a jaguarundi.

Everyone loves the old-timers, like April, the Baird tapir—also known as a mountain cow. (An old superstition says that the tapir can skin a person alive with its nose.) Sometimes when

you go to visit this 500-pound tapir she's happily submerged in her own pond. She's a hands-on favorite. When she trundles over to get a closer look at the curious visitor, it is evident that the personal touches of animal care and wildlife education have produced a unique zoo experience. She now has a roommate, which is part of the zoo's philosophy to keep the animals happy. April is a representative of Belize's national animal, and her birthday is celebrated every year with a big birthday party, all kids invited.

No one can ignore Rambo the colorful toucan, or Sugar, the pretty little purring ocelot. A favorite of the kids is Sweetboy, the otter, who tumbles and plays in the water to a great audience.

Education

The zoo's hand-painted, homespun signs provide simple educational messages that help visitors to laugh as well as learn. A glance at the sign in front of the peccary enclosure tells visitors, "We are warries, and we like the way we smell." Warries are members of the piglike peccary family. Peccaries do smell funny, but a sign explains the purpose of this odd scent in a way that helps observers to appreciate this animal's unusual natural history.

Special events at the zoo further enhance wildlife awareness efforts. Every child in the nation is invited to come to the zoo and join the celebration of their national animal's birthday. Besides singing "Happy Birthday" to a tapir, eating cake, and being entertained by Rose Tat-too (the famous clown of Belize), the children learn more about their special national heritage and all the reasons for protecting it.

One of the zoo's important messages is to let visitors know where they can view the animals of Belize in the wild. When watching the howler monkeys playing in the trees at the zoo, a nearby sign informs zoo guests that they can see these monkeys at the Bermudian Landing Community Baboon Sanctuary. A walk by the jaguar exhibit not only provides an impressive look at these beautiful big cats but also encourages visitors to visit the Jaguar Preserve in the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary—"the only place in the world where the big cats can roam protected and forever free."

Protecting the country's animals is vital. Today, throughout Central America, much of the wildlife is standing on the brink of extinction. To lose forever

the roaring call of the howler monkey, the scarlet macaw's dramatic flashes of red, or the disconcerting presence of the mighty jaguar would be a tragedy.

The Belize Zoo is becoming increasingly well known throughout the world. The unique educational programs and the conservation efforts of the zoo have consistently made international environmental news. Funds are always needed to support "dream projects" for the future: a reptile exhibit, a butterfly flight room, and, with the promise of help from the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a new "water world" exhibit. If you wish to help, it's easy! When visiting the zoo, ask about becoming a member to show your support.

The zoo is at Mile 29 on the Western Highway, open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. The admission is US\$6.50.

Note: The local buses will drop you off only on the highway (you must ask the driver to stop at the zoo road). From there it's about a mile walk to the zoo. You can also take taxis from Belmopan for under US\$10, depending on how many people are going. From Belize City, escorted tours make day trips to the zoo and back, ask at your hotel.

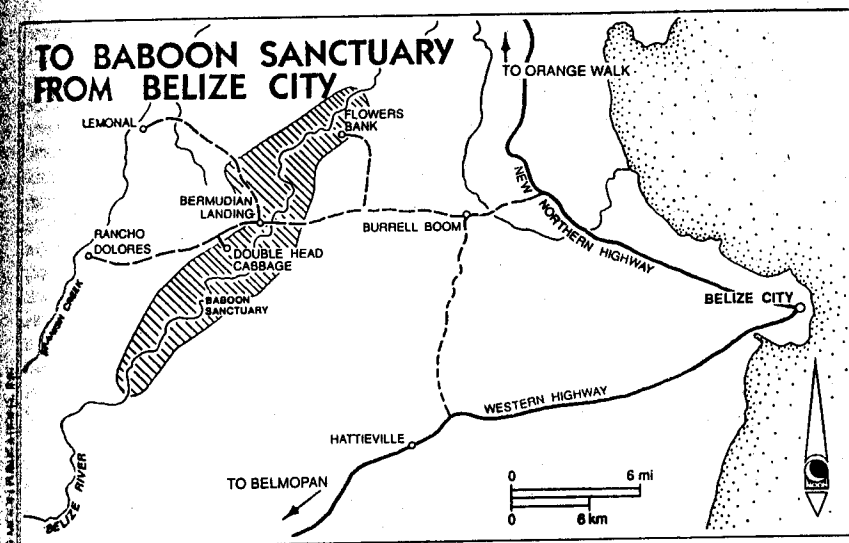
The Belize Tropical Education Center

Across the street from the zoo is the Education Center. Meetings are held here for zoological news, reports, and educational seminars attended and given by people involved with zoology from around the world. A dormitory can accommodate 30 people; there are outdoor showers and flush toilets. Great nature trails weave through the 84-acre site, and birdwatcher can avail themselves of a bird-viewing deck. The Green Iguana Breeding Project is but one of a variety of programs at the zoo that you can observe. There is a small gift shop. For more information contact Tropical Education Center, P.O. Box 1787, Belize City, Belize, C.A., tel./fax (8) 13004, e-mail belizezoo@pobox.com.

THE BERMUDEAN LANDING COMMUNITY BABOON SANCTUARY

Driving the Northern Highway

If you are driving to Bermudian Landing from downtown Belize City, leave town on Freetown Road. You'll pass through the intersection with Central American Blvd. (to the left) and Princess



Margaret Dr. (to the right). Continue straight out of town. As you cross this major intersection, the road becomes the Northern Highway; set your trip odometer just a couple of hundred yards farther, where the road begins a gentle bend to the right.

Expect a good deal of traffic in the mornings and afternoons on the stretch past the Bella Vista suburb and the Belize Biltmore Hotel. You'll encounter lots of school buses, vehicles pulling over to pick up riders, and speed bumps. The Belize River is off to the left. At about Mile 5.5 you'll come to **Haulover Bridge** (one-way traffic at a time) and continue skirting the river northward on Northern Highway.

At a little less than Mile 9 you'll see the turnoff to **Philip Goldson International Airport** to the left. Continue to Mile 14, where the road forks. Take the left fork toward Burrell Boom and Bermudian Landing. Readers are telling us about an excellent eatery in this town called **El Chicleo Restaurant**, tel. (28) 2005, which purportedly has great barbecue. Stop and ask for directions, though how hard can it be in a small village?

About seven miles past Burrell Boom you'll be in Bermudian Landing. Check in with the sanctuary manager for up-to-date information on directions, room and board, and guide fees.

Home of the Black Howler Monkey

When zoologist Robert Horwich from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee began a population survey throughout the range of the howler monkey, it was the beginning of what would become the first viable animal sanctuary. One of the six species of howler monkeys in the world, the black howlers are the largest monkeys in the Americas. Horwich spent time in the howler's range, which covered southern Mexico, northeast Guatemala, and Belize. Until then, no one had formally studied the primate and its rainforest habitat.

The results were disturbing. In Mexico the monkeys were hunted by the locals for food, and their living habitat was fast being eliminated with the destruction of the rainforest. Conditions in Guatemala were only slightly better. Here, too, the monkeys were hunted by locals in the forests around Tikal, and as the forest habitat shrank in the country, so too did the numbers of howler monkeys.

It was the last survey that was surprising. In Belize, at Bermudian Landing, the communities of monkeys were strong and healthy, the forest was intact, and the locals seemed genuinely fond of the noisy creatures. This was definitely a place to start talking wildlife reserve.

Horwich, with the help of Jon Lyon, a botanist from the State University of New York, began a