

Raptor Education Soars in Toledo

Move over, Big Bird! There's a new guy in town. Larger than life sized Harpy Eagle mascot, "Hope" made his debut appearance at a community school last week, as The Belize Zoo teamed up with Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE), to continue their vital harpy eagle education campaign. This campaign targets the communities in the buffer zone of the Bladen Nature Reserve in the Toledo District, which is probably the last stronghold for harpy eagles in northern Central America.



The largest and most powerful raptor in the Americas was thought to be locally extinct in Belize, with the last official sighting in the year 2000. This prompted TBZ to collaborate with The Peregrine Fund in Panama, to see the release of 15 captive bred eagles into our Belizean forests, from 2003-2009, through the Belize Harpy Eagle Restoration Program (BHERP). After the raptor releases stopped, TBZ still continued its education component, to help ensure these magnificent birds had a fighting chance.

Then, in 2005, Harpies were rediscovered in the Bladen, proving that they weren't extinct, just restricted to isolated forest areas, out of sight of people. From there, Harpy Eagle conservation just kept

building momentum, with the establishment of BFREE'S harpy monitoring program, and stronger Harpy outreach education.

This campaign brought BFREE'S

Bird Program Coordinator, William Garcia, and TBZ's Environmental Educator, Jamal Andrewin, to the villages of San Isidro and Trio in Toledo, to wrap up yet another series of Harpy talks BFREE had been doing this year. After starting off with what raptors are, and why they are so cool, Mr. Jamal touched on their importance in population balance, pest and disease control, and tourism. He then switched to the "poster child" of the campaign, the Harpy Eagle, with a little harpy history, before handing the show over to Mr. William, and running out the door, promising to return with a very special guest. Mr. William stressed that harpies only hunt

arboreal animals, are no threat to communities, and that the community should be proud to have such amazing neighbors in their "backyard," the Bladen.

Cinematographers Carol and

Richard Foster were there to catch the wonder on film and photo, as jaws dropped and faces lit up when Mr. William cued Hope's entrance, and the 6 foot harpy eagle mascot shuffled into the room, showed off a harpy's massive wingspan, and practiced pouncing

like a real raptor! Hope gave out posters and colouring books, and shook wings with the clever students who got the Q & A session right. Named "Hope" for the last Harpy that was released through BHERP, the mascot is the latest dynamic education tool devised by TBZ, with the idea that the message of harpy conservation has a greater impact coming from a real life "harpy." A huge thank you goes out to BFREE, San Isidro and Trio communities for being the first ones to test and prove this concept.

B
E
T
T
E
R

Z
O
O
L
O
G
Y