

Feb. 01, 2012 LightHawk

Founded in 2006, ACES/ American Crocodile Education Sanctuary is non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of Belize's critical wetland habitats and protected species, specifically Crocodilians, through education and scientific research to preserve Belize's wildlife for future generations.

ACES is concluding a year long research project, funded by The Rufford Small Grants Foundation, substantiating the American crocodile, *Crocodylus acutus*, population and habitat viability on Ambergris Caye in Belize through daylight, eye-shine, and nest sighting surveys; kind crocodile tagging; and habitat assessments. Throughout this project LightHawk has assisted ACES immensely with previous flyovers to assess possible croc nesting sites, habitat availability, and indiscriminant mangrove clearing in Ambergris Caye and nearby cayes including the American crocodile's premiere nest area in Belize, Turneffe Atoll.

Additionally, LightHawk successfully enabled ACES to determine the feasibility of an Educational Crocodile Eco-Sanctuary in the Ladyville area of Belize. Construction of this facility has commenced and currently houses twenty-two (22) freshwater Morelet's crocodiles, *Crocodylus moreletii*, rescued from illegal and inhumane captivity, and four (4) American crocodiles deemed problematic and would have otherwise been euthanized.

Listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, American crocodiles are catalogued by the Crocodile Specialist Group (CSG) as a critical species in terms of need for conservation and are considered a high priority crocodilian requiring wild population recovery, management and nesting habitat protection in Belize. *C. acutus* is also cataloged on Appendix I of the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES), and is regarded as threatened by the Belize Department of Fisheries.

Information collected on this flight will assist ACES with locating and documenting: additional relocation sites for nuisance crocodiles; new clearing(s) of endangered Red mangrove in the name of development; and any interior lagoons that ACES may have neglected during this past years surveying. The flyover of Bacalar Chico National Park and Marine Reserve is primarily to access future relocate sites and access routes to those sites. Flyovers of additional, interior lagoons is to document American crocodile habitats that have not been included in the survey and to again assess possible access to these lagoons. Finally, newly identified mangrove clearing(s) will be reported to the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment, the Belize Forest Department, to determine that those areas have the proper permits and not conducting illegal clearing activities.

LightHawk will be properly thanked for their generous contributions to this pertinent crocodilian research in ACES final article, which will be submitted for publication to scientific journals and the Crocodile Specialist Group Newsletter by April 2012.