

*Exploring the Sian Ka'an and Calakmul Biosphere Reserves of*

# mexico



**A special departure for The Nature Conservancy's International Leadership Council  
November 13-17, 2006**

## Overview

Our first destination will be the **Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve**, Mexico's greatest wetland area, which lies two hours south of Cancun. This site protects one of the last remaining expanses of tropical forests, savannas, mangroves and coastal habitats along the Maya Riviera – all within the same contiguous World Heritage site. With its close proximity to Cancun, one of the main threats to this area is pending coastal development. In addition to the encroaching stress of tourism, we will explore other threats to the region, including poor wastewater management practices, over-fishing and unsustainable farming operations which all have an adverse effect on the Mesoamerican Reef system that lies off the coast of Sian Ka'an. Participants will also learn about the Conservancy's work with partner organization Amigos de Sian Ka'an (ASK) and our efforts to reach out to local communities.

Following our visit to Sian Ka'an, the group will travel by charter plane to the Maya Forest, an area covering more than six million acres from the Caribbean coast of Mexico through Belize and into the Petén region of Guatemala. The ecological importance of the region is astonishing; mature tropical jungles, seasonally inundated lowland forests, and wetlands provide refuge for many rare and endangered species. On this leg of the trip, we will look at the approach that the Conservancy and its governmental and NGO partners are taking to protect the Mexican portion of the Maya Forest at the **Calakmul Biosphere Reserve**. Slightly larger than the state of Delaware, Calakmul harbors the largest tracts of tropical forests in Mexico and contains several archeological centers.

Local Conservancy and partner staff will also discuss the two main threats facing the reserve: deforestation (from slash and burn agriculture, timber poaching and poor forest management techniques by neighboring communities) and population growth (which has resulted in higher rates of illegal hunting and an increase in road construction). Participants will visit with local communities living outside the reserve and explore the strategies that the Conservancy and its partner organizations are offering as an alternative to unsustainable land management practices.

## Itinerary

### **Day 1: November 13 (Monday) Arrival and transfer to Los Lirios**

Your Emerald Planet trip leader, Mark Willuhn, will meet you at the Cancun airport (arrivals should be no later than 2:00 pm). Our hotel is located on the beach approximately 90 miles south of Cancun and just north of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. After the group arrives we have an hour and a half drive to our Caribbean beachfront hotel. Marie Claire Paiz, Director of the Conservancy's Southern Mexico Program, will serve as our local Conservancy guide during our entire stay in Mexico and will provide a brief orientation over dinner.

For those interested, we will depart in the early evening to explore Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve at night. Under the nighttime sky, we will traverse the lagoons of Sian Ka'an by boat to search for crocodiles. The Conservancy's local partner, Amigos de Sian Ka'an (ASK) has been conducting research on the crocodile population of these lagoons for over a decade and has the most extensive crocodile database in the region for this particular species. It is estimated that there are 50-75 crocodiles that live in the lagoon, and we may see animals from 6 inches to 6 feet in length!

Night: Los Lirios Hotel

### **Day 2: November 14 (Tuesday) Pez Maya and Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve**

Sian Ka'an is Mayan for "Where the Sky is Born." Here the land and marine habitats form a complicated hydraulic system that encompasses a variety of wetlands and coastal habitats such as seasonally flooded forests, savannas, mangroves, fresh water canals, lagoons, bays, cenotes (limestone sinkholes), and coral reefs. Approximately one-third of the reserve is covered by tropical forests, while another third is composed of savannas and mangroves. The final third contains coastal and marine habitats, including 70 miles of the second longest barrier reef in the world. The great variety of habitats houses all the mammal species normally found in the region including jaguar, puma, ocelot, margay, jaguarundi, spider and howler monkeys, tapir and manatees. In addition, the reserve provides habitat for crocodiles and beaches for nesting endangered sea turtles. Over 300 species of birds are also found in Sian Ka'an, including the rare jabiru stork.

We will take a boat trip through the Sian Ka'an canal system, do some fresh water snorkeling, and visit an island rookery. Finally, we will relax along the beaches of Pez Maya, a three kilometer long beachfront property recently protected by the Conservancy and ASK. Gonzalo Merediz-Alonso, Director of ASK, will give us a brief overview of the activities and challenges involved in the management of Sian Ka'an and Pez Maya.

Night: Los Lirios Hotel

### **Day 3: November 15 (Wednesday) Arriving in Calakmul / Project site visit**

After breakfast we depart for the Tulum airstrip and a short flight to Xpujil, in the buffer zone north of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. Calakmul is located in the northern portion of the Petén Region, and is a 1.8 million acre Biosphere Reserve contiguous with 5.5 million additional acres of forest reserves in Guatemala and Belize. Pronatura Peninsula de Yucatan (PPY), a Conservancy partner organization, is very active in this area. After settling into the lovely Ecovillage Chicanna and having lunch, we will visit an agrarian community in the buffer zone of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. The Nature Conservancy and PPY are working with farmers in Conhuas and other local communities that border the forest to develop an integrated agricultural system that allows the community to abandon the traditional, destructive slash and burn techniques while at the same time

greatly increasing their profit margins. We should arrive at our hotel in the late evening with time to freshen up before our dinner discussion with Marie Claire Paiz and Maria Andrade Hernandez, General Director of PPY.

Night: Hotel Ecovillage Chicanna

#### **Day 4: November 16 (Thursday) Calakmul Biosphere Reserve visit**

Today we will be visiting the Calakmul archaeological site located deep within the reserve.

Oscillated turkeys and chacalacas are commonly seen as are many other tropical bird species. Five wild felines have healthy populations in this region, although seeing one requires lots of luck. The jaguar, for example, has its strongest Mexican population in this reserve. Groups are often fortunate enough to catch the howler monkeys in between naps and on occasion find spider monkeys passing through the reserve.

If time permits, we will also visit Balamku, an archeological site with three 15-foot masks inside the main pyramid structure. Over 300 species of birds have been recorded in the area, including toucans, parrots and over twenty species of birds of prey. Right before sunset we will visit one of the largest bat caves in North America. Very little is known about this cave, however, the population has been estimated at between 3-5 million. We will arrive just in time to witness their nightly mass exodus.

Night: Hotel Ecovillage Chicanna

#### **Day 5: November 17 (Friday) Mayan archaeological sites / Return home**

This morning we depart our hotel after breakfast to explore some other Maya archaeological sites including Chicanna and Becan. We will return to the Cancun airport from the Xpujil landing strip via charter flight. Participants will depart according to their scheduled international departures from Cancun (flights should not be scheduled before 2pm).