

# **Belize's crown jewel of protected areas, Bladen Nature Reserve is under threat**

Ya'axché Conservation Trust

August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017

Punta Gorda



Bladen Nature Reserve is one of the most important protected areas in Belize, due to its biodiversity, extensive forests, Mayan ruins and the water services it provides. Ya'axché Conservation Trust co-manage Bladen Nature Reserve with the Belize Forest Department, and whilst only scientific research and education are permitted in the reserve under Belize Law, there is growing evidence of illegal activities which are threatening one of the most beautiful areas of our country.

All Belizeans benefit from the protection of forests due to the environmental services they provide, the income that tourism generates, their cultural significance, their supply of natural resources, their provision of clean water for agriculture, and their beauty. According to the Belize Tourism Board, tourist expenditure was BZ\$771 million in 2015 and visitors are attracted to Belize's rainforests, reefs, beaches, cultural diversity, welcoming people and climate. Protecting forests such as Bladen, whilst allowing restricted tourist access to sites such as Golden Stream Corridor Preserve, helps protect this amazing environment, whilst supporting our tourism industry.

Unfortunately this iconic scenery is under threat. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, forests accounted for 60% of Belize's land area in 2015, but if current trends persist, Belize will have just 47% forest land area by 2040 (CATHALAC). Internationally, protecting forests is more important than ever as temperatures rise. During the 2015 Paris Climate Conference international governments recognized the key role forests play in counteracting climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide. Forested areas also provide clean air, water, crop pollinators, and soil protection.

Some of the oldest forests in Belize are found in the 100,000-acre Bladen, located in Toledo. As you travel through southern Belize heading towards Punta Gorda, among the forested mountains is one unmistakable peak rising as you approach Bella Vista which forms part of Bladen. The Reserve is rich in biodiversity, holds culturally significant archaeological sites, and is one of the most stunning areas in Belize.

Ya'axché, a Belizean non-governmental organization, received co-management of Bladen from the Forest Department in 2008. Since then, Ya'axché has increased protection of Bladen by hiring and training 12 rangers from surrounding communities to conduct enforcement patrols and wildlife monitoring. Multi-agency patrols, comprised of Ya'axché rangers, Belize Defence Force and Forest Department officers, are conducted in remote areas of Bladen, including Western Bladen which is close to the Guatemalan border. The team endure harsh conditions over rugged terrain to identify and record illegal activities and detain perpetrators in these remote locations.

The extent of illicit activities such as trespassing, hunting, xaté harvesting, logging, farming and poaching in Bladen is alarming. In areas where rubbish is left, packaging indicates that trespassers are from Guatemala. New campsites, hunting areas, fire stakes and bones from animals have recently been discovered in Western Bladen, while caves have been utilized as shelter. Rangers have also discovered the production of red kidney beans and marijuana despite laws preventing the introduction of species. Perpetrators flee using the ever increasing trail networks and avoid the enforcement team who are on the frontlines trying to protect Belize's natural resources.

For the benefit of all Belizeans, Ya'axché along with partners are increasing patrols in these hard to reach places to increase presence and inform perpetrators that Bladen does not allow entry, extraction of resources or the introduction of plants or animals. Due to the remoteness of these locations, and the fact perpetrators are often armed, rangers risk their lives on a daily basis conducting patrols. Ya'axché is calling for support from enforcement agencies to help rangers protect Belize's crown jewel of protected areas. The public can also play a part by staying informed on the issues facing the protection of sites like Bladen, and sharing information when suspicious activities are witnessed. Together we can ensure that future generations of Belizeans can continue enjoying the beautiful landscape we inhabit.