

THE IMPORTANCE OF BLADEN NATURE RESERVE

Bladen Nature Reserve is one of the most important protected areas in Belize. It is given such a high level of protection that only scientific research and education are permitted inside the reserve. Bladen is co-managed by the Forest Department and Ya'axché Conservation Trust. At Ya'axché we are often asked "why is Bladen Nature Reserve so highly protected?" here we provide some answers to this question.



Bladen Nature Reserve is often described as the 'Crown Jewel' of Belize's National Protected Area System. The reason for this description is due to the wide variety of plants and animals that can be found there, this variety is known as *biodiversity*. Biodiversity is disappearing at a faster rate than ever in Central America and protected areas like Bladen are vitally important to help reverse this decline.

The forests of the Maya Mountains are important not only for Belize but for the wider Central American region and the whole world. The forests of the Maya Mountains connect with the rapidly disappearing forests of Guatemala and Mexico and are known collectively as *La Selva Maya*. Keeping these forests connected gives the plants and animals within the best possible chance of survival, especially those that live in trees.

Bladen gives protection to the upper watersheds of four major rivers in Toledo protecting thousands of people, property, farms and industries from damaging floods and providing a clean drinking water supply year round.

Keeping the forest and their root systems on the steep slopes of the Maya Mountains helps bind soil preventing landslides and mud from washing into the rivers. This mud and debris can cause destruction of riverbanks, bridges such as the Kendal Bridge, and ultimately can kill the coral reefs which provide so much tourism and fishing income to Belize's economy.

Many people ask why hunting is not allowed in protected areas such as Bladen Nature Reserve. The reason for this is to provide a refuge or shelter for those animals and plants which could otherwise disappear. The reserve acts like a bank, enabling those species which are commonly hunted, such as gibbon, deer, and peccary to safely breed and build up their numbers. If they are allowed to do this in protected areas such as Bladen many of these animals will then move out of the reserve into surrounding community lands where they can be sustainably hunted, this is called the '*spillover effect*'.

These benefits that protected areas such as Bladen Nature Reserve provides are called *ecosystem services*. It is of the highest importance that the values of these services are recognized. Unfortunately, there is currently little funding available for their protection and growing threats could stop the services being provided altogether.

Belize is known around the world for its rich natural beauty, and Belize's economy and most valuable industries such as tourism, fisheries, timber and commercial agriculture rely on protected areas for their existence. Bladen Nature Reserve is a vitally important part of Belize's National Protected Areas System and one that every Belizean can be proud of.

For more information on Bladen, and to apply for permits for research or education, please contact Ya'axché on **722-0108** or visit our website at yaaxche.org.