

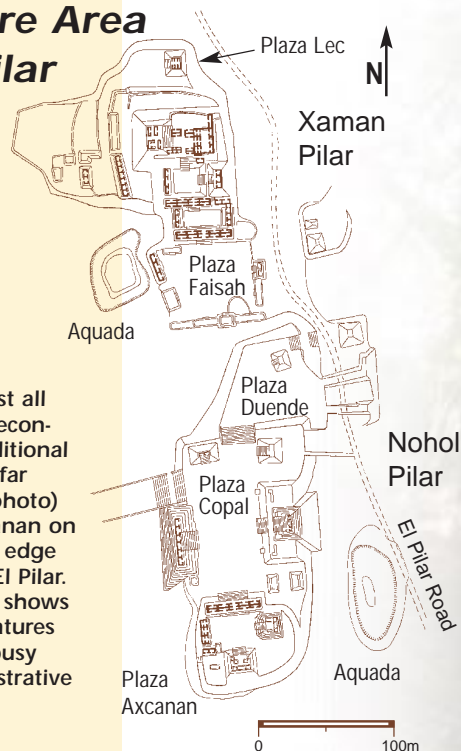
# Forum

## Using the Past to Preserve the Future

Maya Ruins are the Heart of a Bold Economic Plan

The dramatic ruins of El Pilar's temples, plazas, and palaces, enveloped in jungle and surrounded by traditional villages, straddle the border between Belize and Guatemala. Preserving this ancient Maya center and the rain forest associated with it is critical. But if the price tag for conservation dashes local hopes for a better life, then our efforts are doomed over the long haul.

### The Core Area of El Pilar



The rain forest all but hides a reconstructed, traditional Maya home (far right in the photo) at Plaza Axcanan on the southern edge the ruins of El Pilar. The site map shows the major features of the once-busy Maya administrative center.

PHOTO: MIKE CUENCA / SITE MAP: EL PILAR PROGRAM



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by **Anabel Ford**

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EL PILAR PROGRAM /  
CLARISSA GUGGENHEIM

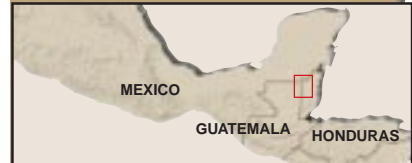
We opted to recruit nearby villagers, along with their governments, as real — not superficial — partners in conserving their cultural and environmental heritage, two aspects that have been intertwined in the Maya forest for millennia. And with their help, we are demonstrating that creative conservation can pay practical dividends by applying agricultural lessons the Maya learned 2,000 years ago while tapping the modern wave of ecotourism.

Local communities are the ultimate custodians of this history and their environment. Our task is to prove they

also are the ultimate beneficiaries of it.

We call this carefully planned effort, which I direct, the El Pilar Program. This unique approach to balancing short-term economic needs of the local communities with long-term objectives of conservation offers a model with promise for preserving threatened archaeological and ecological treasures throughout Central America and beyond.

The core of the El Pilar vision comes from research on the evolution of the ancient Maya landscape: Secrets to sustaining the complex habitats of today's forest are embedded in ancient



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Maya prehistory. The picture that emerges shows a continuum of land-use strategies ranging from densely settled, intensively used uplands with

cialties, supported by the diplomatic community and endorsed by the governments of Belize and Guatemala.

Our goal is an unprecedented cultural research center, ecological preserve, and eco-tourism destination developed

The Maya civilization was built on agriculture. The ecological structure of the Maya forest is a relic of the dynamic relationships in which humans have played an integral part for more than 4,000 years — and it is the heritage of

## El Pilar, once a bustling Maya administrative center, sprawls over more than 50 hectares (124 acres) was built over more than sixteen centuries.

public centers, to dispersed transitional zones loosely organized around a local elite, to unsettled swamps.

We are following this blueprint of ancient Maya settlement patterns in creating the new El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna in Belize/Guatemala. This vision has been adopted by an international group of professionals with a wide range of spe-

cialties, supported by the diplomatic community and endorsed by the governments of Belize and Guatemala.

Our goal is an unprecedented cultural research center, ecological preserve, and eco-tourism destination developed under a single master plan applied on both sides of an international border. El Pilar, once a bustling Maya administrative center, sprawls over more than 50 hectares (124 acres) and was built over a span of more than sixteen centuries, beginning before 600 B.C. Many more El Pilar monuments almost certainly await discovery, especially in Guatemala.

today's Maya farmers. Large, contiguous stands of forest are a testimony to the efficacy of ancient agriculture. While the collapse of the Classic Maya affected the human populations, the plants and animals of the forest survived — only to be threatened with extinction today. Therein lies the ecological lesson that must be learned.

Traditional Maya farming, today just as millennia ago, is built around forest gardens — using “polycultivation” — an eclectic mix of annuals and perennials interspersed with tree crops. This has been immensely successful, sustaining production over countless generations. Yet many villagers today are abandoning traditional life for undependable intermittent wage labor.

Returning to the traditional strategy at El Pilar will foster resource conservation and community development that works with the natural regenerative power of the forest. Polycultivation mimics the natural diversity. The forest-garden design is a mix of economic plants that depend on labor input rather than scarce capital to provide a diverse subsistence, as well as potential cash crops. Included might be such nitrogen-fixing legumes as acacia and beans, and phosphate-generating palms as the cohune or corozo. Together, such plants can maintain soils depleted by corn and other domesticates.

A cooperative association has been established with Amigos de El Pilar, a

## Field Notes





Don Heriberto Cocom (far left) of the El Pilar Project shows the site to officials of Belize and Guatemala. The impressive ruins of a palace (right) are still standing.

community-based organization that promotes local participation in the reserve. The Amigos' goal is to develop community enterprises in tourism and agriculture that increase villagers' economic stake in the reserve. The leadership role they are assuming and the self-determination they are gaining is the foundation upon which the success of the El Pilar model depends.

As the tourism industry focuses on traditional cultures and environmental wonders, Meso-america has become a flourishing travel destination, and the Maya world has evolved as a vital niche for adventurers and ecotourists. Links between specialty, worldwide travel firms and regional travel services are essential to developing this market.

The El Pilar Program has set the stage for ecotourism with local guides and hotels, regional publications, and international promotion in media and tour books. We have hosted events such as the annual Fiesta El Pilar. Public-relations information has been circulated to international guide books, reported in journals, and posted on the Internet. Funding from agencies such as the Central American Commission for Environment and Development, Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and U.S. Agency for International Development boosts visibility and provides a springboard for development.

Since 1997 and the first Mesa Redonda El Pilar (sponsored by Ford Foundation), a group of 28 profession-

als in research and development, along with an equal number of community participants, have been preparing a master plan for release this year. This El Pilar Management Plan, consequently, will include the concerns and desires for both resource conservation and local economic development.

Establishing a contiguous park around one resource in two countries is a landmark achievement. The natural environment, cultural resources, access for tourism, and adjacent contemporary peoples all figure prominently into this master plan for research and development.

The challenge now is to see that this plan takes root and grows into the ultimate product: the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve. □

ANABEL FORD, head of the El Pilar Program, is director of the ISBER/MesoAmerican Research Center at the University of California at Santa Barbara. For more on the project, see the Website at <http://alishaw.sscf.ucsb.edu/~ford/index.html>.