

Women for a Wild

By Eric Hoffman



In a tiny Latin American country, women do big things for conservation.

A common caricature of a head of state in Latin America is a stern looking man wearing a military uniform surrounded by a gun-toting entourage of men dressed much like their leader. The other half of the human equation, women, are not often thought of as influencing decisions of consequence in nations of Central and South America.

There are, however, refreshing exceptions. In tiny Belize, a New Hampshire-sized nation of 200,000 citizens located on the Caribbean directly below the Yucatan and next to Guatemala, women have been the moving force in a vanguard conservation movement. At stake are some of the largest stretches of rainforest in Central America, which are homes to healthy populations of jaguars, ocelots, tapirs, scarlet macaws, and other endangered denizens of the jungle. Offshore, Belize has the longest contiguous barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere, with countless kinds of fish populations, manatees, and rare sea turtles.

There may be a lesson in the approach and methodology of four leading women who have been instrumental in shaping today's Belizean character to a pro-wildlife ethic.

They talk of "appealing to the hearts," "working behind the scenes," "knowing all the facts," and "involving all levels of society." None of them holds a government post. Yet, each is effective in altering national policies in ways that benefit the myriads of wild creatures.

Sharon Matola, a 1982 transplant from downtown Baltimore, has taken Belize by storm. She's the director of the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, which has been credited with a national "attitude adjustment" of the average Belizean regarding wildlife from one of nonchalance to greater awareness and national pride. Each year, thousands of Belizean and international travelers visit the Belize Zoo, which moved December 7, 1991, to a new 28-acre facility, compliments of Wildlife Preservation Trust International and other funding sources. Visitors now go away with their first glimpses of native jungle wildlife in sections of enclosed habitats where animals would likely occur in the wild.

Everything from jaguars, to howler monkeys, king vultures, tayras, ocelots, and Morlet's crocodiles are present. Only the crocodile was taken from the wild — a donation from a contingent of British soldiers who found the reptile snoozing in an irrigation ditch near their camp. Matola has made sure each of the zoo's exhibits houses animals whose individual stories vividly illustrate the difficulties the species is facing in the wild.

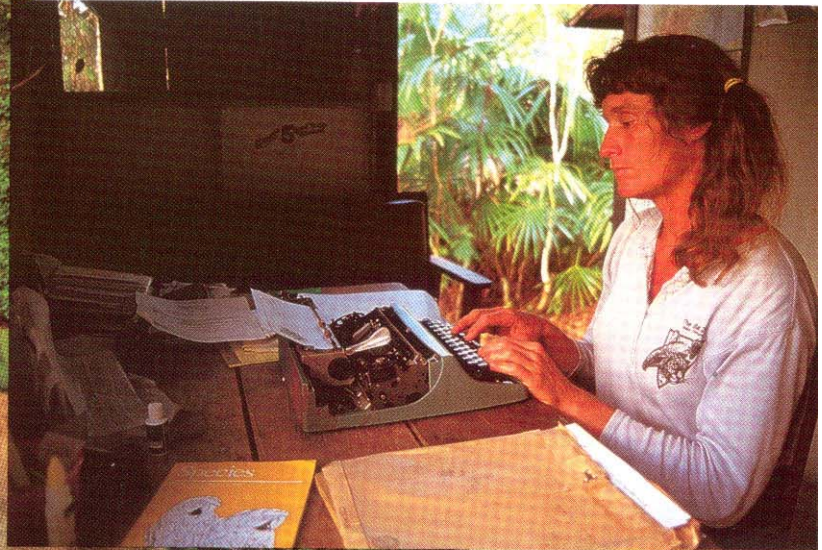
Belize

Photographs by Frans Lanting

In Central America, much of the rainforests of Belize remain intact. Innovative conservation programs aim to keep them that way.

There's a white hawk that was shot and permanently crippled because it was suspected of stealing chickens. "A case of ignorance," explains Matola. White hawks eat small reptiles, not chickens. There is a Baird's tapir named April that arrived to Matola's care nearly dead from a screwworm infestation, a disease common to livestock. Matola nursed April back to health. The Baird's tapir is the national animal, and yearly hundreds of school children traipse to the zoo to celebrate April's birthday – complete with a carrot and omolene cake for the celebrant.

Unlike the other women prominent in Belize conservation, Matola arrived alone, with no funding source or family ties. Matola came to Belize to care for a group of jungle animals collected by a British filmmaker. When filming was completed, Matola was told to get rid of the animals. "In good conscience I couldn't release captive-raised animals into the wild because they'd never make it," recalls Matola.



Sharon Matola catches up on correspondence in her office at the Belize Zoo. She founded the zoo with captive animals that belonged to a British filmmaker who no longer wanted them.

Today, on its new grounds, the zoo offers animals like this puma (left) natural-habitat enclosures to live in. The zoo is credited with inspiring an ecological consciousness-raising among Belizeans.



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— its 190-mile-long barrier reef. In 1990 she was one of six people worldwide to win the prestigious Goldman Environment Award, “for efforts to preserve the fragile marine ecosystem in the Belize barrier reef in the region of Latin America.”

Among Gibson’s accomplishments is spearheading the creation of Hol Chan Marine Reserve, a first of its kind 1,000-acre marine sanctuary that protects 750 acres of reef, associated sea grass beds, and 250 acres of mangroves. Because of the abundance of sea life at Hol Chan and its shallow depth that never exceeds 25 feet, the reserve is the

primary destination for most snorkelers visiting Belize. Moray eels, groupers, and human visitors stare at one another without fear.

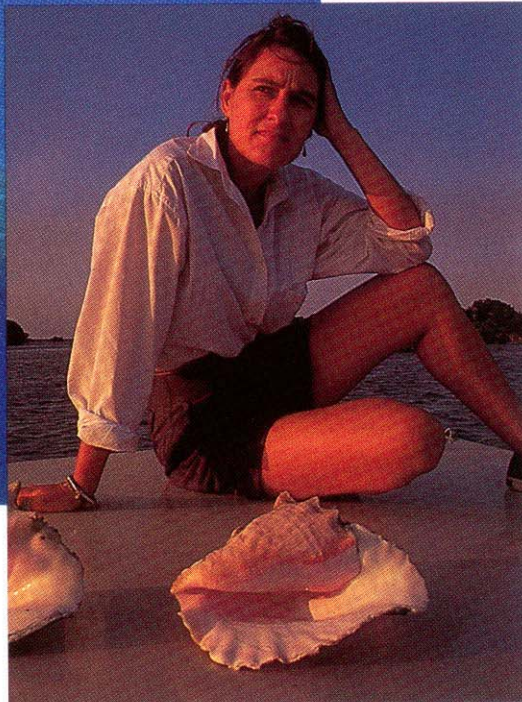
At age 38, Gibson has demonstrated true grit in gaining acceptance for her ideas in conservation. She started as a biological field officer for the Department of Fisheries in 1975. She became involved in efforts to stem the overfishing of lobster and conch, and, in a short time, found herself organizing the first underwater reserve in the region. When Gibson floated the idea of a marine reserve to citizens of Ambergris Caye, the nearest landfall, she found that fishermen were highly suspicious of any idea that would make fishing permanently off limits. Dean Lindo, the minister of natural resources at the time, says: “Janet is a gem. She always came to meetings with all the facts, and it wasn’t long until people without the facts sat quietly as she methodically explained why her proposal made sense for all Belizeans.”

Gibson recalls almost giving up. “The hotel owners saw the reserve as good for tourism, but the fishermen’s cooperatives were much tougher to convince. Often they’d agree, then reverse themselves the next morning. When they came to meetings drunk it was discouraging,” sighs Gibson. “The fishermen kept saying, ‘Isn’t the “cut” (a dramatic channel, rich in marine life that was central to the proposed reserve) enough?’” Gibson stuck to her belief that a portion of the entire ecosystem needed protection, not just the dramatic cut. “The seagrass isn’t exciting to most people, but it is where the baby fish live,” she says. “The mangrove is home to small fish and nesting birds. It’s a filtering system and source of nutrition for the reef. To last, a reef needs healthy surroundings.” Gibson’s views eventually won out.

Hol Chan was just the beginning for Gibson. Now backed by Wildlife Conservation International, Gibson has been instrumental in procuring \$3 million from the Global Environmental Facility, a group of 25 nations working through the World Bank to fund projects that protect biological diversity. The grant will go towards the Coastal Zone Management Plan she has championed, which promotes the united management of Belize’s entire coastal and reef areas.



Belize’s 190-mile barrier reef provides habitat for an astounding variety of marine life. Janet Gibson’s efforts to establish the Hol Chan Marine Reserve has earned her worldwide recognition.



The alternative that she chose was to declare the unwanted menagerie a zoo and then scrape enough money together to feed them.

Traveling via motorcycle, Matola soon began visiting schools with her boa constrictor, Balboa. This was the start of her Tropical Education Center, which now has three educators and will make contact with more than 20,000 school children this year.

Matola’s greatest skill may be her adroit use of the media to further the cause of wildlife. She has a constant presence in every kind of journalistic medium in Belize. On radio there is “Bardi the Baboon” (baboon is a Belizean term for howler monkey). Bardi lectures kids on the many needs of animals living in Belize. Matola’s children’s book, *Hoodwink the Owl*, may have had the greatest influence. Hoodwink, a wise old owl, travels through Belize talking to each of the creatures found in the forest. In the course of these encounters, issues such as the illegal pet-bird trade and destruction of rainforest are discussed.

In contrast to Matola’s improvisational style are the government-involving conservation strategies of Janet Gibson, protector of Belize’s best known geographic feature

Gibson envisions the creation of zones where commercial fishing may be allowed and other zones, such as spawning grounds or turtle and bird nesting areas, where human activities would be minimal. Gibson has met with administrators of Australia's Great Barrier Reef Authority to glean ideas for a management plan for Belize. The emerging Belize plan may be even more comprehensive than the Australian model. "We need to think of the reef and the Belizean coastline that contributes to it, including the rivers," she says. The mangroves are of special concern to Gibson because increased development on the coast around Belize City has led to old growth red mangroves being mowed down to make way for new hotels and commercial development.

Gibson, who appears shy but sure of her direction says, "I'm most comfortable working on the details with middle-level government officials. I work to find solutions with staff and will let ministers contact me. I don't go over the heads of others."

At 29 years of age, Therese Bowman Rath is the youngest ever president of the Belize Audubon Society, the organization that has been the driving force in all environmental issues in Belize since the country's independence in 1981. Through constant lobbying Belize Audubon has been the force behind the government's committing 31 percent of its landmass to no-hunting sanctuaries.

Belize Audubon also administers the areas it has helped to create by hiring wardens from local villages and allocating funds for security, cleanup, and trail maintenance. Some of the better known sanctuaries are: The Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, renowned for its jaguars; Bermudian Landing Community Baboon Sanctuary, founded

by more than 100 subsistence farmers to protect black howler monkeys; and Half Moon Caye National Monument, one of the few red-footed booby nesting sites and an excellent snorkeling area.

Besides Rath's position as president of Belize Audubon's board of directors, she also sits on the Programme for Belize board of directors. The two boards oversee the management of more than 600,000 acres of private and public reserves and sanctuaries. Rath's self-effacing style belies the amount of power she has. "Therese Rath represents a change in emphasis from acquisition of lands to implementing a businesslike approach to managing them. She's a blend of a savvy businesswoman and a dedicated conservationist," says Brad Northrup of the U.S.-based Nature Conservancy. Regardless of whether she is talking to a wealthy citrus grower or a Mayan villager, her message is the same. "It's important to win their hearts. I talk to them about the kind of place they want for their children," says Rath.

Meb Cutlack, editor of *Belize Review* recalls Rath's special qualities in a sanctuary opening he attended: "Therese made a speech at the official opening of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, when it was extended



Therese Bowman Rath, president of the Belize Audubon Society, believes firmly that local people must be involved in sanctuary management. Toucans and many other species benefit from Belize's no-hunting refuges.

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from 3,500 to 102,000 acres. After years of political infighting to get it expanded, she forgot about her role in the creation of the sanctuary and chose to talk about the meaninglessness of the sanctuary without involvement of the local Indians as managers of the reserve." Today, nobody's surprised the staff was hired from the nearest Mayan village.

William Bowman, a citrus farmer, spoke after Rath. He alluded to once being "on the other side" and then said, "Well, Therese has since convinced me." Bowman is Therese's uncle and at one time advocated citrus development for the area. He also was known to post bounties on jaguars, but no longer. On his own land he now leaves sections of forests that act as corridors for jaguars and other creatures.

Rath is a tireless optimist. "Changing attitudes about conservation is mostly overcoming ignorance," she says. "The growers may become wealthy, but most of them haven't traveled much and often aren't connected to thoughts and concepts essential to the survival of certain species. I like the Belizean proverb, 'Too much of one thing, is good for nothing.' A world of citrus groves without wildlife would be an empty world."

One native Belizean who heads a unique conservation effort is Joy Grant, the director of Programme for Belize. Grant oversees 200,000 acres of virgin rainforest called the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area in northwest Belize. The Programme's main purpose is to link economic development and conservation of the country's wildlife, forest, and marine areas. The Programme is a private, nonprofit Belizean corporation that acts as a bridge between private and public sectors. With seed money from mostly U.S. sources, the agency has raised \$6 million to buy most of the land, which will be held in trust for the people of Belize in perpetuity.

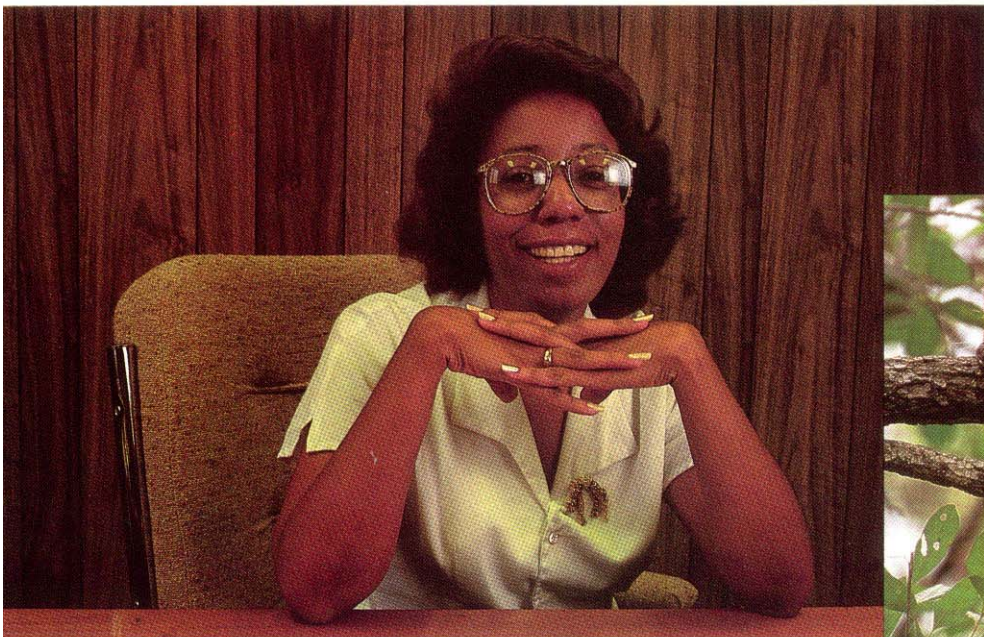
Often, in other parts of the world, biodiversity assessments are undertaken after exploitation occurs, which skews the findings and complicates effective management. This won't be the case with Programme for Belize. The assessment of plants and animals is expected to take years before sustainable uses of the areas' resources are discussed. Already it is known that the area possesses significant populations of jaguars, tapirs, ocelots, howler and spider monkeys, and more than 200 kinds of birds.

Soon after Grant took over for a North American director, she was credited with winning the support of fellow Belizeans. She has included kingpins from the sugar industry, conservation groups, and government officials on the board of directors which operates under a charter that puts maintaining biodiversity and habitat needs of creatures first. "This is the entire society's project, not just a segment," says Grant.

Grant is a force to be reckoned with. She holds an M.B.A. degree, was once second in command at the Belizean embassy in Washington, D.C., and was offered the second highest position in the Central Bank of Belize. Instead she took the director's post for Programme for Belize. "The Prime Minister told me I'd made a career blunder," recalls Grant. She disagrees.

Grant sees women as important contributors to the worldwide conservation movement, because, as she says, "women are nurturing in all societies." Creating a friendly atmosphere is essential to Grant. "People are at their best when they don't feel threatened," she explains. About men holding all senior cabinet posts in the Belize government Grant has a parting shot: "Here, men may hold the top spots but women hold the influence."

*Author Eric Hoffman is a frequent contributor to Animals. His latest book, *Adventuring in Belize* (Sierra Club/Random House), is due out this spring.*



As the director of Programme for Belize, Joy Grant works to ensure that conservation concerns are combined with economic development. Within the 200,000 acres of virgin rainforest her program oversees, a coatimundi (above) pauses for a few moments' rest.

