

Tapir Conservation Trundles Forward in Belize

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It is safe to say that 2013 is the “Year of the Tapir” at The Belize Zoo & Tropical Education Center. As the institution enters its 30th year, it continues to strive to remain dynamic and consistent in its wildlife conservation work. Efforts focused on the Central American Tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) are no exception.

These efforts began with the reimagining for a section of the Zoo, now designated as “Tapir Town.” Here, visitors are able to view and interact with several of the resident tapirs at the Zoo, and appreciate new education signage and displays, aimed at building awareness about the natural history and biology of the tapir species, as well as the threats they face in Belize. These displays include an intact skeleton of an adult specimen on exhibit in a glass case, horse and tapir skull displays as a nod to their sister species, and several information boards drawing attention to wildlife-vehicle collisions.

Celso Poot, Operations Manager at The Belize Zoo, has been carrying out independent research on roadside ecology, focusing on the rising number of tapir fatalities by vehicular collisions. Following the documented deaths and body recoveries of tapirs between 2009-2012, Celso has been able to mark the collision points along the Burrel Boom road, a highly trafficked highway in the Belize District, and map them via satellite imagery. Through his work, we produced a large display banner mapping on a satellite image the points of tapir fatalities along the highway. The banner



‘Fuego’ the orphaned C.American Tapir with Belize Zoo keeper, George Choc in May 2013.

is now a part of the displays in “Tapir Town.” A total of 13 tapirs are represented on the map, and that number continues to rise in 2013.

In response to this alarming occurrence, and with approval and support from the Belizean Ministry of Works, “tapir crossing” road signs were erected at three major collision points, or “hot spots” on the Burrel Boom road. A replica of the “tapir crossing” sign was added to the “Tapir Town” section of the Zoo, accompanied by images of the roadside fatalities, and a message calling for motorists to be more aware of the potential for wildlife encounters on the highways.

Following the opening of “Tapir Town,” were celebrations for National Tapir Day, on April 27th. A proposal from The Belize Zoo to establish National Tapir Day in Belize was received and approved by the office of the Belizean Prime Minister in 2012. Official celebrations are now carried out every April 27th at Zoo, to coincide with World Tapir Day. The objective is to involve parents and children in a day of education, awareness, and cultural pride, with the focal point being the National Animal of Belize, the tapir. Over 300 students, teachers and specially invited guests were in attendance for the 2013 celebrations. One key



30 Years of

Appreciation Protection Respect Integrity Love

Happy 30th Birthday, April the tapir!

Bumper sticker exhibiting slogan created by Belizean students to commemorate the 30TH birthday of ‘April’ the Central American Tapir



April the tapir & Claire Gibson 1983



April & Claire 2013

Timepiece photo used as centerpiece for 2013 National Tapir Day celebrations at The Belize Zoo.

celebration was that of the 30th birthday of “April” the tapir, who has been recognized as the oldest living female tapir in captivity. Her birthday celebration has been an annual event at the Zoo since 1983, and has proven to be invaluable in instilling understanding, appreciation and respect for her species in the Belizean people.

An important moment in the day’s events was the unveiling of an enlarged double image of April as a calf in 1983, befriending Claire Gibson, a long time friend and supporter of the Zoo, next to an image of both April and Claire reuniting for the first time in 2013, several weeks before April’s 30th. The image summarized the Zoo’s mission for the past 30 years, which is to bring locals and visitors in touch with the native wildlife of Belize, and make the effect long lasting, and applicable to future generations.

Youth groups in attendance were given an opportunity to showcase their talent in honour of National Tapir Day, and added to the festivities with musical and athletic presentations, by a local high school steel band, and tumblers association, respectively. In addition, three young women from a primary school in the Cayo district were honoured for their contributions to a slogan competition that was run countrywide. Their submission was chosen to be added to the commemorative bumper sticker that was created for the event: “30 Years of *Appreciation, Protection, Respect, Integrity, and Love: Happy 30th Birthday, APRIL the Tapir!*”

A new tapir conservation poster, funded by a grant awarded by the IUCN/SSC Tapir Specialist Group (TSG), was also issued to everyone in attendance. The Zoo’s education department is now distributing the poster, along with the commemorative bumper

sticker, and a children’s book focused on “Tambo,” a rescued tapir now living at the Zoo, to the over 300 registered schools in the country.

All these efforts received nationwide coverage by the three major media stations in the country, as well as through social media, and newspaper articles.

In May, The Belize Zoo saw the acquisition of an orphaned juvenile tapir, approximately 1-2 months in age. The calf was separated from its mother during a forest fire in the Cayo district; one of many that the nation saw throughout the months of March to May. The fires were, in many cases, reported to be intentionally and carelessly set by humans, and were so severe that health advisories were issued by the Belizean

Ministry of Health.

The tapir calf was brought to the zoo by a concerned citizen, after he observed the calf alone for a full day, making distress calls by the side of a road. Due to the nature of his origin, the calf was named “Fuego,” and will feature prominently in efforts to promote fire ecology education and responsible burning practices for the next dry season (December 2013-May 2014). The working slogan for the upcoming fire ecology efforts is “No more Fuegos!,” calling for an end to unsustainable burning practices to help prevent other animals, like “Fuego,” from becoming orphaned or killed due to wildfires.



One of two main activities for 2013 National Tapir Day at The Belize Zoo that showcased talented Belizean youth, a special performance by the Belize Tumblers Association