The Belize Tourism Development Project, on which the ICDF is cooperating with the Belize government, the Inter-American Development Bank and other groups, is planning and executing the development and preservation of important Mayan civilization archeological sites. The project will ultimately develop numerous Mayan ruins in Belize, bolstering the nation’s growing eco- and adventure tourism sectors. The ICDF’s current role is in funding the upgrade of a road linking the major Caracol Mayan ruin in western Belize to nearby cities and highways. With the signing in September of the loan agreement by ROC Ambassador to Belize Tsai Erh-huang and Belize Prime Minister Said Musa, the Belize Tourism Development project has now been launched in earnest. Between 1,100 and 1,700 years ago, when much of Western civilization was languishing in the Dark Ages, the Mayan civilization was flourishing in the Yucatan Peninsula region of Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The Mayan civilization was probably composed of many loosely affiliated settlements with allegiances to two “super cities,” Tikal and Calakmul (other societal organizations are also possible). At its height (Classic period) from 300-900, the Mayans were extremely advanced, developing sophisticated mathematical and astronomical systems, a hieroglyphic writing system and elaborate architecture. It is in fact Mayan architecture that has attracted the most interest in the modern world, resulting in considerable tourism to Mayan archeological sites.
in Central America. Mayan cities consist of intricately decorated stone masonry, massive earthworks, large pyramids, civic centers surrounded by symmetric patterns of residences, temples, monuments, plazas and sporting fields and courts.

It is estimated that at least 100,000 people once lived in Caracol (possibly many more), making it the largest Mayan ruin in Belize, and one of the largest Mayan cities in the entire region. Caracol may have been a large “satellite” of the center city Calakmul in Mexico, and “clearly played a major role in the political organization of the Maya lowlands during the Classic period,” according to Richard M. Leventhal, director of the UCLA Institute of Archeology. Central to Caracol is a large pyramid (called Caana, or “sky palace”) that rises 40 meters above the lush surrounding forests. The pyramid is flanked by a temple, ball courts, water conduits, and many large and small buildings, most in significant disarray (the thick forests have encroached and in some places overwhelmed Caracol’s buildings and structures).

Because miles of virgin rainforest and pine forests surround Caracol (providing a useful blanket of protection for the site), and existing jungle roads are narrow, undeveloped and virtually impassable in rainy weather, Caracol has remained underdeveloped for research and tourism (the site is managed by the Belize Department of Archeology, which will also be strengthened during work on this project). Currently, only a few visitors (15 per day, or approximately 5,400 annually) treat themselves to the splendor of the Caracol ruins. These visitors tell of the awesome mystical beauty of the ruins, with stunning views over the canopy from atop the Caana, and lovely flora—colorful orchids dot the landscape—and myriad fauna, including birds, reptiles, howler monkeys and even glimpses of leopards darting through the forest.

Because of the primitive conditions of the roads leading to Caracol, the construction of 50 miles of first-class rural road, from the city of Santa Elena through the nearby Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve and Chiquibul National Park and thence to the site was deemed a project priority. While perhaps pedestrian when compared to the development that will occur on the Caracol site proper, improving access roads such as this one is an important element of the project plan, and it is this component the ICDF will finance, with US$3 million of the total US$14 million project loan (the Inter-American Development Bank is managing the remainder of the loan). With improved access, and other project components providing additional tourist facilities at the site, the Belize government hopes that more than 30,000 tourists and researchers will visit the site each year by 2015.

Wolric H. Lind and Associates of Belmopan, Belize (the capital city) performed an engineering assessment of the conditions of the primary road to Caracol in September 1999. The firm found that the surface condition of the gravel road was at least adequate, but that fluctuations in the width of the road (from only 11 to as much as 28 feet), sharp curves and steep inclines, poor drainage in some areas, and inadequate guardrails at bridge approaches were the primary existing problems. Construction firms selected after the current bidding process will rectify these problems, planning 15 years into the future, when 7,500 cars and 33,400 tourists are expected to visit Caracol annually. The road, which will safely allow travel at maximum speeds of 45 mph (lower speeds in villages), will be built to a uniform width of 22 feet (24 feet on curves) with six-foot shoulders on each side; gravel surfaces will be deepened and stabilized where necessary; guardrails will be constructed; and new traffic control and safety signage will be erected.

The Inter-American Development Bank, headquartered in Washington, D.C., has been the primary organizer of the Belize Tourism Development Project. The bank is emphasizing tourism because world growth trends in eco-and adventure tourism are extremely favorable (the World Tourism Organization, headquartered in Madrid, has named 2002 the “International Year of Ecotourism”). Sustainable development in
Belize in these areas will attract foreign and local private sector investment, generate foreign exchange, create employment, and provide funds for continued preservation of developed sites. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), a key element of eco- and adventure tourism planning, has been prepared, addressing concerns such as the effects of the project on natural and archeological resources, the area’s visitor carrying capacity, visitor and local citizen safety, and the social impact in the surrounding area’s villages. Fortunately, the assessment concluded that the project as planned would have no major negative impacts, and many positive impacts, such as increased employment opportunities and tourism revenues in the area, better protection of natural and archeological resources, and improved public services in nearby villages. The report recognized that although increased tourism will bring changes to the rural communities in the region, the impact would be mitigated by strict “behavior codes” for visitors, focused support of local traditions and cultural values, and, perhaps most important, active community participation in the project. The Belize Ministry of Tourism and Youth conducted community meetings in August 1999, where more than 200 residents of the surrounding villages voiced their concerns and opinions about the Caracol development. Their views were incorporated into the EIA and subsequent project plans.

Eugenio Yunis, chief of the World Tourism Organization’s Sustainable Development of Tourism section, has written that tourism development such as that of the Belize project can be “major contributors to sustainable development,” but must respect “the social and cultural fabrics of host communities.” Further, Yunis has outlined several key factors in successful eco- and nature tourism development, including: development must have minimal environmental impact and contribute to conservation of natural areas; local communities must be actively involved in projects; sufficient amounts of income generated by tourism must be channeled back into local communities; historical and natural assets must be preserved; and tourism’s overall impact must be continuously monitored. The Belize Tourism Development Project looks to be meeting all of these criteria, and will extend beyond the Caracol ruins site and assist Belize in developing and preserving second-level sites such as Lamanai (with several hundred buildings, and comparable in size and impact to Caracol), Altun Ha, and Xunantunich; and third-level sites including Cahal Pech, El Pilar, Cerros, Santa Rita, Nim Li Punit and Lubaantun.

Clearly Belize has a rich historical and archeological legacy that it can develop for the best possible reasons. The ancient Mayan world has long provided a window to the Americas’ past (though the Mayan people and culture live on in Central America today), and Belize can now utilize its share of this magnificent heritage as it plans for its future social and economic development.