

CHIQUIBUL CAVE SYSTEM

Quest Tunkul Expedition 2nd Technical Report

March 21-23, 2012



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Chiquibul National Park Manager

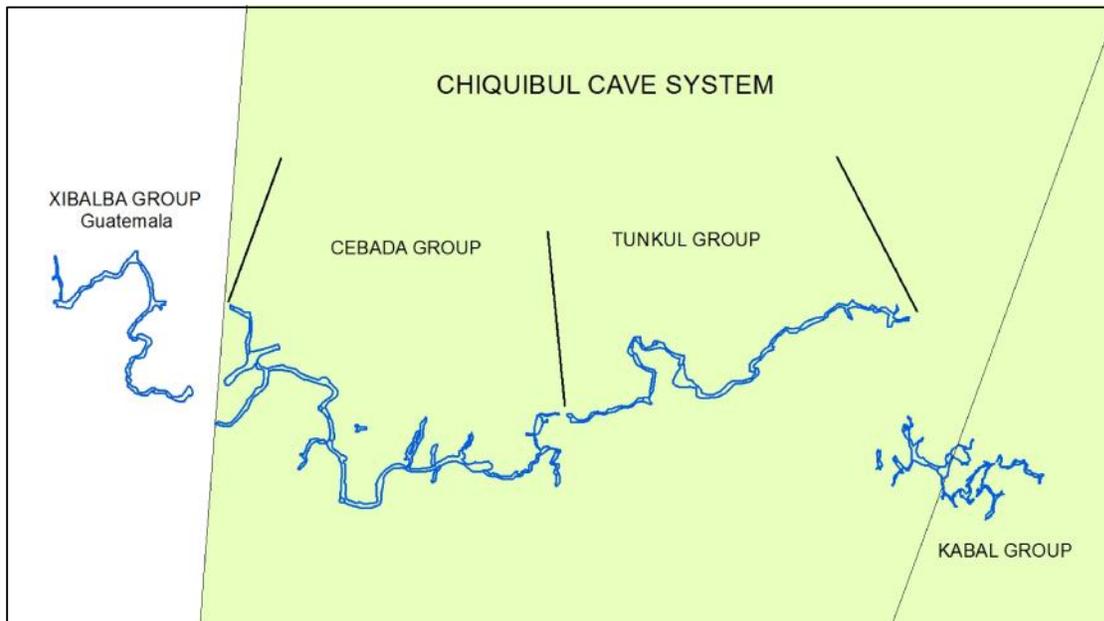
March 24, 2012



Operation Tunkul 2nd Recce

Summary

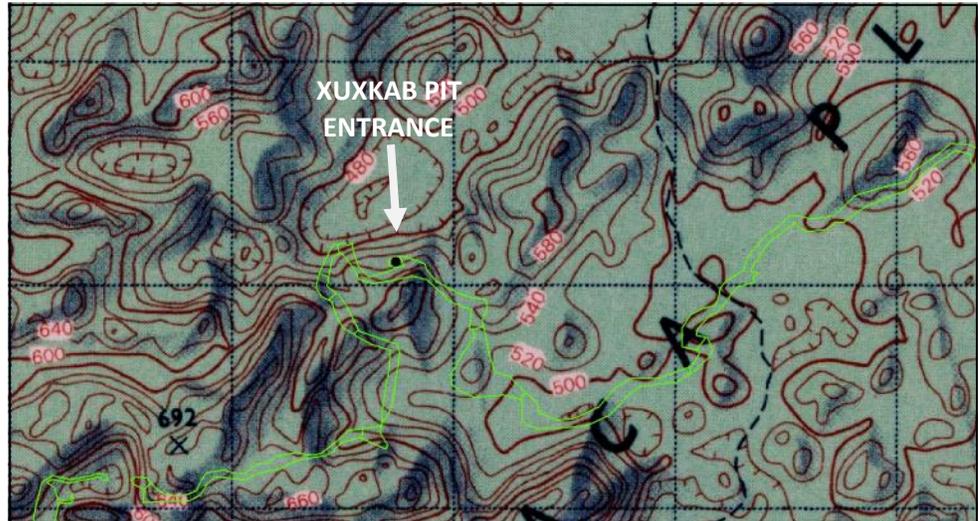
The Tunkul Operations comes about following the inception of the program “Instituting a Long Term Conservation Program for Belize’s Chiquibul Cave System”, and following the boom of illegal logging along the Belize/Guatemalan border. The Tunkul Operations is aimed at the Tunkul Group of the Chiquibul Cave System. The System is divided into four groups, Tunkul being the longest. The plan is to document the present situation of the Chiquibul Cave System. FCD has so far only explored part of the Kabal Group but this is the most accessible group so other expeditions will be conducted in the near future. The third group is the Cebada group but this has not been explored at all by the FCD team. Presently FCD along with the CFJEU is conducting two trips per segment; the first being a recce to clear the area and to locate the site for further exploration.



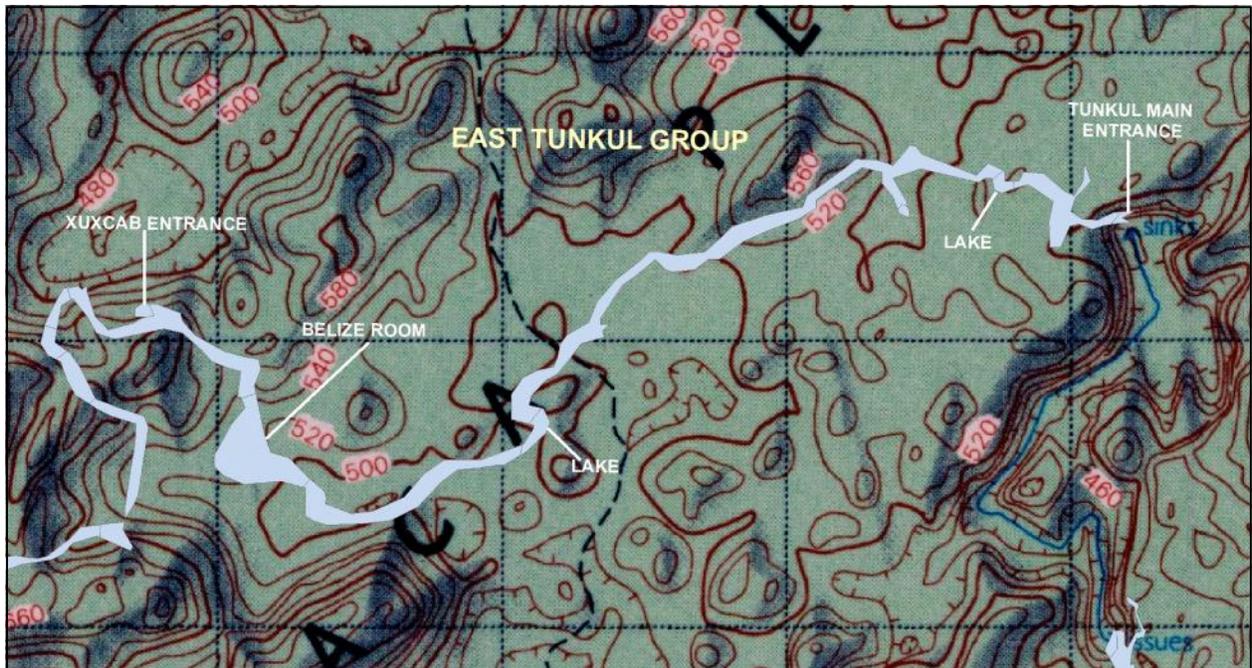
Considering that the Chiquibul Cave System is located on the west central rugged and remote area of the Chiquibul, the CFJEU enforcement has launched a series of operations that will take place throughout the year 2012. With this at the forefront, the 2nd recce was conducted to the Tunkul area. In November 16, 2011 **Operation Understory** in the Tunkul area made a major hit on illegal loggers crippling their illegal operation in that area. Subsequently, another recce and Quest Tunkul were conducted in the area in the month of December 2011 and we had seen a dramatic decline of illegal logging in that area. However, interpretation of aerial pictures from 2007 to the present time of that area has shown an increase of illegal incursions of slash and burning and illegal logging. Because the area is so large the possibility exists that loggers have moved completely to another location of the same region. Following **Operation Understory** we have not recorded any chain saws in that region. We can only assume that due to our frequent presence in the area people have abandoned the area but possibly moved elsewhere.

Accomplishments

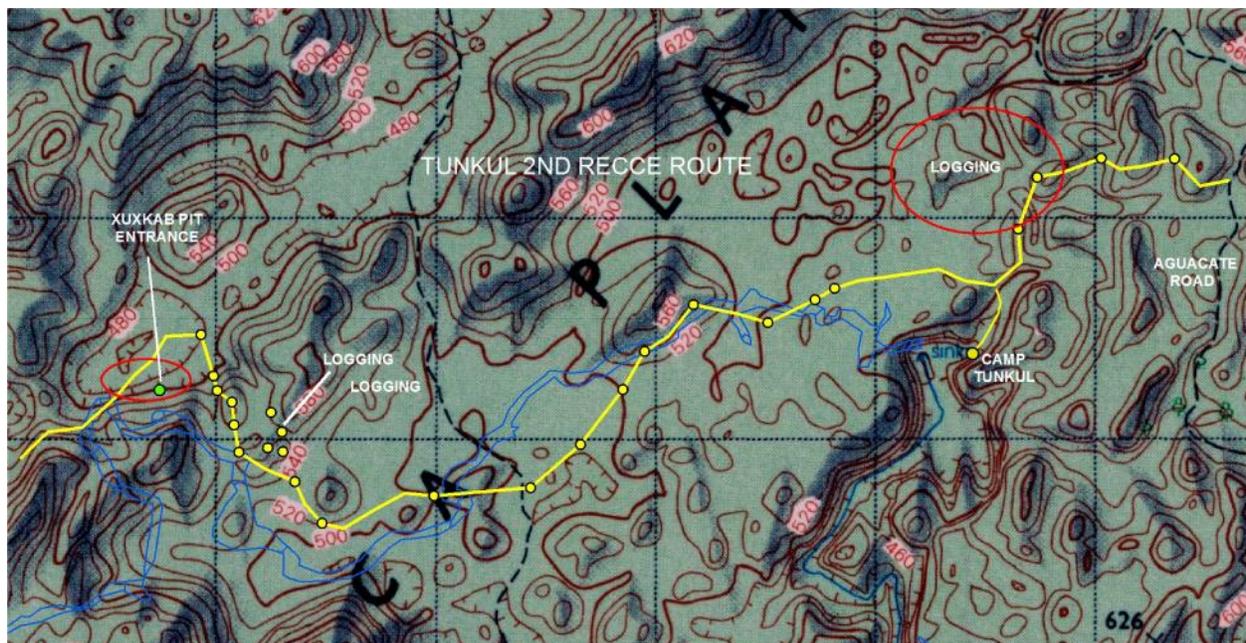
The Operation Tunkul 2nd Recce was conducted successfully from the 21st to the 23rd of the month of March with dual objective. First, the team was tasked to locate the Xuxcab entrance to the Tunkul Cave which leads to the Belize Room. Secondly, the team was tasked to search the area for illegal logging and arrest anyone if encountered. The team was deployed in the morning of the 21st at the Lirios point on the Aguacate Road at grid 281647-1846816 and from this point hiked to the objective. At 15:00 hours the team arrived at the main Tunkul Entrance at grid 277454-1843427 where the most reliable water point is located inside the cave. Camp was set here for two reasons namely because of the water source and secondly, because this area deep in a valley safer from illegal Guatemalans. In the morning of the 22nd the team moved on to the objective hiking through a xatero trail. Very few fresh tracks were seen on the trail and apparently we had missed encountering illegal Guatemalans by a couple of hours. The team moved very cautiously through the trail as intruders are unpredictable on this area. Numerous trails meander and crisscross the area but no recent or intensive activity is pronounced. Apparently, the mahogany density is not high in the area where we conducted



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the recce. Several logged trees that we inspected were undersized. One camp was located at grid 274309-1843026; this camp is apparently a logging camp but has not been used recently. No sign of permanent water was seen near the camp. One red container was seen near the camp and this could possibly have been used for giving water to horses. Only at one point we found 4 flitch of 4"x6"x8' but this perhaps have been there for at least a month. Because the team was fresh in the area we did not destroy anything since we wanted to recce the area and also accomplish the second task of locating the Xuxcab Entrance of Tunkul.



The team gambled itself in choosing which trail to follow but luckily enough we continuously advanced to our target point. Apparently the Xuxcab entrance is a pit according to the reports from the expeditions in the area. The reports did not mention a grid but based on the readings we established where this point could be located. The team arrived at the sink hole where the Xuxcab Entrance is apparently located and searched the area but it was not found. Considering that water is a problem finding in the area the team conducted a two hour search and decided to return to the Tunkul main entrance water point. Although the Xuxcab entrance was not found the team has located a trail and mapped this from the road to the Xuxcab sinkhole which we plan to use on another occasion when we attempt to search for the entrance.

Observation and Discussion

This area of the Chiquibul Forest is quite remote for patrolling and difficult to access with frequency. Surface water is always a problem finding. The area is very rugged with sudden shear walls, cliffs, pit drops and deep trenches at times. However in the past logging roads were built by Belizean logging companies. Patrols have found roads that traverse from Caracol to Arabato Camp. Most of these old roads are still visible and are currently used by

loggers and xateros. The only road that is still accessible by vehicle and used by rangers is the Aguacate Road.

Currently there is a network of illegal trails in the area; these trails were first discovered in 2007 by FCD rangers who conducted a patrol from Natural Arch to Caracol. At the time this trails were being used by xateros. In 2010 an FCD patrol recorded logging as far as Nohoch Chen which is located almost 7 kilometers inside Belize.

Guatemalans access this area from Cebada and Sapote and people come from the Village of San Jose Nueva Armenia and Las Flores de Chiquibul. Recently it has been observed that Guatemalans have been encroaching more and more into this area. In 2009 a BDF/FCD patrol in the area near Cebada were fired at, missing a soldier by merely a couple of inches. Incursions and activities in this area have not been well documented and have ranged from marijuana plantations and observations of people carrying heavy firearms. A report from a Guatemalan encounter with our patrol reported that people were aggressive and offensive and said that they will not abandon the land.

The current trend of Guatemalans encroaching in the area is alarming for us who have been monitoring them. Our records show how Guatemalans have encroached into the area of Valentin, Sapote and Rio Blanco; these have been constant and exponential every year and have not been able to be deterred. Being monitored for the past 5 years we have not received adequate support to enter this area and create a credible deterrence. In 2009 a patrol encountered ranchers who fired upon our troops.

One of the current threats for the Chiquibul Cave system is the slash and burning which will eventually weather out the limestone; this threat is more common in the area of Cebada.

Recommendations

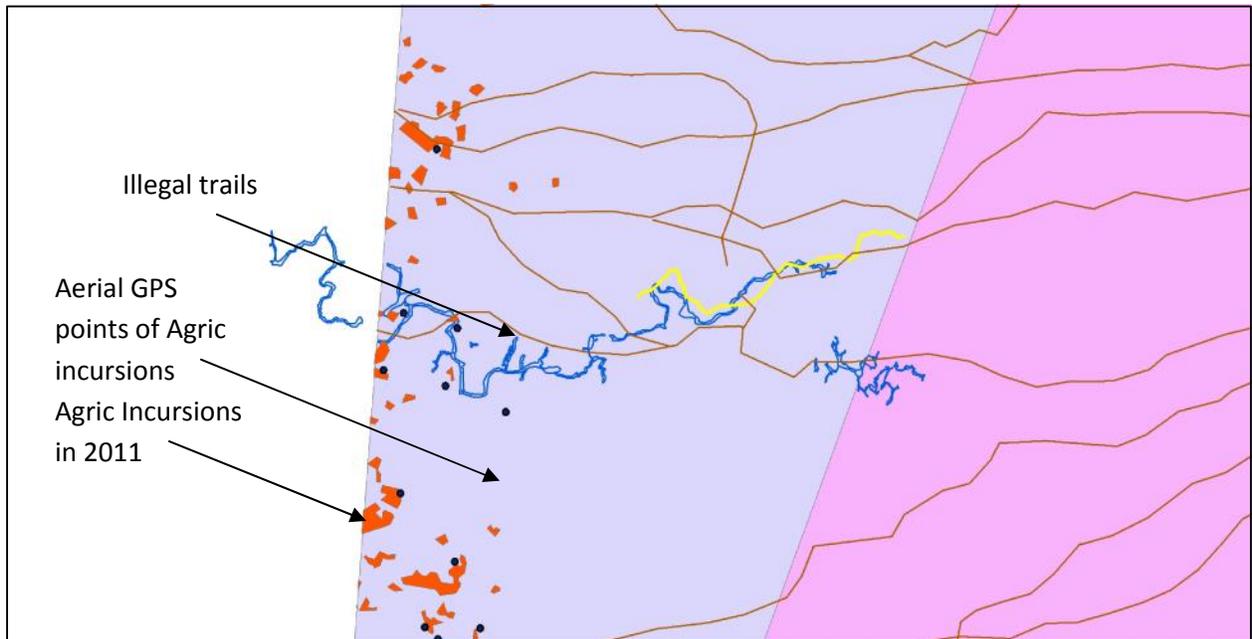
Improvement of the Aguacate Road to loop to Arabato is critical for patrols to come close 10 kilometers within the border where encroachments are coming from. This road is quite accessible but has not been improved for at least 20 years. The Aguacate Road is also the main access to the Chiquibul Cave System, Resumidero and loops around to the Natural Arch where some of the most beautiful features of the Chiquibul are located.

It has been noted that our presence in the area has deterred a lot of activities in the area. As a result it is important to continue intensifying patrols in the area with BDF and bring in BSAG to conduct special operations in areas of suspected drugs.

It is important to map all trails, camps and especially water points and categorize them for proper and strategic planning of patrols, research expeditions and possible jungle tours in the area.



Undersized mahogany trees logged in the Tunkul area.



The Chiquibul Cave System (blue color) in relation to incursions