



Ya'axche Conservation Trust
Annual Report 2009



Mission:

The Ya'axché Conservation Trust is a community-oriented organization, which advances integrated landscape management for equitable development in southern Belize through sustainable land use management, strategic advocacy and awareness, and by supporting socially innovative and economically viable enterprises.

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From the

Executive Director



Dear Friends,

2009 has proven to be a year full of growth and accomplishments as we at Ya'axché continue to make progress towards our goal of supporting sustainable development in the Toledo District of Belize through biodiversity conservation, enhanced livelihood opportunities, and strategic advocacy. We grew in all aspects of our work, ranging from the total area of protected lands that we manage to the number of communities in which we work. We even outgrew our office and moved into a larger space to accommodate our growing staff. Of course this growth has not come without its challenges. Some of these challenges, such as an ever-increasing population putting more stress on our natural resources, are to be expected. While other threats to the integrity of the region's protected areas come without warning. Luckily Ya'axché's innovative strategic plan has prepared us to carry on with our mission of achieving equitable development in the Toledo District.

We believe that our integrated landscape management approach to conservation is key to preparing both the people and environment of Southern Belize for the future. Integrated Landscape Management, the practice of planning how land will be used and resources will be managed in the most efficient and sustainable manner, ensures that all stakeholders have a voice and that all social, economic and environmental aspects are considered. It is these principles that have guided our 2009 endeavors in protected area management, community outreach, enhanced livelihood, and advocacy activities.

This annual report is meant to highlight Ya'axché's achievements in 2009 and to share all of the hard work in which we have been involved over the past year. The support from our funders, assistance from our partners, and encouragement from our friends has been vital to our success. We sincerely hope that you will join us again in 2010 as we continue to pursue our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lisel Alamilla".

Lisel Alamilla
Executive Director of Ya'axché Conservation Trust

About Ya'axché

History

In 1997, a consortium of individuals including an environmentalist, a local Mayan activist, an ecotourism entrepreneur, and concerned community leaders formed the Golden Stream Corridor Preserve (GSCP) NGO. These persons made up the first Board of Directors of the GSCP NGO, which would later become the Ya'axché Conservation Trust.

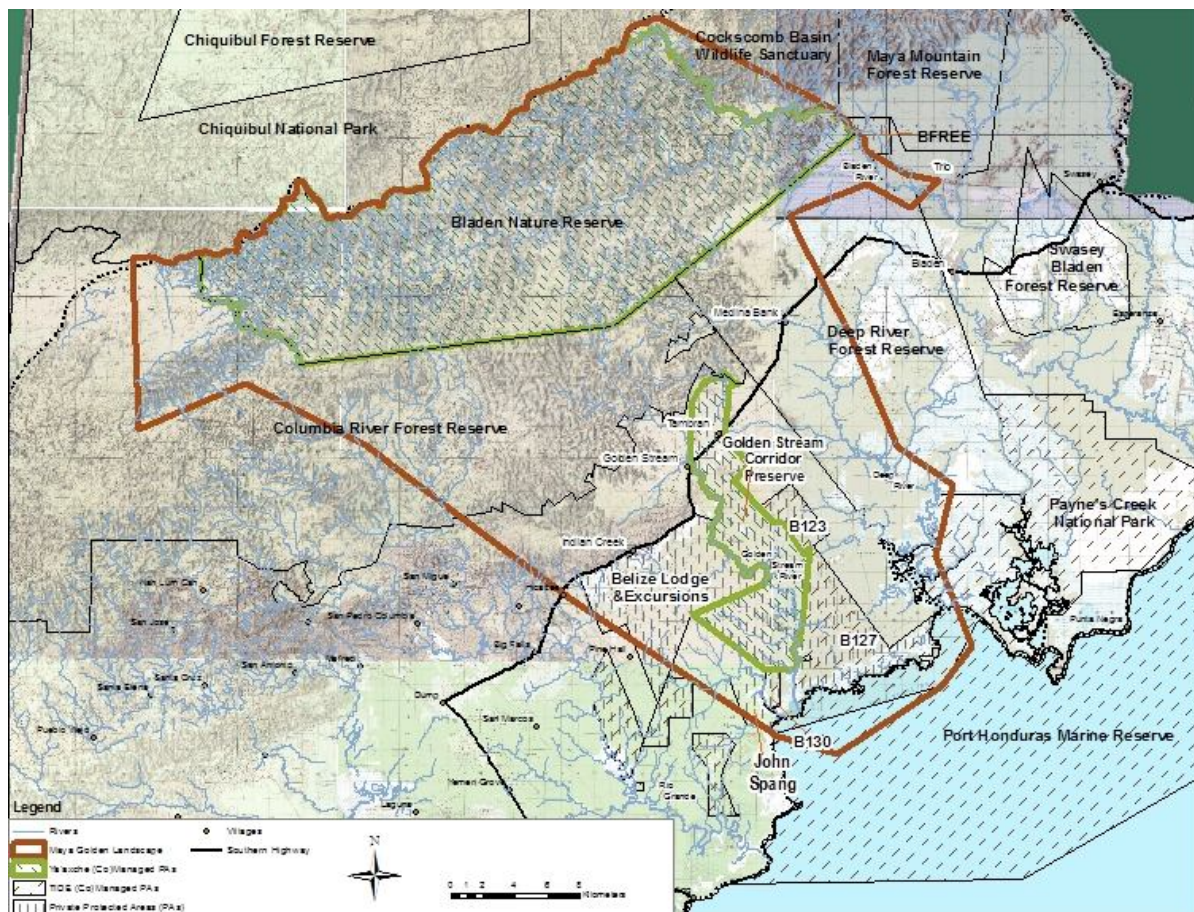
In November 1998, the organization received its first one-year grant from the International Union for Conservation of Nature for institutional strengthening, hiring of staff, demarcating of boundary lines and procurement of basic equipment. In the same year, GSCP NGO signed a 12-year institutional Memorandum of Understanding with Fauna & Flora International (FFI), the world's oldest conservation organization based out of Cambridge, United Kingdom. The name GSCP NGO was legally changed in 2002 to Ya'axché Conservation Trust.

Ya'axché is the Maya Mopan name for the *Ceiba pentandra* (cotton tree), a tree sacred to the Maya that linked ixbalba (the underworld) to the heavens, and thus has symbolic importance to the Mayan communities. After hurricane Iris hit Toledo in October 2001, the tremendous Ya'axché trees were the only ones left standing due to their deep roots and strong trunks, making them highly visible landmarks in Southern Belize, and a powerful namesake for the organization.



Where We Work

The first 9,554 acre (3,386 ha) parcel of the GSCP was purchased with support from FFI. The second Flick parcel, bought in 2004 and funded by Grassvalley Trust, increased the GSCP's area to a grand total of 14,970 acres (6,058 ha). While the GSCP expanded in size, Ya'axché was also growing as an institution due to a committed Board of Directors, a small but dedicated staff, and increased fundraising successes. In particular, the partnership with FFI gave Ya'axché critical financial and technical support in its formative years. Most recently, in December of 2008 the Belize Forest Department awarded Ya'axché co-management of the 100,000 acre Bladen Nature Reserve, arguably Belize's most important terrestrial protected area. This partnership is evidence of the respect and trust that Ya'axché has cultivated among both local and national organizations that manage and protect natural resources.

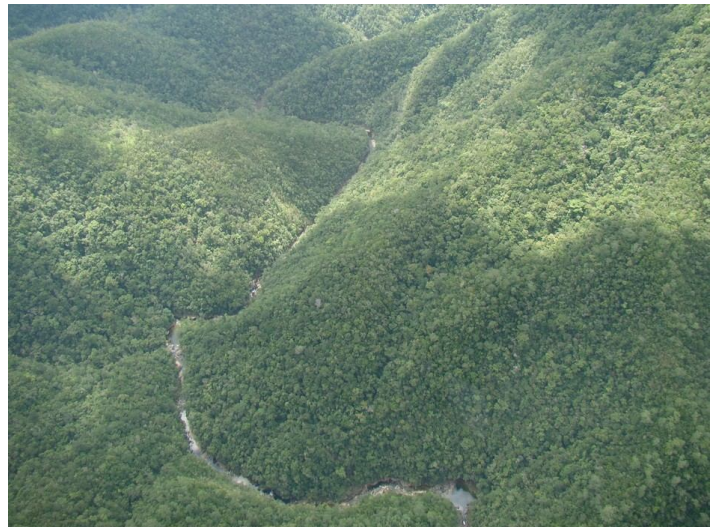


Sustainable Land-Use Management

Strategic Landscape Level Planning

2009 was the inaugural year for the Sustainable Land-Use Management Programme and it was filled with achievements that set the Ya'axché Conservation Trust apart as one of the leading sustainable development agencies within Belize. The principal building block of the programme has been the formulation of an integrated strategy for the sustainable development of the Maya Golden Landscape, Ya'axché's operational focal area. This document, a central component of the Golden Stream Watershed Initiative, provides a uniquely holistic mechanism for achieving sustainable development by using the Integrated Landscape Management approach to tackle key economic, environmental and social issues at the appropriate level. Through its joint implementation, all of the Landscape's stakeholders including local communities and businesses, the Government of Belize and civil society organizations such as Ya'axché, will benefit. One example, that is already underway, is the preparation of all entities to adapt to climate change, which is likely to have serious detrimental effects amongst vulnerable local populations.

Complementing this strategy, Ya'axché continued to execute the Conservation Action Strategy (CAS) that was developed in 2008 for the one million acre 'Maya Mountain Marine Corridor' alongside five other partners, including the Belize Forest Department and sister NGO Toledo Institute for Development and the Environment (TIDE). Midway through the year the CAS was reviewed by the co-implementers, where it was confirmed that 86 out of 127 identified



actions within it had already been initiated in the first of the Strategy's five-year timeline. To date, countless plans have been developed throughout Belize with little to no implementation. This makes the combined efforts of Ya'axché and its partners truly impressive and an example for others to follow.

Private Sector Partnerships

During the implementation of the above strategies, Ya'axché worked closely with the private sector. In cooperation with the World Wildlife Fund, Ya'axché has formed a close partnership with the Golden Stream Citrus Plantation to promote best practices for citrus growers. Native peanut cuttings, *Arachis pintoj*, were planted in sections of the Golden Stream citrus plantation. Their use as a cover crop has been shown to act as a cheap method for controlling weeds and enhancing soil fertility without using herbicides, providing a win-win situation for the Plantation's profits as well as the environment. Similarly, Ya'axché developed an agreement with the Cisco construction company to ensure that impacts to local watersheds during the construction of the Southern Highway were kept at minimal levels.



Protected Area Management

2009 marked a keystone year in the development of Ya'axché's protected area management efforts. Ya'axché significantly strengthened the management of the GSCP and Bladen Nature Reserve (BNR), while also assisting the Forest Department and TIDE to increase the effectiveness with which they manage the Maya Golden Landscape's other Protected Areas including the Colombia River Forest Reserve, privately owned lands and the Port Honduras Marine Reserve.



With the enforcement capacity of a Head Ranger and nine full-time Rangers, Ya'axché was able to maintain a significant presence throughout the 100,000 acres of BNR and the 15,000 acre corridor of GSCP while patrolling deeper and more strategically than ever before. Miles of newly demarcated boundaries posted with dozens of new signs have bolstered the security of BNR. Moreover, seven of Ya'axché Rangers now have the responsibility and privilege of representing the Police Department as Special Constables with the full power of arrest.



Supporting this, Ya'axché has worked closely with the Ministry of National Security to tackle incursions by Guatemalans crossing the border to illegally cut xaté palms and valuable hardwoods that are abundant within the Columbia River Forest Reserve (CRFR) and BNR. Through the Golden Stream Initiative, an observation post was established within the Machaquilha area of the CRFR, bringing much needed management presence to the southern portion of Belize's Maya Mountain Massif, which is a critically biodiverse region.

However, a myriad of pressures continue to face the protected areas of Toledo, and recognizing this, Ya'axché has updated the Bladen Management Plan and has assisted the Forest Department to do the same with the Colombia River Forest Reserve Management Plan.

Research, Inventory and Monitoring

In order to ensure that management efforts are based on the most relevant conservation issues, Ya'axché developed and began implementation of the Biodiversity Research, Inventory, and Monitoring (BRIM) Strategy for the Maya Golden Landscape. The BRIM strategy is designed to collect data on the area's



natural resources, which helps guide the adaptive management of both the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor Conservation Action Strategy and the Maya Golden Landscape Sustainable Development Strategy. BRIM activities that were undertaken in 2009 include development of a comprehensive freshwater health monitoring system that is implemented in the Bladen, Deep, Middle, and Golden Stream Rivers; collection of

data to evaluate trends in key wildlife species; and tracking of the status of critical threats such as forest fires. All of the data collected under the BRIM strategy is incorporated into a Geographic Information System and the results are disseminated through the annual biodiversity synthesis report. Additionally, Ya'axché helped facilitate the work of numerous researchers in



both the GSCP and BNR who contributed to the mounting scientific knowledge that supports the need for conservation.



Community Outreach and Livelihoods

Economic Opportunities

Many community members of the Maya Golden Landscape make their livelihoods as farmers. Ya'axché believes in continuing this custom by providing technical and financial support for the incorporation of environmentally friendly, integrated farming practices into traditional methods. By initiating new technologies and innovative techniques, Ya'axché offers existing farmers opportunities to improve product yields.

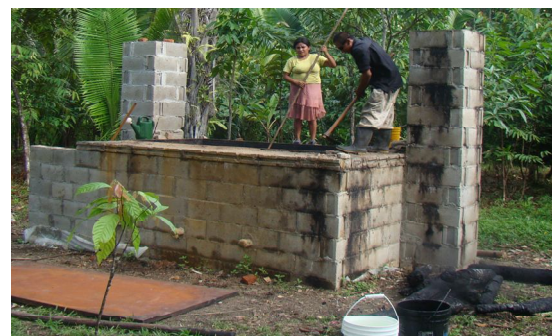
Ya'axché continued to work with village members in Medina Bank to establish the first of three community vegetable gardens. A drip irrigation system was installed as a preventative method for the increasing variability in precipitation as a result of climate change. School children were



introduced to the practice of organic agriculture by helping to sow seeds. All of the hard work paid off this year with the first sales of organic cabbage, tomatoes, cilantro, and sweet peppers harvested from the garden.



An agro-forestry initiative was launched in 2009 in Indian Creek that began with the distribution of 5,000 cacao, timber, and fruit tree seedlings to



farmers. These farmers will continue to receive assistance from Ya'axché in developing healthy, productive cacao plots and in navigating the organic certification process. Eventually they will sell their product to the Toledo Cacao Growers Association, adding to the success of the farmers that Ya'axché currently works with who sold 6,200 pounds of organic cacao in 2009. The agro-forestry initiative also includes providing assistance to farmers in establishing apiaries, which will allow them to harvest honey that can be sold for a profit.

Community Development

This year Ya'axché held four open forums with five villages to gather ideas and suggestions on how to involve community members in the management of local protected areas. These forums also functioned as a way to initiate projects beneficial to each community's needs. The installation of a solar powered pump to distribute water throughout the community of Medina Bank was just one of the projects originating at a community forum that was successfully completed in 2009.



Education and Outreach



Ya'axché reaches out to community members at a young age, with the hopes of creating a new generation of environmentally conscious and sustainably-minded individuals who will continue to develop entrepreneurial spirit and leadership in their communities. In 2009 Ya'axché's education outreach officer conducted school visits in five villages to present and discuss information on a variety of environmental issues including the

importance of protected areas, causes of climate change, and how to maintain a healthy watershed. The area's youth were also brought together for a poster competition that coincided with the International Day of Climate Action and a school trash clean up and tree planting to celebrate Earth Day. The scholarship program is currently providing financial sponsorship to 32 high school students who were selected based on their financial need and academic potential. This year Ya'axché celebrated the graduation of five more students adding to a total of 17 graduates who have been funded throughout their high school careers.



The annual race against fire continues to be a successful event, now in its seventh year. Over 800 participants from 10 villages gathered for a fun and educational day of activities aimed at raising awareness about the prevention, management and dangers of forest fires—the highlight of which was a 20 mile bicycle race.

Promotion of Best Practices

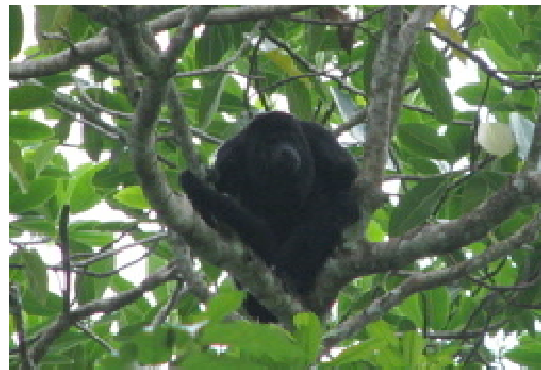
Ya'axché works with local farmers and businesses to promote practices that will improve productivity while maintaining the integrity of the land and surrounding areas. Over the past year Ya'axché has held trainings and conducted site visits to encourage riparian reforestation, vermiculture, composting, and integrated farming systems among local farmers. Ya'axché is assisting Carbon Gold, an organization working to combat climate change, in developing trial vegetable and cacao plots that use biochar (similar to charcoal) to simultaneously reduce the amounts of Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere and improve soil fertility. In 2009 Ya'axché emphasized best practices for watershed health, which involved working with citrus growers to encourage cover cropping as a means of reducing the volume of chemicals that enter the local waterways.



Advocacy

National Cooperation

Ya'axché is a member of the Executive Committee for the Association of Protected Area Management Organizations (APAMO). APAMO advocates for and contributes to the sustainability and proper management of Belize's protected areas through collaboration among members as well as through establishing relationships with governmental bodies that influence key policies. Over the past year Ya'axché's involvement with APAMO took on the role of leading efforts towards the development of a concerted advocacy plan for the organization. This advocacy plan will work to ensure that the 26% of national land and marine territory that is officially recognized as part of the National Protected Areas remains intact.



Ya'axché holds a place on the board of directors of the Belize Association for Private Protected Areas (BAPPA). In 2009 Ya'axché continued to support BAPPA's efforts to develop an amendment to the National Parks Systems Act that will allow private protected areas to be legally recognized. This step is critical for allowing all who work towards the protection of Belize's natural areas to participate in the strengthening of the entire protected areas network.

In 2009 Ya'axché continued to be a vocal committee member of the Belize Organic Producers Association (BOPA). BOPA is a consortium of NGOs, government ministries, and businessmen working to develop nationwide standards for the certification of organic products. This initiative compliments Ya'axché's work in the promotion of organic vegetable gardens and cacao and will improve the solidarity of a market for organic products.



A Local Voice

The proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam bordering the community of San Pedro Columbia, the Columbia River Forest Reserve and Bladen Nature Reserve has compelled Ya'axché to take on a new advocacy role. Ya'axché has begun to work with affected communities to ensure they are fully informed of the proposed development and to facilitate dialogue among all stakeholders. In doing so, Ya'axché completed a damage assessment of unauthorized work already completed and has arranged for an ecological assessment of the Central River, which will aid the communities in making informed decisions regarding the possible economic, social, and environmental consequences of the dam.



Institutional Governance and Management

Ya'axché constantly works to build the capacity of its staff in order to stay abreast of the ever-changing knowledge, technology, and ideas regarding current conservation issues. In doing so, many of Ya'axché's staff members have traveled to attend workshops and trainings both locally and internationally. The Protected Areas Manager accompanied village members to Guatemala to attend a forum promoting collaboration among the international conservation community, the Communities Outreach and Livelihoods Program Manager traveled to Alaska to attend the Native Peoples Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop and the Agro-forestry Outreach Officer spent time in Costa Rica learning about new topics in integrated farming systems. The entire Ya'axché staff attended a workshop geared towards preparing the organization for the impending consequences of climate change, where the topic of incorporating climate change mitigation and adaptation into each individual's work was also highlighted.



Over the past year a number of important documents have been developed. A Policies and Procedures Handbook was created to formally guide the governance and management of Ya'axché, a Volunteer Handbook was produced to define volunteer roles and benefits, a Visitor Policy for researchers and students to BNR was developed and a Sustainable Extraction Policy was instituted. The Golden Stream Watershed Business Planning Strategy was completed by independent consultants. This document acts as a guide and reference for income generating activities that will help secure the financial sustainability of all entities in the Golden Stream Watershed including Ya'axché as an organization. Another step taken in 2009 towards improving financial stability was the development of an ecotourism program where participants get to experience what it's like to be a "Ranger-For-A-Day" while simultaneously supporting Ya'axché and local conservation efforts.

Financial Statement 2009

OPERATING INCOME

Grants 997,594.56

Total Income 997,594.56

LESS EXPENSES

Community Sub- Projects 36,252.44
Salaries 498,515.21
Advertising 607.00
Consultancies 180,781.70
Audit 9,900.00
Communication (Telephone & Satellite) 19,914.38
Equipment and Motor Vehicle Maintenance 27,306.90
Field Supplies 903.50
Fuel 29,352.73
Insurance 1,522.03
International Travel 10,507.95
Licensing 400.00
Local Travel & Subsistence 16,723.90
Materials & Supplies 7,713.28
Membership Fee 100.00
Office Supplies 10,118.04
Miscellaneous Supplies 18,179.05
Plant Stock 7,235.75
Postage 847.64
Office Rental 10,125.00
Scholarship 6,309.70
Training 13,371.09
Utilities 5,695.22
Office Equipment 11,129.50
Infrastructure
Field Equipment
Promotions

Total Expenses 969,607.64

(Loss/profit for the year) 27,986.92

Thank You!



Ya'axché Staff

Executive Director

Lisel Alamilla

Community Outreach and Livihoods Programme Manager

Bartolo Teul

Sustainable Land-Use Programme Manager

Nick Wicks

Golden Stream Watershed Project Manager

Ansel Dubon

Protected Areas Manager

Nathaniel Miller

Freshwater Ecologist

Rachael Carrie

Volunteer

Bridget Barry

Development Officer

Ginny Fuhs

Agroforestry Outreach Officer

Kenny Cal

Education Outreach Officer

Julio Chub

Agroforestry Outreach Officer

Auxebio Sho

GIS/Communications Officer

Maximiliano Caal

Field Supervisor

Marchilio Ack

Volunteer

Molly Klarman

Accountant

Aretha Morris

Administrative Assistant

Ivanny Oliva

Horticulturist

Veronica Pop

Ranger

Abelino Zuniga

Ranger

Rosendo Coy

Ranger

Alejandro Ical

Ranger

Vigilio Cal

Ranger

Victor Bonilla

Ranger

Octavio Cal

Ranger

Anignacio Makin

Ranger

Marcus Cholom

Ranger

Marcus Tut

Board of Directors

Valentino Shal

Robert Bensted-Smith

Barbara Locke

Victor Ical

Reymundo Sanchez

Dale Gomez

Alphonso Cal

Acknowledgements

To Our Funders and Partners

Fauna and Flora International: Ya'axché's principal institutional partner, who has supported its work from the beginning.

Organizational Partners

Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE)
Sarstoon-Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM)
Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE)
Friends for Conservation and Development (FCD)
World Wildlife Fund (WWF)
Association of Protected Areas Management Organizations (APAMO)
Belize Association of Private Protected Areas (BAPPA)
Toledo Healthy Forests Initiative (THFI)
Belize Forest Department
Belize Defense Force
Belize Police Department
Belize National Security
Maya Mountain Research Farm
Belize Botanic Gardens
Toledo Cacao Growers' Association (TCGA)
Citrus Growers' Association (CGA)
The Lodge at Big Falls
Hickatee Lodge
TIDE Tours

Granting Organizations

Global Environment Facility (GEF)
Organization of American States (OAS)
Caribbean Network for Integrated Rural Development (CNIRD)
Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT)
PACT Foundation
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Critical Ecosystems Protection Fund (CEPF)
United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Rapid Response Facility
Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)
Whitley Animal Protection Trust
GIS Software (ESRI)

Community Partners

Indian Creek	Silver Creek Village
Golden Stream Village	San Miguel Village
Medina Bank Village	Big Falls Village
Bladen Village	San Pedro Colombia Village
	Trio Village

