



# Step by step, Belize reveals its treasures

My assignment was to find a spot in the Belizean Zoo and sit and listen. It sounded easy enough. I chose a spot next to Belize's national animal, the tapir, a weird animal that looks somewhat like a cross between a giant hog and an anteater.

As I lay on the platform next to the fence I heard all familiar sounds such as birds whistling, wind blowing, people talking and my breath slowing.

Just about when I was ready to make my transition from the real world to the dream world I heard a spine tingling "ROAR!"

"What the H-E-double hockey sticks is that noise?" I immediately sputtered. It sounded like something straight out of the movie "Jurassic Park."

To my surprise I looked around and no one was running. Finally I gathered my wits about me and decided I needed to follow that noise and find out what it was. As I got closer, I became less startled and more curious. The noise led me to another platform in the zoo standing under a canopy of tall tropical trees.

Out of nowhere, a small black monkey propelled himself from a high branch to a lower one, grabbed the tree trunk with his left hand, wrapped his tail around the branch, and leaned in to the right facing another monkey and "ROAR"!

The hair stood up on the back of my neck and I thought to myself: "Wow! That cute little guy sure can pack an intimidating blow." It was then I realized this was the famous Howler Monkey that I had read about in preparation for my trip.

Belize, located in Central America, was the destination for my first Global Field Program (GFP) experience. In conjunction with "Project Dragonfly." GFP is a master's program based out of Miami University's Oxford campus. I was excited to explore the



**Rosie Bloom scholarship winner Josh Gardner took this photo of Altun Ra**

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Health educator Josh Gardner is one of four AMV Rosie Bloom scholarship awardees for 2010, and one of three able to travel as planned.

Our autumn newsletter recounted the experiences of Doug Horvath, a naturalist with Five Rivers MetroParks, in Baja, Mexico. Our spring edition will tell the story of naturalist Joshua York.

Their trips were made possible thanks to Earth Expeditions, in partnership with Miami University and Project Dragonfly.

Unfortunately, Lakota science teacher Rachel Howard could not journey to Thailand because of its dangerous political situation.

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world from a conservationist's view.

Our group of 21 students was led by head instructor Jill Korach, co-instructor Jonathan Lee, and our jack of all trades/ Belizean guide/ ambassador/ instructor Celso Poot.

Our first home for the 10-day trip was the zoo. No, we did not sleep with the animals, nor did they lock us up in our own exhibit. We had accommodations, and they were good ones, except for sharing space with scorpions, tarantulas, mosquitoes and ants.

The unique thing about the Belizean Zoo is that it has all native plant and animal species, unlike so many zoos that have animals from all over the world. It gives you a genuine feel for the country. The displays enclose natural habitats rather than create fake ones

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# Belize reveals treasures

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for the animals. No animal was taken from the wild without good cause. Most were injured, abandoned or rescued. Along with tapirs and howler monkeys the zoo had crocodiles, deer, macaws, harpy eagles, jaguars, cougars, ocelots, owls and many more.

Even though it felt like we could have spent almost a week at the zoo and not seen all there was to offer, we only visited a couple days. Next on our list of destinations was the Maya site Altun Ha. Our guide, Peter Herrera, explained that rather than being a place of worship, which is most common among Mayan sites, Altun Ha was thought to be a trading market. The reasoning behind this is its proximity to the ocean, the foreign objects found in the ruins and lack of large-scale religious structures.

As I stood atop the highest ruin and gazed a bird's eye view of the entire site, I imagined what it would have been like to live among the Mayan people. How interesting it would have been to participate in their unique rituals. I visualized myself using flint as a tool to shape out pottery from a piece of limestone and selling it in the plaza, standing at one of the ruins trading with people from distant places.

My eyes then traveled beyond the ancient Mayan site into the seemingly never-ending, deep tropical forest. At this moment I realized that I was far away from what I call home, Cincinnati.

Baboon Sanctuary was our next destination. To me it looked like just a regular rural community, until we walked around and took a closer look. It is a community of people committed to the preservation of howler monkeys. Rather than farm or develop all of their property, many of the local people keep areas in prime habitat for the monkeys. This agreement brings in some tourism, so it is kind of a win/win situation for both the locals and the monkeys.

It was a unique experience to be walking with a tour

group through someone's front yard to observe these fiercely vocal creatures, especially while that person was sitting on their front porch trying to enjoy the weather. Daytime wasn't the only time we were tromping around looking at nature. We traveled at night as well. As we beamed our headlamps through the darkness of the woods, I had it in my mind that I was going to see the majestic medium-sized cat known as the ocelot. I would have been happy seeing a jaguar or cougar just as well! Mostly we saw big spiders, bright stars and beady red eyes. Oh, yeah — and that one crocodile!

Just as I started to feel the trip had packed too many activities into a small amount of time, we had a great opportunity to wind down with the local kids at the La

Democracia, a K-8 government school.

We spent most of our time making art work, looking at pictures on our cameras and playing soccer. Probably the most interesting thing for the kids was to look at our pictures and see strange places and strange animals, such as snowy mountains and elk.

Our next location was paradise. The 5-acre island of Tobacco Caye sits off the coast of Belize in the middle of the coral reef. We practically had the island to our-

selves. I remember stepping off the boat onto the dock looking through palm trees and thinking that I could see the water on the opposite side of the island. Surely, I thought, my eyes were playing tricks on me. They weren't. It took only two minutes to walk to our bunk houses on the other side of the island.

A competition to see who could climb the highest on a coconut tree left us hoping that none of us ever get stranded on an island and are needing to survive off of coconuts. Most of our time was spent snorkeling and studying the reef ecology.

The night snorkel was probably the most memorable experience on the trip. Once we got over the eerie feeling of being under the water at night, our eyes were

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Photo by Travis Duncan

**Tobacco Caye housing.**





Photo by Rachel Rowland

The Belize trip included work on land and sightseeing under the sea, home of this octopus off the coast

## Above and below the sea, Belize reveals treasures

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opened to a whole new world. Our waterproof headlamps exposed eel, octopus, lobster, stingray and many more nocturnal creatures. I even got to see our guide catch a lobster with his bare hands.

Field expert Matt Jasinski of the Tobacco Caye Marine Station was a key our studies of marine life on the coral reef. I admit, after talking with him and learning that in the end he will have spent 2.5 years living on the island and studying the reef, I was a little jealous. We spent two days total on the island, and by the time we had to leave I was about ready to ask Matt if I could be his long-term assistant. I wasn't ready to part with the sounds of the ocean, the warm breeze and the sunsets.

Last stop was Gale's Point, a village near the Southern Lagoon off

the coast. Our mission: study the ecology of sea turtles and the conservation of Antillean manatees. The objective was to count manatee sightings and note the times between sightings. Since heavy boating traffic cuts down the number of manatees in the Southern Lagoon, we tracked boat sightings as well.

Seeing the manatees come up for air every couple of minutes was a pleasure, considering that most groups go hours without a sighting.

We weren't as fortunate when it came to the sea turtles. Although we didn't see any turtles, we did find many nests. Late into the night local conservation specialist, Kevin Andrewin, and his crew led us to several nests, where we documented findings. These findings included the number of viable eggs versus destroyed eggs, the distance of the

nest from the water line, and what predator (if any) had harvested the eggs. Mostly we found that skunks were the culprit.

We spent two days and two nights at Manatee Lodge, Gales Point. The last night's festivities included ancient drumming and dancing around the fire with the villagers.

On our way out of Gales Point, we said goodbye with a visit to Gales Point Government School. We hung out with the children and all of us lined up against the school wall for the last picture of our trip. The camera shuttered, the flash snapped, and it was all over.

The trip to Belize will always be tattooed in my mind as a life-changing experience. Celso Poot was right. It was an "unbelizeable" time.

— Josh Gardner

