

A walk on the wild side

By Lisa
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Ever seen the movie Gorillas In the Mist? Remember the central character Diane Fossey, played by Sigourney Weaver? Well, little do many of us realise but we have our very own 'wild woman' working as a volunteer in one of our BFBS radio stations.

I had the pleasure of meeting Sharon Matola when she made a pit-stop visit to Chalfont Grove from her home in Central America and found out about her life beyond BFBS Belize.

If you had founded and managed the day-to-day running of a zoo, had numerous degrees in biology and were a devoted environmental campaigner, could you still give up your valuable spare time to run a radio show for the British Forces in the tropics?

Me neither. And so the first question I put to Sharon Matola, who does all of that and more, was: 'Why?'

Why does she regularly makes the 40-mile journey from her zoo, through tropical terrain to the BFBS radio station, where she presents a weekly show, records her daily, one-minute eco-features and her twice-weekly 'Wild Belize' info-features.

The simple answer from Sharon: "For the love of it. I love the music, I love sharing the knowledge I have and there is no buzz quite like going on air live."

No buzz quite like it, that is, apart from heading out into the tropical rainforest and coming nose to nose with Jaguars or Pumas, various dangerous species of insects and reptiles, and some rather heavily clawed and beaked exotic birds. This is all life beyond BFBS for American-born Sharon.

While the rest of us turn off the

computer and head for the M25/bar/bed, she has the continual pressure and responsibility of running the only zoo in Belize, a project she initiated to help protect the endangered species living in the country's remaining pockets of rainforest.

"I knew what I was doing was worthwhile when an old Belizean man, in his 70s, visited not long after we'd opened and stood looking around with tears pouring down his face. We still only had chicken wire pens and very few animals and I thought he was upset at the principle of containing the animals.

"But he said, 'I have lived in this country all my life and yet have never seen the animals my own country, and only my country, has borne. This is very special to me.' That was a pretty powerful affirmation that the project was as important as I hoped it would be.

"It is really about education and if we continue to educate the younger generation of Belizeans about their environment, then these rare species stand a greater chance for survival."

Sharon opened the zoo in 1983. Her only previous experience working with animals was as a lion tamer in a Mexican travelling circus.

"I was offered a job looking after animals on the filming of a Channel 4 documentary in Belize - a place I'd never been to before. Ironically, this was a documentary underlining the need to protect rainforests and their endangered species. But when the filming was finished the animals they'd filmed were so tame they couldn't be released back into the wild. Without a film crew tracking their every movement they didn't know what to do!

"Channel 4 had no resources to take care of them and so they would have foundered. Some chicken wire fences later and the first few zoo enclosures were made. It's been a long journey from there, and now the zoo is visited by hundreds of

tourists and Belizeans every year," said Sharon.

Okay, so she runs a zoo, presents and produces radio shows and frequently 'goes bush' on exercises with the British Army. The rest of the time she must surely catch up on the latest Danielle Steele novel, paint her toe nails, sit still...?

Not this Action Woman! When she's not doing her 'day jobs' Sharon also writes children's books - aimed, of course, at educating children about endangered species. 'Hoodwink the Owl' is about to feature in Sharon's third book, all proceeds from which go back into running the zoo.

Did I forget to mention that in her spare time Sharon also runs a hard-fought, environmental campaign opposing the building of a dam and reservoir which would flood 22 miles of the Macal River valley in Belize, obliterating one of the most vital wildlife habitats in all Central America?



"Yeah, I guess it's not a 'usual lifestyle' and it has called for quite a few personal sacrifices, but I suppose all of this is just what I'm meant to do. It is very draining, especially the campaigning. When you're that committed to something you never switch off from it," she answered.

I ask again, what tiny part of her is it that still needs the fulfillment of being a BFBS volunteer?

"At the end of the day I like to communicate with people too - we all need that. It helps keeps me in touch with the latest music, and is a bit like my window on the real world. It brings me back out of the wild side and into the company of people."

