



PRESS RELEASE

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BELIZE COALITION TO SAVE OUR NATURAL HERITAGE PRESENTS AWARD TO LOCAL ORGANIZATION

Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management recognized for conservation/human rights work

On Saturday, October 1st, the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage presented its first award to the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management in recognition of SATIIM's tireless efforts in both conservation and human rights. SATIIM's mission is to promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples and safeguard the ecological integrity of the Sarstoon Temash region by promoting the sustainable use of its resource for its indigenous people's economic, social, cultural, environmental and spiritual wellbeing.

The Sarstoon Temash National Park is more than 40,000 acres of broadleaf, wetland and mangrove forest in Southern Belize. Its 13 unique ecosystems are home to more than 200 species of birds, 24 types of mammals, more than twenty types of reptiles, 42 varieties of fish and almost fifty kinds of butterflies and moths. In 2005, the Sarstoon Temash National Park was declared a RAMSAR site - a wetland of global importance. But a year later, oil developers showed up in the park.

"In 2006, we prepared Conejo for what is now a landmark lands right case; the judgement of 2007 of Chief Justice Conteh and that really awakened the communities to the fact that they had rights," says Froyla Tzalam, SATIIM's Executive Director. "The communities began to understand that they no longer had to accept what was being imposed on them, from outsiders and in the case of our communities, it was the government. For the first time, they began to understand that they could change the conversation and that meant that they demanded to be at the table. It started with people wanting to know more about the oil issue, wanting to know more about what development is, to now where they are saying, we have always been told that we can't, we have been told Government must set the pace, and if it doesn't we can go and challenge it. And that's ok."

As Tzalam accepted the award, she paid tribute to the stalwart leadership of former Executive Director Gregory Ch'oc and to the unwavering support of the Maya and Garifuna communities of the Sarstoon Temash region. Today, SATIIM is at the forefront of innovations in sustainable development that combine traditional and modern practices. This indigenous-led model increases food security and climate change resilience, reduces deforestation, and ultimately provides proof of the success of community-based sustainable development.

At the official handing over ceremony, one of the founding members of the Coalition, Dr. Candy Gonzalez of the Belize Institute of Environmental Law and Policy, reminded the audience that the struggle is ongoing. *"Too often we expect "success" in two hours or less. But this type of work represents a lifetime of commitment and dedication to the cause of safeguarding our natural resources. This award is designed to be motivation to continue the work."*

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The Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage's mission is to secure a ban on oil exploration in Belize's offshore and protected areas; and to strengthen the legislative framework for the equitable distribution of oil revenues and promote strong environmental safeguards for the oil industry.