

# Capacity what? The intangible side of conservation

July 31 2019, by Laura Owens And Sara Calcada

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Credit: Fauna & Flora International

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) believes in partnership—we always have and we always will. In 2018, we partnered with almost 400 organisations, businesses or governmental agencies. We favour this partnership approach because—put simply—it works better for everyone. Each partner brings something unique to the table and

contributes in their own way to a common goal.

One contribution we offer our partners is capacity building. When asked to write an article about capacity building and its crucial importance for [conservation organisations](#) and their work, I naturally agreed. After all, this is what my role is about. Having committed myself, I was requested kindly but firmly not to use the term 'capacity building' in the article, as those who do not work in the [conservation](#) or medical field are unlikely to know what this means. It's true that the concept is hard to encapsulate, but only because the term is greater than the sum of its parts. So, here goes.

Those parts include, but are not limited to, technical training, [skills development](#), [financial support](#) and mentoring, as well as advising partner staff on how to develop and plan for their organisation's future, and facilitating that process. These are all things that conservation professionals need in order to achieve success.

Exploring FFI's partnership with one organisation in Belize demonstrates how all these parts come together to produce some truly amazing achievements.

## **New beginnings in Belize**

As an established and flourishing organisation with over 20 dedicated staff, Ya'axché Conservation Trust (Ya'axché) protects and manages 151,000 acres of land in southern Belize, plays an influential role in the protection of the entire Maya Golden Landscape (encompassing 770,000 acres) and supports over 100 farmers within eight communities. In addition, Ya'axché's rangers patrol around 3,000 miles a year. Their work has contributed to the protection of 37 globally threatened species. These are fantastic accomplishments for a conservation organisation and Ya'axché is on its way to building a long-term legacy for biodiversity and

people in Belize.

But how does an organisation like this start? Where do the finances and resources come from to enable this work? And where do those forming the organisation develop the skills and know-how to run one, particularly in a country that might not have the resources or infrastructure to support such work?

The answer is dedication to a goal and strong support.

## **A fledgling alliance**

Just over 20 years ago, FFI was approached by a newly formed, community-based Mayan organisation. This small collection of local leaders wanted to conserve forest around the Golden Stream River before it was converted for shrimp farming and agriculture.

The group had determination and ideas but did not know enough about establishing itself as a credible organisation that would be taken seriously by those they needed to work with, such as the government and donors.



Technical skills development is just one of many elements of effective capacity building. Credit: Maximiliano Caal/Ya'axché Conservation Trust

Invited to visit the area, FFI quickly appreciated its significance and the immediacy of the threats facing the species within it. Rather than simply providing one-off financial support and leaving the new NGO to get on with the work, FFI recognised that the best way for the respective organisations to achieve their shared goals would be through a partnership. By 2002, bolstered by full-time support from FFI including fundraising and technical advice, the fledgling organisation had been formally established as Ya'axché Conservation Trust.

## **Partnership in evolution**

As well as helping Ya'axché secure a large grant of over one million US dollars, FFI was intimately involved in developing the organisation and

provided day-to-day operational advice and mentoring. By 2007, however, the FFI-Ya'axché relationship had evolved from a state of complete dependency on FFI resources to the point where Ya'axché was ready to begin operating autonomously.

FFI's Belize Country Manager at the time, Lisel Alamilla, became Ya'axché's new Executive Director, a move that underpinned a step change in Ya'axché's development. The team expanded, its internal systems improved and Ya'axché introduced more innovative fundraising and income-generating mechanisms to support organisational growth and management.

Ya'axché now supports others in Belize, including small-scale farmer families, rangers, local leaders and community groups, engaging them in technical training, workshops and exchange visits to strengthen their skills and knowledge in governance, microfinance and sustainable agriculture.

## **A model of success**

The passion and dedication to these crucial natural areas of Belize has enabled Ya'axché to implement much-needed conservation work. FFI merely provided support according to Ya'axché's stated needs, tailoring our approach as we went.

Without the mentoring, advice, knowledge exchange, leadership skills and [financial planning](#) and support that FFI offered an initially very small, embryonic organisation, it is unlikely that Ya'axché would have been able to grow into the regionally acknowledged champions of Belizean conservation we know today.

But partnership is a two-way street. Without the foresight, talent, enthusiasm, dedication, resilience and commitment to the conservation

cause shown throughout the past two decades by Ya'axché's founders and all its staff, the Golden Stream Corridor and other threatened landscapes would almost certainly not have survived, and the biodiversity of Belize would have been seriously impoverished.

Christina Garcia, Ya'axché's Executive Director and the driving force behind more recent developments, says: "Ya'axché has been extremely fortunate to have a partner such as FFI. Ya'axché was granted numerous opportunities over the years to build the capacity of staff through training in proposal development, strategic planning and the Conservation Leadership Programme. This has led Ya'axché to grow even bigger and become more competent in its strides to accomplish its conservation goals and objectives in the Maya Golden Landscape and wider Belize. The assistance FFI has given Ya'axché has allowed us to grow in strength, resilience, influence and impact, leading us to now being considered the most successful NGO in Belize."

FFI continues to support Ya'axché's organisational development, helping it to strategically plan for the future while strengthening its fundraising base. Equally importantly, our own organisation continues to derive huge value from this partnership, and the lessons learned from this mutually beneficial long-term relationship have enabled FFI to develop and refine our own approach to conservation challenges.

Now can you tell me, what is capacity building?

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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