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Robert H. Horwich

Community-based sanctuary for  
the black howler monkey

# Community-based sanctuary for the black howler monkey



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**Honourable Mention**

**The Rolex Awards for Enterprise – 1987**

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Starting from the premise that only a limited amount of tropical rain forest can be preserved in its pristine state and that large tracks of rain-forest land are already, or soon will be, under cyclic cultivation, this project has established a scheme to complement attempts to preserve uninhabited forest areas. What may be considered a unique experimental approach to the conservation of a wild life species has been adopted, since it involves volunteers working with local agricultural landowners on a management plan for their private lands and thus aiding in conservation of the black howler monkey, *Alouatta pigra*.

The project began as a pure research study on various aspects of howler monkey behaviour; however, it soon became evident that the black howler was in need of conservation. The situation in Belize, however, was found to be more favourable in view of the tolerance displayed towards the monkeys by the sparse human population there. In particular, the villagers in the area called the "Bermudian Landing" were well disposed to the howlers which the local Creoles call "baboons".

## **Launching the sanctuary concept**

After a preliminary enquiry in 1984, a petition was drawn up requesting support for the concept of a community sanctuary for the howler monkeys. This was circulated in the village of Bermudian Landing and was signed by 16 owners of land on which howlers resided and by the seven members of the village Council. The support of the area representative of the Government of Belize and of the Ministry of Natural Resources was also obtained together with permission to begin the project.

In 1985, the sanctuary was formally launched with financial support from the World Wildlife Fund (USA), and the concept of a community sanctuary was presented to a Bermudian Landing village meeting attended by the area representative, with stress being laid on the voluntary nature of the programme. The support of the Council was obtained, and the villagers gave permission to begin what came to be known as the "Community Baboon Sanctuary". Formal



A male black howler monkey, *Alouatta pigra*, in the Community Baboon Sanctuary at Bermudian Landing, Belize.

general public, a radio programme about the sanctuary was broadcast on Radio Belize, and 500 copies of a booklet on the black howler and its conservation were produced and distributed to villagers and landowners; the booklet was subsequently rewritten for high school students.

The project's most recent educational booklet is an illustrated guidebook containing: information about the importance of tropical rain forests and the establishment of the sanctuary; the history of the area; a description of the forest types and vegetation; census maps; facts on the black howler monkey; a key to trees in the sanctuary and a partial listing of the sanctuary's mammals, birds and reptiles. The retail mark-up on this will be used to finance updates.

Research has started on various aspects of howler behaviour and will be continued with greater emphasis on howler ecology and the interaction of farming practices, forest succession and howler usage of the forest. For example, a preliminary categorization of successional stages in the riverine forest will be continued, and data collection on seasonal usage of plants by the howlers has been started together with a study of local commercial use of the endangered river turtle, *Dermatemys mawii*. At the villagers' request, limited tourist objectives have also been pursued with the sanctuary being publicized through the media and through tourist agencies specializing in wildlife tours. In addition, volunteers have constructed a tourist shelter along with an introductory sign about the sanctuary.

#### Planning to expand the project

In 1986, it is planned to extend both the area and philosophy of the sanctuary, and the guidebook – although designed for sale to tourists – will also be distributed to villagers and local naturalists to demonstrate what can be done on a low budget, and help spread the community sanctuary concept. Geographically, the objective for 1986 is to expand the sanctuary to some 4,660 ha up and down river from Bermudian Landing, and increase the number of landowners and villagers involved. Participating landowners will be formally presented with certificates during a general village meeting, and will receive T-shirts decorated with howler monkeys as a token of appreciation.

We also hope to develop a limited tree-propagation programme in which, with the permission of the participating landowners, students will help replant eroded areas along the river banks with fig or other trees. Further lectures will be given at local schools, and another attempt will be made to initiate a conservation-orientated film programme through the Bureau of Information. The publicity campaign will continue through news releases and radio and TV coverage to encourage tourism and to give positive feedback to the villagers; talks will again be given for tourists groups, and local people acting as sanctuary guides will be given formal training. Finally, work on an educational film about the village and the project will be pursued, and preliminary scenes will be shown to the villagers in 1986.

work commenced with the mapping of an area of some 780 ha north and south of the village on the west side of the Belize River. Vegetation maps were constructed, the howler population was censused and a study was started of the riverine forests including the successional stages following cultivation.

At the end of the three-month study, maps of the individual lands were drawn up, together with appropriate management programmes. After any points unacceptable to them had been removed, a number of landowners signed voluntary pledges to abide by a programme designed to provide optimum benefit for the howler monkeys and for the area as a whole – especially from the point of view of river bank maintenance. The overall plan will attempt to maintain a continuous forest along the river banks, connected to the strips alongside the cultivated fields, thus providing a strong reseeded base for the regeneration of the riverine forests and the nutrients they offer, and for maintaining a continuous gene flow in the monkeys.

#### A multifaceted project

The project has three main aspects: conservation, education and research, which continually intermix. At an early date, an education programme about the black howlers was launched on three levels: in local schools, at the village level and at the professional and public level through the Belize Teachers' College and the Belize Audubon Society. Lectures were given to local schools, colleges and the

Photographs and artworks have been submitted by the entrants except where indicated in the captions

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