

WONDER WOMAN

Former showgirl and lion tamer Sharon Matola launched a zoo that helped transform an entire country

By Eric Hoffman
Photographs by Frans Lanting

ONE NIGHT almost ten years ago, Sharon Matola was a guest at a formal dinner at the British High Commissioner's residence in Belmopan, the capital of Belize. It was a lofty occasion, so she had abandoned her usual coveralls and slipped her athletic 5-foot 9-inch frame into her only dress. At one point during the evening, she was locked in earnest discussion with the High Commissioner and the Brigadier General of British forces, thanking them for paying the feed bill for the jaguars, ocelots, pacas and other native animals in the temporary chicken-wire cages she had dubbed the Belize Zoo.

The formality of the moment was already strained by the snake that Matola was wearing around her neck like a scarf. It didn't help when, suddenly, the serpent slithered free and flopped onto the table in front of the High Commissioner. Matola calmly retrieved it and apologized, explaining that she was protecting the reptile from another snake that had snapped at it earlier.

Unfazed by the stares of other guests, Matola took the opportunity to dispel common misconceptions about snakes. She also seized the moment to explain the need for habitat preservation for Belize's wildlife. By the end of the evening, many of the guests had handled the snake and thanked her for bringing it.

The incident may help explain how Sharon Matola—former showgirl, lion tamer and fungus enthusiast—became an oracle for wildlife conservation in this



MAN OF BELIZE



A modern-day Noah, Sharon Matola greets Rambo the toucan. She rescued the bird along with other animals abandoned after a movie shoot, then opened a zoo that has since become a centerpiece for conservation in Belize.

tiny Central American nation. After overcoming tremendous odds, Matola created the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, which has since become a beacon for a conservation movement that permeates Belizean society. Thanks largely to her influence, many Belizeans have traded their indifference toward the natural environment for pride.

In December 1991, on a site about a half-mile from the original menagerie, Matola opened the new Belize Zoo, with 35 exhibits featuring 120 creatures in enclosures built around existing trees and bushes in the animals' natural habitat. At the entrance stands the Gerald Durrell Visitor's Centre, whose namesake helped build it. A 1,700-acre deciduous forest nearby, a gift of the Belizean government, will be the site of the zoo's new field station. What makes all this remarkable is that it was created by a woman who arrived in Belize with only a few hundred dollars to her name, and in a country where the per-capita income only recently climbed to \$1,400 a year.

How the daughter of a retired Baltimore brewery manager and an administrative assistant found her way to the jungles of Central America can only be attributed to her unbridled approach to life. At the age of 20, Sharon Matola had been one of the first six women allowed into the U.S. Air Force's jungle survival training school in Panama. "I loved floating down jungle rivers clinging to sections of bamboo for buoyancy," she recalls. After her short stint in the military, she earned a B.S. degree from New College in Sarasota, Florida, where she became enamored of mycology, the study of fungi.

One day she came upon an unorthodox opportunity to pursue her scientific interest: an ad in a Florida newspaper calling for "tall white women" to dance in a Mexican circus. She was worried

FRANS LANTING (MINDEN PICTURES) (5)

that the position had something to do with white slavery, but curiosity got the better of her. She applied.

The job turned out to be legitimate, and it allowed Matola to travel through Mexico identifying fungi. Traipsing around the countryside collecting specimens by day and donning a sequined red bikini at night, she worked for two-and-a-half years as an exotic dancer, often doubling as a lion trainer.

Eventually, she became disillusioned with circus life and returned briefly to the United States. In 1980, it was back to the tropics, this time to work underwater on a fish survey in Belize. She arrived at an opportune time. The country (which, at the time, was called British Honduras) was on the verge of gaining independence. Its small size and 90 percent literacy rate assured quick change if an idea caught on.

Ecologically, the country is a gem. Located on the Caribbean Sea, bordered by Mexico and Guatemala, Belize is about the size of Israel. More than half of its area is covered in subtropical rain forest, which supports some of the healthiest populations of jaguars, tayras, tapirs, pacas and colorful birds found anywhere.

With a human population of 200,000 and a density of only 21 people per square mile, Belize is among the least-populated nations in Latin America. It is also blessed with the most extensive barrier-reef system in the Western Hemisphere. In the past decade, the government has placed 31 percent of the country in national parks or nature preserves.

But people have begun to put a tremendous strain on the country's resources. Hordes of divers and commercial fishermen are wreaking havoc on the delicate coral reefs. Ancient stands of red mangroves are giving way to hotels and other development, and thousands of colonists in western regions are rapidly mowing down forests for farmland.

Into this land of environmental wealth and ruin stepped Sharon Matola, who started humbly on the road to prominence in Belize. After the fish survey, she was hired by a small film company to clean up after native animals used in the

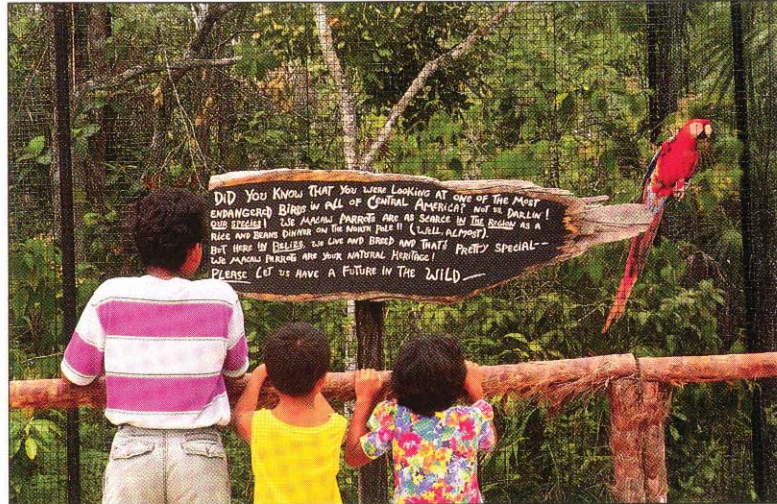
movie "Selva Verde." When filming was over, her boss left town for six months and put Matola in charge. Problem was, all the money was gone. "Most of the animals had always lived in captivity and would never make it in the wild," Matola explains. "In good conscience, I couldn't release them. I also couldn't afford to feed them."

The irony of her dilemma helped solidify her commitment to wildlife. As Matola puts it: "Here was a group of unwanted animals that were used in a film

socially difficult to evict me," she says.

She started a newsletter, "Balboa Rides Again," which addressed goings-on at the zoo, visits to schools and various conservation issues. To support herself, she led tours for international expeditions and raised chickens, which she sold to restaurants and resorts on the coast. Twice a month for two years, she climbed on her Kawasaki 650 motorcycle wearing a backpack stuffed with 80 pounds of fresh chicken meat and drove for an hour over bumpy dirt roads.

The bike and backpack also came in handy for her school "out-reach" programs. "I'd put Balboa [her favorite boa constrictor] in my backpack and drive to primary schools. For many kids," she says, "Balboa was the first snake they'd touched that hadn't been chopped in half." She visited about 600 kids the first year. Now, ten years later—with the help of an education director and two full-time instructors—more than 20,000 youngsters a



With education comes a dose of inspiration at the Belize Zoo, where children can observe a scarlet macaw (above) and, at the same time, learn about the species from its own point of view. A yawning jaguar named Pete in an enclosure nearby (right) was a gift from Guatemala's government.

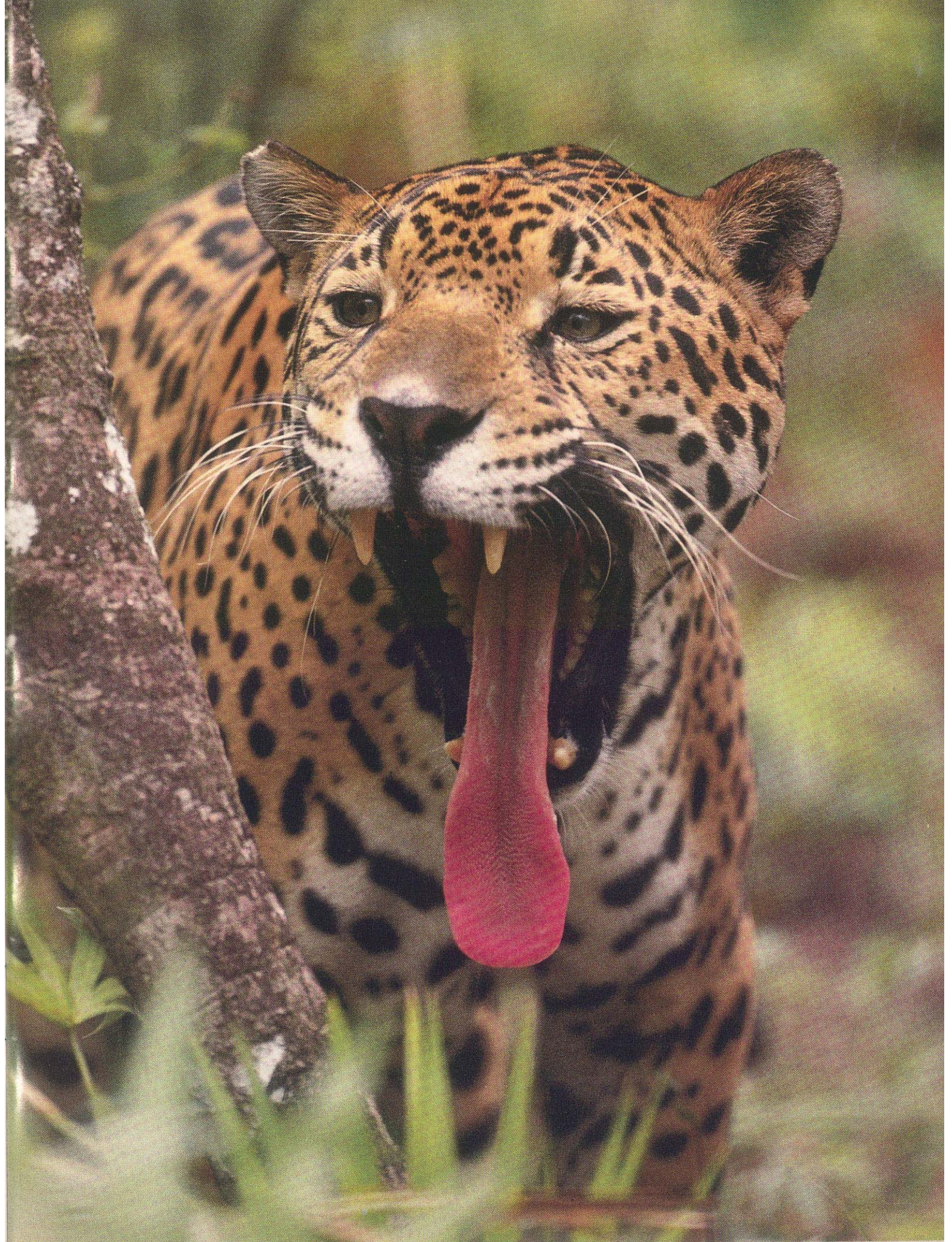
to create greater appreciation and understanding of their kind in the U.K. and the U.S., while in Belize—where the animals actually live—efforts to educate and develop appreciation for them were nonexistent. It occurred to me that a zoo featuring native species could be the first step in educating Belizeans about their animals."

So in January 1983, on a tropical savanna dotted with palmettos, white-trunked crabs and Caribbean pines, the Belize Zoo—then just a miniature shanty town of small, saggy-wired cages—was born. With no income and facing the likelihood her menagerie would be forced to leave when the filmmaker returned, Matola devised a survival plan. "I figured with support from schools and government I might make it

year receive Matola's conservation message, which stresses human threats to animals and the importance of maintaining habitat.

Not long after Matola launched her newsletter she began a multimedia blitz. She wrote articles for Belizean magazines on subjects ranging from zoo matters to discoveries on jungle expeditions. She took to the airwaves, creating a radio program with such characters as "Bardi the Baboon," a talking howler monkey (which Belizeans call baboons). Matola somehow found time to write a book, *Hoodwink the Owl*. Published in 1988, the book is now part of every primary school's library.

Her workaholic mission on behalf of wild animals and environmental protection had no precedent in Belize. Not surprisingly, it has drawn a variety of reactions over the years. Once, during her chicken-ferrying days, Matola went to the government to gain support and approval. She remembers one official with pad and pencil who eyed her with deep suspicion. "He looked me square in the eye and asked if I worked for the CIA," she says. "I don't know what he wrote down, because all I did was laugh. Ap-



parently, what I was doing just didn't make sense to them."

In the eyes of some people, Matola's concern for animals borders on zealotry. A few years ago, she led a tour group into a small art shop. Noticing some captive birds that had no water and were outside in the hot sunshine, Matola opened their cages and let them go. She then admonished the proprietors in front of all present. "I guess she thinks she's the goddess of the animals," says co-owner Aurora Garcia. "She treated us like we were stupid."

Brigadier General Tony Ballard, commander of the 2,000-man British contingent in 1983, had no such reservations about Matola; he and his wife, Marie-Louise, became fast friends with the zookeeper. Now retired and living in England, Ballard recalls, "We never understood why Sharon was so passionate about the animals and so committed to visiting children in remote villages, but we loved her for it. My wife

and I thought it remarkable how she'd put the animals' needs before her own."

Matola remains on excellent terms with the British military. Zoo events are often dramatized by skydivers and low-altitude flyovers. British Royal Marines and Matola often concoct expeditions into the remotest parts of Belize. When British soldiers found a 6-foot Morelet's crocodile in a drainage ditch near their camp, they wrestled it into a Land Rover and took it to the zoo. "Sarge" now lives in a large pond dug by the soldiers on their own time.

Along with the Audubon Society and other conservation groups, Matola has helped persuade the Belizean government and wealthy citizens to consider wildlife in their land-use decisions. Jim Bevis, a local businessman, was so moved by Matola's dedication that in April 1992 he turned 4,000 acres of his own land, mostly rain forest, into a wildlife sanctuary called the Slate Creek Preserve. Adjoining land owners will likely follow suit, expanding the preserve to 17,000 acres.

Matola also seems to have had an influence on entrepreneur Barry Bowen, second only to the Belizean government

as the country's largest employer. Among Bowen's holdings were more than 200,000 acres of jungle in northwestern Belize. Bowen remembers meeting Matola in 1983: "She used to show up on her motorcycle, hair flying out of her helmet, usually to use our copy machine for her newsletter." Though they didn't agree about much in the beginning, he says, "I admired her sincerity and willingness to put so much of herself into her projects."

Matola and other conservationists



Two children feed birthday cake to April the tapir—the Belize Zoo's most famous resident—as well-wishers look on (above). By showcasing native species like the spider monkey (right) in their natural habitat, the zoo has helped Belizeans appreciate the wealth of wildlife in their own back yard.

were worried that Bowen would develop his property in ways detrimental to wildlife. But Bowen surprised his detractors by selling 110,000 acres to the Programme for Belize, a private conservation group, instead of to a large cattle operation, which would have cleared much of the property.

On the 110,000 acres he still owns, Bowen developed an experimental farm, founded a village and built a jungle lodge called Chan Chich. The lodge is a prime destination for birders from around the world, but guests also frequently see jaguars, ocelots, tapirs and other animals. Bowen, a hunter in his youth, now forbids hunting on the property and pays patrols to deal with poachers. At first, he says, "Sharon didn't think of me as an environmentalist. Now she does."

Not the least of Matola's talents is her gift as a master saleswoman. In 1984, on her first trip to the United States as director of the Belize Zoo, she arrived practically penniless on a complimentary airline ticket to attend a meeting of zoo executives in Miami. She dyed her two jumpsuits to make them look new and, for an office, worked out of a toilet stall with a handmade "out of order" sign on the door. By the end of the conference, a leading zoo architect named John Paul Jones had offered to pay a visit to Belize.

His suggestions were later incorporated into today's zoo.

Matola's annual fund-raising forays into her native United States (she's now a Belize citizen) are almost always fruitful. A trip in 1986 netted the zoo's current assistant director, Amy Bodwell, who had been assistant curator of education at Zoo Atlanta. Matola has also garnered financial support from groups such as the World Wildlife Fund, the Inter-American Foundation, Conserva-

tion International and Wildlife Preservation Trust International, which has contributed more than \$300,000.

These days, the maverick zookeeper has ventured into the unfamiliar territory of conformity and conventionality. She now has staff meetings, a budget, professional keepers, educators, a curator and volunteers by the score. Her chicken-wire menagerie has evolved into a full-fledged zoo, which educators throughout Belize recognize as an important source of conservation information.

Will a predictable lifestyle anesthetize Sharon Matola? Doubtful. A recent evening finds her engrossed in conversation with Royal Marines and scientists during a rooftop party at the Fort George Hotel in Belize City. The group is planning a trip across the rugged, unexplored Maya Mountains in hopes of locating undiscovered species and recording what lives there. Enthusiasm undimmed, she exclaims, "I love it, and can't wait until we start." ■

*Writer Eric Hoffman owns an alpaca and llama ranch in California. His book *Adventuring in Belize* (Sierra Club/Random House) is slated for publication next spring.*

