

Novel deal to save rainforests in Belize

In a landmark deal, the US Government and the Nature Conservancy have teamed up to protect 9200 ha of endangered rainforest in Belize. The forests will be safeguarded as part of a debt-for-nature swap that will halve the indebtedness of Belize to the USA.



In addition to reducing debt, contributions of ~US\$5.5 million from the USA and US\$1.3 million from the Nature Conservancy will be exchanged for local currency and used by Belizean conservation groups to buy forests that are threatened by aggressive logging and agricultural encroachment. The funds will also be used to manage the Golden Stream Corridor Preserve, which sustains jaguars, ocelots and diverse bird communities, and which stabilizes forest soils to protect the world-class tropical reefs of Belize.

This is the first time that a private organization has teamed up with the US Government in a major debt-for-nature swap. The US funds were provided under the Tropical Forest Conservation Act (TFCA), a bipartisan initiative that is designed to provide debt relief to developing countries in exchange for forest conservation.

Although the TFCA has enjoyed laudable support from some conservative politicians in the USA, in addition to strong support from Democrats, many had hoped that the program would be greatly expanded. In a campaign promise just before the November 2000 election, US President G.W. Bush pledged to increase the annual budget of the TFCA to US\$100 million. Shortly after being elected, however, Bush reneged on the promise and the current annual budget of the program is just US\$30 million. *WFL*

Paleobiology data base catalyzes research breakthroughs

A remarkable synthesis of fossil data funded by a US National Science Foundation Biocomplexity grant (2000–2005) is quickly reaping huge research benefits (<http://flatpebble.nceas.ucsb.edu/>). Paleobiology, which often seems relegated to 'curiosity status' if one is to measure its importance via university faculty appointments, has much to contribute to modern biology. The reason is simple. Policy makers and the public hear a great deal about 'extinction crises', 'human onslaughts' and possible 'global catastrophes'. What better way to learn about these risks than to study the historical paleobiological record. It is impossible to put today's so-called biodiversity crisis into perspective without evaluating past mass extinctions. Similarly, previous human impacts, such as the Pleistocene megafaunal overkill, teach us about the probable consequences of our current assault on biodiversity. The limiting factor in asking questions about the past has not been data, but data synthesized and corrected for sampling biases. The paleobiology data base project coordinated by John Alroy at the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS, Santa Barbara, CA, USA) is a unique attempt at building a public data base, in which scientists are encouraged to bring their data to the table, and create something that is much more than the sum of the parts. The significance of the paleobiology data base extends far beyond its specific research focus – the project provides a model for data sharing in general.

Clear standards are specified for adding data, opportunities for collaboration are facilitated and a mix of 'private' and 'public' access is established in such a way that allows individual researchers to get the credit that they deserve, whilst also allowing access by the broader research community. If similar efforts were also established for food webs, population dynamics, toxic effects, life table studies, and so on, the fields of ecology and evolution could make major advances that are currently blocked by the onus of 'data ownership'. *PK*

Mapping the distribution of all terrestrial vertebrates

Information regarding the range of vertebrate species is routinely required by conservation planners and research scientists. But, until recently, even this seemingly basic information was difficult to track down. To fill this gap, a group of over 20 internationally prominent biologists has joined forces to launch the compilation of data defining the distribution of all 25 000 land vertebrates through a public web portal (<http://www.nceas.ucsb.edu/vertdist>). The beneficiaries of this undertaking are science-based conservation organizations, museums and ecologists or biogeographers who examine biological patterns at large scales. Researchers have set an ambitious schedule for this data-mining and synthesizing collaboration, with a target first-cut completion date of 2003.



The project was initiated by Walter Jetz (Dept of Zoology, University of Oxford, UK) and Tom Brooks and Gustavo Fonseca (Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, Conservation International). One key to this project is an emphasis on careful attention to proper source referencing and credit of data providers. In this age of genome mapping, it is embarrassing that we have only now begun such an effort, and only for terrestrial vertebrates. Let us hope that similar efforts will follow for plants, invertebrates and aquatic vertebrates. *PK*

Risk assessment and stakeholder-based decision making

Conservation policy inevitably involves conflicts among stakeholders, risk analysis and a treacherous mingling of science and policy. A newly formed 'Centre for