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Maya Reserve at El Pilar Formally Established

A UCSB archaeologist's plan to establish a Maya reserve along the Belize-Guatemala border has become a reality.

Meeting last May in Belize, representatives from both Central American nations--- with assistance from Mexican and U.S. experts---adopted a management plan and vision statement for the 4,000-acre site. With the agreement, the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna was officially born.

"Both governments now recognize the reserve's boundaries and have committed to protecting it. Now it's just a matter of sorting out the administrative and legal fine points," said UCSB's Anabel Ford, who has spearheaded the El Pilar effort. She will address Guatemalan colleagues on the status of the project in Antigua, Guatemala, on Aug. 6.

The site of a major Maya civilization dating back more than 3,000 years, El Pilar has been the object of excavations led by Ford since 1983. The digging shows that El Pilar was built before other important Maya sites, such as nearby Tikal in Guatemala, and continued to flourish even after they went into decline.

Today, the site straddles the Belize-Guatemala border, which has complicated preservation efforts. Ford first won a qualified endorsement for the El Pilar project from the governments of Belize and Guatemala two years ago. That agreement

marked the first time the two nations collaborated on a cultural issue since Belize (formerly British Honduras) became independent in 1981. Guatemala hasn't entirely abandoned old claims to the former British crown colony.

The recently adopted management plan is the most far-reaching El Pilar agreement to date. It calls for cooperation on three fronts: law and policy issues, scientific inquiry, and community development. Ford is currently pursuing a grant to formulate a communications plan that bridges the Belizean and Guatemalan legal systems and park management bureaucracies.

Ford, who heads up UCSB's MesoAmerican Research Center, envisions a living museum of Maya culture at El Pilar, which is located about 75 miles west of Belize City. She hopes the reserve will not only display the excavated monuments but also serve as a contemporary showcase of Maya crafts and agricultural techniques.

Such programs could be a model for sustainable development and saving endangered tropical forests in Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, and other parts of Central America, she said. El Pilar's extensive trail system is already open to the public, and the reserve is the site of experimental farming and craft production by modern-day Maya. Excavations at El Pilar are ongoing. "This is an unprecedented effort to preserve a cross-border area rich in resources and history for research while improving the quality of life for local peoples. I couldn't be more pleased with our progress," said Ford.

Please note: Photographs available upon request.

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