

Belize offers opportunities for A-State faculty, students

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

In an effort to expand opportunities for faculty and students, Arkansas State University has signed a cooperative agreement with Galen University of Belize.

Belize, which is about the size of Massachusetts, borders Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to the north, Guatemala to the west and south, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Along the 300 miles of Caribbean coastline lies the longest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere.

Belize is a unique Central American country whose history dates back well before the arrival of the Europeans to the American continent when the country was run by Mayan city-states. Today, Belize boasts the highest density of Mayan ruins in the Mayan world. Since the 17th century the territory was disputed between Spain and England, and it formally became the colony of British Honduras in 1854. Territorial disputes between the UK and Guatemala delayed the independence of Belize until 1981. Today the country is an independent and developing country with a parliamentary system of government.

With about 300,000 inhabitants, it is a largely unpopulated country, but its rapid population growth is creating environmental problems such as deforestation, water pollution (from sewage, industrial effluents and agricultural runoff), and solid and sewage waste disposal.

Belizean scientists and officials welcome any cooperation from abroad that leads to

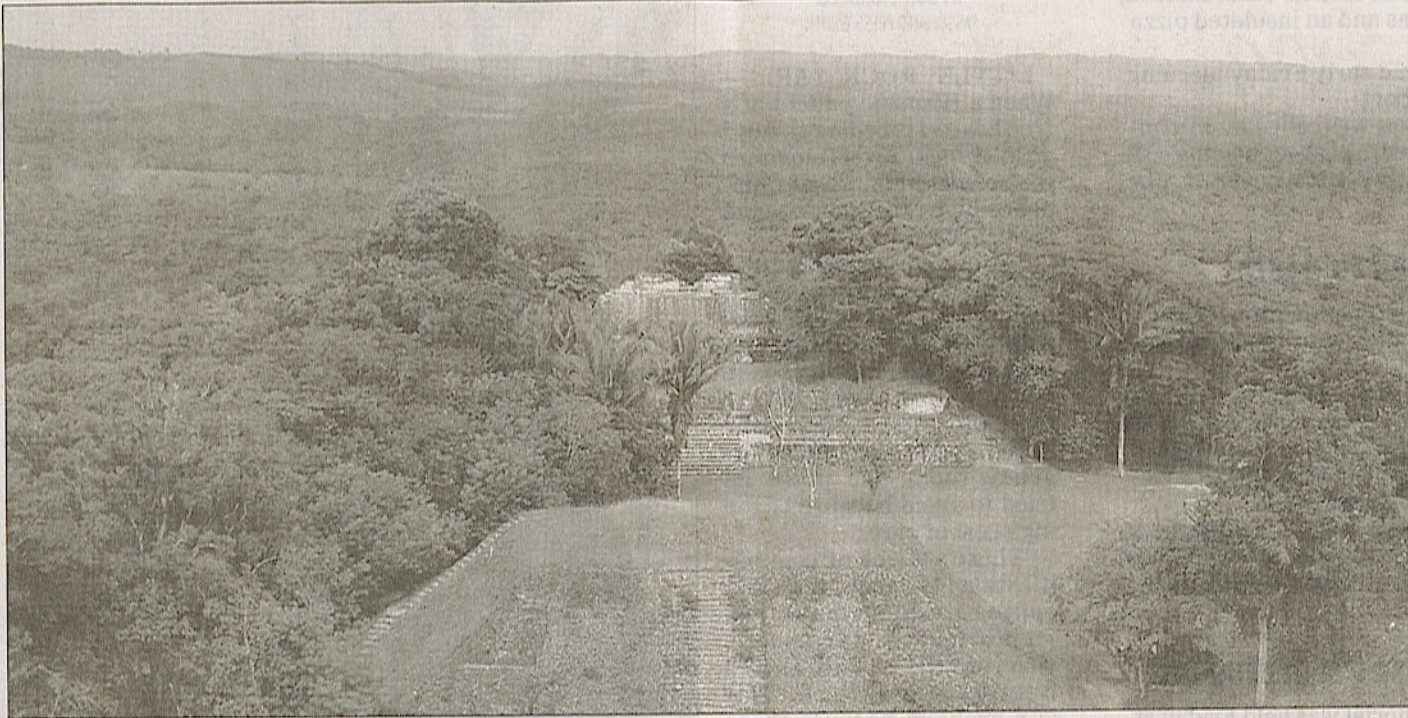


Photo by Aldemaro Romero

The ancient Mayan city of Xunantunich in Belize was not discovered until the 1930s and represents one of the many cultural treasures of a country with an enormous biodiversity.

capacity building and possibility of conducting collaborative research.

Recently one of us (Romero) contacted Galen University to explore the possibility of developing an exchange program of faculty and students by which both institutions could benefit.

Galen University (named after the famous physician) is a private, not-for-profit university created in 2003 that offers undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees in arts and sciences and business education.

What makes this university unique is that all the degree programs it offers integrate the concept of sustainable development. Most courses are very much field-oriented so

field courses and trips are commonplace and include semester abroad programs as well as opportunities to be engaged in research and community service projects.

Galen signed the Talloires Declaration for developing a "green" campus last year, at about the same time that ASU did.

Faculty and administrators at Galen University will welcome ASU faculty and graduate students' expertise in areas such as fauna and flora surveys, conservation projects, ecotoxicology, sustainable agriculture, folklore and heritage studies. One of us (Young) is interested in working with ASU faculty at the Arkansas Biosciences Institute to identify active com-

pounds among Belizean plants of medicinal use.

ASU will benefit by having a partner in Central America where students can participate in field courses about tropical fauna and flora, archaeology and local culture. Languages can also be another area for development. Although Belize is the only country in Central America that is English-speaking, the learning of Spanish is mandatory, and about 50 percent of the population speaks it in their home.

Creole is the lingua franca of the country; however, Mayan, Garifuna (a mixture of Carib and Western African languages), and Spanish are widely spoken throughout the country. Thus, most Be-

elizeans are trilinguals if not tetralinguals and, as such, Belize offers great potential to for ASU students to learn a

new language.

For its size, Belize has an unparalleled biodiversity in the region with 571 species of birds, 162 species of mammals, 121 species of reptiles, 43 species of freshwater fish, 288 species of Lepidoptera (butterflies) and 176 species of Odonata (dragonflies) as well as more than 700 species of trees. However, the ecology of these species are poorly known.

There is a monitoring program of migratory birds between the U.S. and Belize.

The agreement has been signed by Dr. Robert L. Potts, chancellor of the ASU-Jonesboro campus, and Dr. Nancy L. Adamson, acting president of Galen University.

For more information contact the ASU Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

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