

BELIZE FOUNDATION FOR RESEARCH AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

THE BLADEN REVIEW

2021
VOL.7



Letter from the Executive Director

We are still here. The year 2020 will be remembered by each of us differently, but for so many, it was a period of great uncertainty, stagnation, loneliness, and loss. The pandemic hit BFREE like a freight train, with all our visitation canceled, many of our planned initiatives put on hold, and our financial status and future in jeopardy. We decided early on that a priority was to do everything possible to keep the BFREE staff employed. They are the lifeblood of the organization. They also ensure that the BFREE reserve and field station are patrolled, protected, and maintained. Like many organizations and businesses, we found ourselves in survival mode, so we put our noses to the grindstone and got to work.



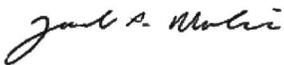
Having determined that we would likely remain closed for visitation through 2020 and 2021, we embarked on a fundraising effort on a scale we had never attempted before. Our goal was to raise enough funds to stay operational through mid-2021 and create a plan for the sustainability of BFREE into the future. I am so pleased and thankful to report that due to the generosity of so many individuals and sponsors, we achieved our fundraising goals and have remained operational for the past year, even without the regular income we receive from being open to the public. Thank you!

2020 was also our 25th anniversary. March 6th, to be exact. As that date passed and the full impact of the pandemic settled in, I have been reminded on an almost daily basis of the critical role that BFREE has played over the past 25 years. These reminders take many forms: Scarlet macaws are seen and heard daily since August; an abundance of large mammals (jaguars, ocelots, tapirs) and game species (curassows, crested guans, peccaries, gibbon, agouti) and countless others are commonplace on the BFREE reserve.

Our location, bordering four other protected areas and lying at the gateway to the Bladen Nature Reserve, has been and still is so critical to the preservation of this incredible tropical landscape. The threats, however, to BFREE and surrounding reserves, continue. Therefore our dual roles - serving as a research and educational institution as well as a physical buffer and corridor both protecting and linking the wilderness areas surrounding us - are now more important than ever.

We are still here. We will continue our exceptional educational programming, hosting researchers, and providing unparalleled access to one of the most biologically rich rainforests left on earth. We will continue to inspire the next generation, discover the mysteries of the natural world, and ensure that the wilderness in our corner of paradise remains in all its glory for generations to come. This is all possible because of your support, the friends of BFREE. Thank you for helping us get through 2020 and for continuing to support us as we transition back to the new normal.

In conservation and stewardship,



Jacob A. Marlin
BFREE Executive Director

BFREE Stewardship and Conservation Award

In December 2020, BFREE presented our first ever "Stewardship and Conservation Award" to Mr. Sipriano Canti, BFREE's Protected Area Manager and Head Park Ranger. Canti has dedicated his life to ensuring that Belize's wild areas are protected for future generations.



He started his career in 2001 as lead ranger for the Bladen Nature Reserve for five years, after which he transitioned to BFREE where he has led our protection program ever since. His deep commitment to conservation and his vast experience working with multiple agencies and stakeholders have equipped him to be uniquely positioned to oversee the conservation and protection of the BFREE reserve. He eagerly pursues opportunities to expand his knowledge and to share it with others.

Canti's passion for conservation and the natural world makes him a role model for youth and adults alike. We are honored to work with this true conservation hero.

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Heather Barrett

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Timeline



Jan. - Feb. 2020 Started off with a Bang

Kutztown University, SUNY Potsdam, and Independence Junior College field courses

Dry Season Hicatee Health Assessment

Ranger Basic Navigation Skills training

Board of Directors meeting at BFREE

Mar. - June 2020 The World Paused

All visitation stopped due to the pandemic

Bringing BFREE to You social media campaign

BFREE's first-ever "Day of Giving"

July - Dec. 2020 A New Normal

Bunkhouse renovation began

145 Hicatee hatchlings were released into the wild

BFREE staff virtually presented to partners like TSA, PMCA, UNCW, IJC, Zoo NE

4th annual Hicatee Awareness Month

Wet Season Hicatee Health Assessment

Crioco worked to restore degraded BFREE land using cacao agroforestry

BFREE Science and Education Fellowship program advances

Jan. - Apr. 2021 Looking Forward

Bunkhouse completed

Dry Season Hicatee Health Assessment

2022 field course planning begins

Tourism professionals in Belize begin to receive vaccinations

Chocolate-making resumes

Celebrating the Lives of Two Belizean Champions

by Jacob Marlin

The BFREE family wishes to express the deep sadness and loss felt since the recent passing of two people that have had such a positive impact on BFREE, Belize, and beyond. We send our deepest condolences to the families of both Sharon and Sonny. May they both rest in peace; they will forever be missed. Their spirits live on in countless people all over the world.

Sharon Matola was a living legend. For four decades, she was a champion for the conservation of wildlife, forests, rivers, and wildlands of Belize. She also was a world-class educator, author, and storyteller. She leaves behind the legacy of the Belize Zoo, "The Best Little Zoo in The World," but also the lifelong impact she personally had in touching the lives of tens of thousands of people. When BFREE was



still just an idea, Sharon supported our efforts and advised me on getting BFREE off the ground. Over the years, Sharon and the Belize Zoo partnered with BFREE on many occasions, from Harpy Eagle outreach and education programs to frequently promoting and advocating for BFREE to championing our work with Hicatee turtles. She was always supportive, generous, helpful, and positive - a remarkable partner in conservation.

I got to know **Sonny Garbutt** more than 20 years ago when he helped with a baseline study on the health and status of the Monkey River Watershed, including the Bladen River that passes through the BFREE reserve. The team based out of BFREE for a portion of the study, and I was fortunate to join them as an "assistant/cook" during a foray up into the Bladen Nature Reserve a few days walk from BFREE.



It was then that I first felt his strong but calm presence, his genuineness, his unique sense of humor, and his encyclopedic knowledge of the Monkey River and the natural history of Belize. Over the years, Sonny became a part of the BFREE family. He helped with the construction projects at the field station and captained boats for our student groups out on the Belize Barrier Reef. When he gave lectures and told stories related to marine and freshwater conservation topics, his passion for the sustainable use of Belize's marine resources was evident. He welcomed us into his community and his home - always sharing his love for Monkey River and the sea that touches its shores.

There is Still Hope for the Hicatee

by Heather Barrett

As I stand at the water's edge, I dance around to avoid the angry bites of leaf cutter ants while trying to photograph the quick movement of small children. There are 12 of them, and each gleefully reaches for and is gingerly handed a tiny turtle before swinging around, kneeling, and releasing "their turtle" into the river. The hatchling Hicatee turtles move more slowly than the children. Once released, they hover, possibly shocked by the chain of events that brought them to this place—slowed by the many hours of being transferred from tub to tub and vehicle to vehicle before ultimately reaching this, their new home. The kids worry when their turtle doesn't swim off immediately, and a few gently nudge them away from the riverbank toward deeper water. A sad fact is that Hicatee are being overharvested for human consumption across their limited range—nearly to extinction. In 2011, BFREE and the Turtle Survival Alliance partnered to create the Hicatee Conservation and Research Center (HCRC). Here, we study the Hicatee and determine the viability of captive breeding as one piece of a larger plan to save the species from extinction.

A key part of the strategy to save the species is to research and determine suitable release sites that provide appropriate habitat and are safe from poachers. After years of searching, we needed help and found excellent partners from Missouri State University. In 2019, with the Belize Government's support, MSU researchers and BFREE staff conducted critical fieldwork to determine the species' actual population status in the wild.



Children examine turtles prior to releasing them.



Community members release Hicatee turtles into the river.

In early 2020, Day Ligon and Denise Thompson of MSU established the Belize Turtle Ecology Lab (BTEL). They worked closely with BFREE to conduct experiments designed to determine environmental effects on the growth rate and health of the 2020 cohort of 185 Hicatees. Turtles were randomly assigned to groups, marked for identification, and released into one of five selected sites - some were equipped with sonic transmitters so that they could later be tracked.

One of the release sites was a river near a community that has an interest in the conservation of the species. Community members had repeatedly been helpful during turtle surveys and had many great questions, so we teamed up with BTEL and Belize Fisheries to offer an education event before the release of 12 Hicatee. The day was rainy, and the Prime Minister was preparing for a country-wide radio address on the COVID-19 pandemic at the exact hour of our event. Still, members from the community, including 12 children, came to see the turtles and learn more about the research on their river. After a presentation, everyone was invited to weigh and measure a hatchling, investigate research equipment, and become a "Hicatee Hero" by promising to follow Belize's laws and sign a banner. We then marched to the river's edge, where we stood on rain-soaked earth, knocking away biting ants as 12 masked children released 12 tiny turtles. I'm sure I heard a collective sigh. Even in these very troubling times, we can still come together for the love of turtles, and there is still hope for the Hicatee.

Hicatee Awareness Month Celebrates its 4th Year

by Tyler Sanville

BFREE and the newly established Hicatee Awareness Month Committee invited turtle-lovers everywhere to put on capes and transform into Hicatee Heroes in celebration of the 4th annual Hicatee Awareness Month in October 2020. Together, they had one task – to save the critically endangered Hicatee turtle!

In view of our annual outreach's growing success each October, a planning committee was created to plan for Hicatee Awareness Month's future. Nelly Cadle of BFREE served as Committee Chair along with BFREE staff members Heather Barrett, Jonathan Dubon, and Tyler Sanville. Additional participants included Belizario Gian Carballo, an artist and environmentalist from Orange Walk Town; Ines Garcia, staff from Belize Fisheries Department; Monique Vernon, an entrepreneur and environmentalist from Placencia Village; and Abigail Parham, Instructor at Independence Junior College.



Hicatee Heroes at the September Health Assessment.



Wildlife Fellow, Jonathan Dubon.

The planning committee was tasked with updating existing educational materials and - in light of the Covid-19 pandemic - creating new and inviting ways to bring Hicatee Awareness Month outside of the classroom and (virtually) into students' homes across Belize. New materials included a video highlighting 18 young Hicatee Heroes across all six districts in Belize, a printable Hicatee & Ladders board game, and classroom activities such as a quiz and writing prompt. The education packets were shared electronically with over 400 principals, and teachers and several schools received physical packages reaching 500 students in their classrooms. Our goal is to inspire future generations and leaders to recognize the significant cultural and historical value of the Hicatee turtle and other wildlife. The success of Hicatee Awareness Month 2020 reflects the dedication, commitment, and talent of this year's committee members.

COMBINING MUSIC AND CONSERVATION

BFREE's Wildlife Fellow, Jonathan Dubon, is not only a talented wildlife conservationist but also a talented musician. Hicatee Awareness Month allowed Jonathan to combine two passions into a two-and-a-half-minute song, titled, "Mr. Hicatee." Written by Jonathan and his friend, Ike Phillips, the duo had people of all ages bobbing their heads to lyrics such as, "Which turtle Belize to the bone? Hicatee! Hicatee! Hicatee!" The song is in Belizean Kriol language and shares a conversation between Mr. Hicatee and Damien, a human who wants to learn more about the problems that Mr. Hicatee encounters in his daily life. We believe it is essential to be innovative and include unconventional learning materials in our education packets. Wildlife conservation is hard work, but "Mr. Hicatee" helps us remember just how much fun we are having along the way!

BFREE Launches New Chocolate Company, Crioco Cacao, LLC

by Jacob Marlin

Can chocolate save the rainforests? Not by itself, but here at BFREE, we are investigating that potential. In the past few years, BFREE made the strategic decision to form a for-profit cacao farming and chocolate company: Crioco Cacao, LLC. “Crioco” has set up shop on the property, and is quickly changing the landscape at BFREE - for the better, if you can believe that!

The goals of Crioco are many, including the preservation of the wild cacao trees discovered on the property, the propagation of this heirloom fine flavor cacao on a commercial scale, and the restoration of degraded areas within the BFREE reserve. Crioco has embarked on a journey of discovery, experimentation, and implementing a novel approach to cacao farming never before seen in Belize or in the vast majority of cacao-growing countries throughout the world.

In just the past year and a half, Crioco identified all of the degraded areas of BFREE and began transforming these areas into agroforestry systems, with the world’s only known pure ancient criollo cacao as the primary understory tree. We have planted over 12,000 trees, more than half of which are cacao. Other species are either temporary or permanent shade trees of diverse species. Over the coming years, close to 70 acres of BFREE will be reforested with over 25,000 cacao trees, and in total, more than 60,000 mixed fruit, hardwood, and soil-enriching tree species.

Already we see the fruits of our labor. Wildlife such as migratory and resident bird species are now utilizing the farming areas for perching, feeding, and nesting. All five wild cat species of Belize have been documented roaming the farms day and night. Each month, as these young newly forested areas grow, we discover new species taking advantage of the canopy and understory.

But let’s be honest: the other real benefit is the rich, exquisite fine chocolate that is now being made in Crioco’s small-batch chocolate lab at the Cacao Discovery Center here at BFREE. The aroma of chocolate is in the air. The finest chocolate products will soon be available for purchase from Crioco’s online store, so you too can experience the chocolate forests growing at BFREE.



Jacob Marlin, BFREE Executive Director and founder of Crioco Cacao, LLC.



Cacao pod at BFREE by Sara Kieser.

Birding During the Pandemic

by Tyler Sanville

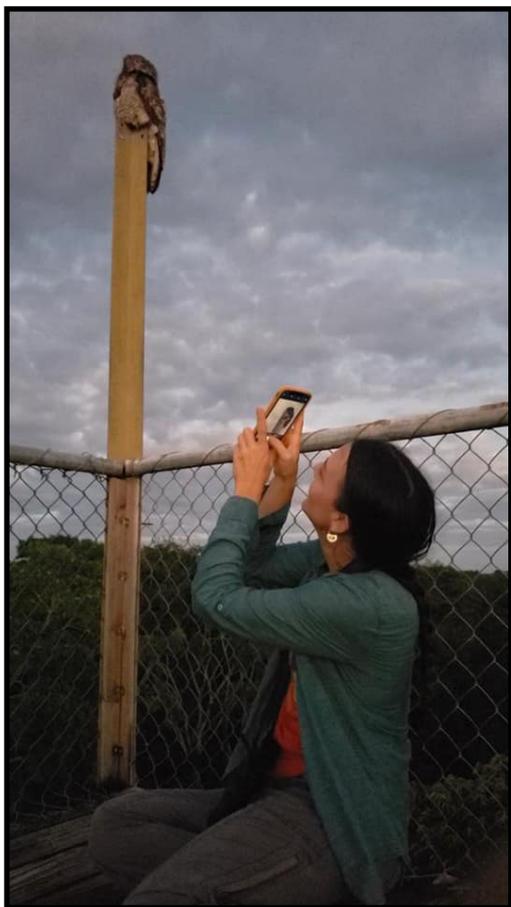
The popularity of birdwatching soared worldwide during the pandemic. Countless articles encouraged the hobby as an activity safe for social distancing, and the popular site for tracking bird sightings, eBird, experienced a 68% increase in new accounts.

Staff at BFREE were not immune to this trending hobby and quickly took to the meditative practice in 2020, creating a team bonding experience during a challenging year. Some would gather in the garden before breakfast or at the observation tower after work. With binoculars never too far from reach, we have been able to take multi-tasking our work while listening for bird calls to a new level.

Birding at BFREE isn't new. Avian researchers and visitors alike have journeyed here in search of birds for over 25 years. However, this year brought a fresh perspective; we were birding for our own education, for our own data collection, and because it was a safe and enjoyable experience that we could do together.



Juvenile ornate hawk-eagle at BFREE by Roni Martinez.



Heather Barrett photographs a Great Potoo.

BFREE is home to more than 80 species of migratory birds and hundreds of resident species. While even a common sighting such as a hummingbird outside the dining room brings us joy, it is the enormous and awe-inspiring raptor, the Harpy eagle, that keeps us on our toes scouring treetops. Since September 2016, there have been 20 separate Harpy eagle sightings at BFREE, most frequently in the Prickly yellow tree near the kitchen. Harpy Eagles are classified as extremely rare and endangered in Belize. In 2000, Harpies were thought to be extirpated from the area; however, they were rediscovered in 2005 by BFREE and the University of North Carolina Wilmington researchers.

In February 2021, we launched a monitoring project implemented by Avian Expert, Liberato (Gato) Pop, to document which birds utilize the young cacao agroforest at BFREE. The very first bird he noticed was a Pale-billed Woodpecker, which, while a beautiful resident bird, is not an unusual sight. Still, he was thrilled when he saw a band on the bird's leg. He explained that this bird was the only Pale-billed Woodpecker that he and William Garcia, previous BFREE Bird Project Leader, ever banded. Since the program ended in 2013, he estimates that they placed the band in 2011 – 10 years ago!

These sightings continue to show just how critical our location is for wildlife. We know that our property and the Maya Mountains remain healthy and intact enough to support top predators like the Harpy eagle, and that many, such as the Pale-billed woodpecker, have called BFREE home for more than a decade.

BFREE can feel about as remote as remote gets at times, even more so during this last year. However, when we look up in the branches for our feathered friends and imagine some of them migrated from your backyard to ours - we are reminded of just how connected we all are. It's a rejuvenating feeling that inspires all of us at BFREE to continue our role as stewards of this rare and spectacular place.

Cultivating Conservation Leaders in Belize

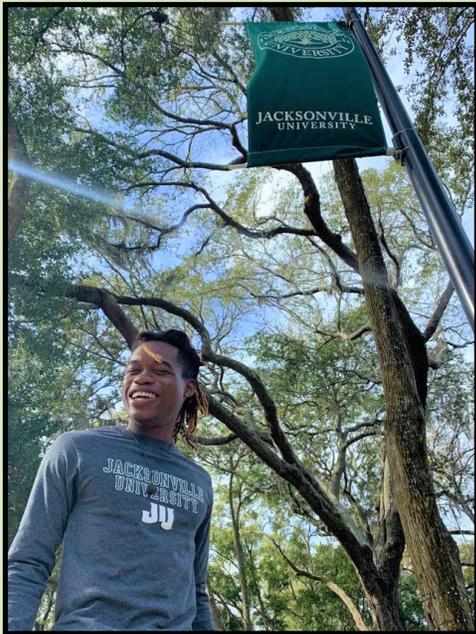
by T. Sanville & H. Barrett

BFREE has a 25-year history of training biologists and conservationists in Belize through field courses, internships, parabiologist training, and field research opportunities to hundreds of Belizeans. In 2017, Deputy Director, Heather Barrett, took the leap into launching the BFREE Fellowship Program, something she had long dreamt of that would provide young conservation-minded Belizeans a two-year work-training opportunity. The program helps build a community at BFREE to cultivate future environmental leaders and create a conduit connecting motivated Belizeans from academic studies to implementation in the field and leading to future educational opportunities.

2020 brought new challenges to the growing program. We had to be innovative in the ways we provided professional development opportunities with the absence of student groups, researchers, and the reality of constantly changing schedules. We focused on online learning opportunities like turtle and chocolate conferences, NGO professional training sessions, and trainings offered by BFREE senior staff like Herpetology 101 and CV Writing.

A highlight of 2021 so far has been a weekend of jungle survival skills with Park Rangers, Sipriano Canti and Apolonio Pop. Lenardo and Jonathan packed their camping equipment and food for an entire weekend and hiked into the bush, where they learned critical jungle survival skills, assisted in patrols, and helped with long-term wildlife monitoring. The weekend trip was an essential experience in understanding the challenges BFREE rangers face in ensuring our privately protected area remains safe from poachers and loggers while also participating in long-term data collection.

While still in its early years, the program's success is already undeniable. We are excited to continue expanding the opportunities available and plan to hire two additional fellows in 2021. The fellows' enthusiasm and their leadership potential will radiate into their communities, having a broader impact both in their communities and throughout Belize.



JAREN SERANO

Jaren Serano was the first to complete the two-year program where he was mentored by Tom Pop at the HCRC. By the end of his second year, Jaren was accepted into Jacksonville University in Florida, where he will graduate in May 2021 with a Bachelor of Science in Sustainability and a minor in Biology.



LENARDO ASH

Lenardo Ash (Cacao Fellow 2019 - 2021) is mentored by Erick Ak and will graduate from the program this summer. As the first BFREE Cacao Fellow, Leo has supported the crucial work of expanding and studying the shade-grown cacao agroforestry farms at BFREE.



JONATHAN DUBON

Jonathan Dubon (Wildlife Fellow 2020-2022) joined the program last year and is assigned to the HCRC and mentored by Tom Pop. Jonathan supports the daily maintenance of the breeding facility and manages data collection and reporting.

Our Presence Matters

by Heather Barrett

Around the world, the question is being asked: How does the pandemic impact threatened species and protected areas? The answer seems to be a resounding: We don't know, but we suspect in some good ways and some bad ways. Wildlife and protected areas have likely benefited from less human presence and disturbance and have also been negatively impacted by unregulated use and illegal resource extraction, including illegal poaching.

We know that the pandemic has led to the closure of many protected areas worldwide. The consequences of closed, protected areas are many. They include staff layoffs and loss of livelihoods, suspension of critical research and monitoring programs, and decreased ranger patrols, resulting in possible illegal and environmentally damaging activities.

In Belize, both terrestrial and marine protected areas have seen periods of closure in short bursts since the pandemic was declared last April. Protected Areas staff struggle to continue daily work with less mobility due to Covid-19 restrictions and reduced staff.

At BFREE, our park rangers feel the stress of those restrictions yet perform their essential tasks despite the challenges. Throughout the pandemic, they have continued to come to work 24/7, patrolling the 1,153-acre property and its boundaries which connect us to nearly 1.5 million acres of lowland tropical rainforest.

Rangers and BFREE staff have also continued to document wildlife and weather patterns as part of our long-term monitoring programs. Monitoring wildlife will help us understand which animals utilize which pieces of the property and whether their populations are increasing, remaining stable, or declining. Similarly, monitoring weather helps us know how Belize's climate changes over time.

This year, we've been impressed with and surprised by the abundance of Scarlet Macaws utilizing the property. Macaws in groups from 2 - 25+ have been observed on an almost daily basis throughout the area since August 2020. The rangers have been diligently recording their observations in datasheets.

We are proud to continue doing the vital work of patrolling the BFREE privately protected area and monitoring wildlife and climate. It allows us to protect the land around us and contribute important information that helps to better guide conservation policy and interventions over the long-term.

BFREE'S WILDLIFE

Through years of documentation, we know BFREE is a hotspot for biodiversity.

There are over 300 species of birds, including 70 migrants here.

Harpy eagles have been observed on 20 separate occasions since September 2016.

All five species of cats known in Belize are regularly seen, as are countless other mammal species, including White-lipped peccaries, Tapirs, and more than 50 species of bats.

Reptiles and amphibians exist in healthy populations, including over 50 species of snakes, 20 species of lizards, seven species of turtles, the endangered Morelet's crocodile, and over 25 species of amphibians.

More than 20 species of fish are found in the Bladen river and aquatic habitats within BFREE's protected area.

The butterflies, moths, insects, and other invertebrates are simply too many to name.



Puma captured on a Camera Trap.



Howler monkey at BFREE.

Donors

Thank You to All Our Donors. We are so grateful to each of you for your generous financial contributions, in-kind donations, and words of encouragement. Thank you for believing in BFREE's staff and mission during an especially complicated year. Your generosity has enabled us to maintain this year's operations at BFREE, allowing us to continue the crucial work of conserving the wildlands and wildlife of Belize. Our sincere thanks to the BFREE donors from Winter 2020 to Spring 2021. Please let us know of any errors or omissions on this list.

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2602 NW 6th St. Suite D

Gainesville, FL 32609

www.bfreebz.org

contact@bfreebz.org

Bringing BFREE to You

by Tyler Sanville

At the end of March, we started what was to be a month-long social media series in response to global stay-at-home orders. Our goal was to share photos and videos that would bring positivity, love, hope, environmental education, and, most importantly, BFREE, to your homes while we all did our best to stay indoors and flatten the curve.

The series was a huge hit; we received so much positive feedback that we continued to share as much as we could throughout the rest of the year, including lots of mini-series such as “Cooking with Nelly” and “Wildlife Wednesday.” We uploaded as many virtual hikes as the wifi signal would allow, created citizen-science backyard activities, and shared the trials and triumphs of day-to-day life at the Field Station, from misadventures along the entrance road to incredible wildlife sightings. While we have missed having a bustling field station, we enjoyed finding ways to stay connected with you online.

We are ready for the days we can invite you back to the jungle with open arms and fresh fry jacks. Until then, follow us on social media while we continue to bring the tropics to your fingertips! Search “#bringingbfreetoyou” on Instagram (@BFREEBZ) or Facebook (@BFREEBelize) to view all of the posts in this series.

