Window into the Ancient World

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By Jack Roth, '94

Gaining worldwide recognition in the remote and unwelcoming jungles of Belize is no easy task. As Arlen and Diane Chase will tell you, there's nothing glamorous about what they do. Their humble dispositions suggest they are merely two anthropology professors who have worked hard searching for answers regarding the mysteries of ancient civilizations. The reality, however, is that their collective research at Caracol in Belize has reaped immeasurable benefits for UCF students and the university's Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

The Maya were a fascinating people. Originating in the Yucatán by 1200 B.C., they once occupied a vast...
“All goes well. Amy got stung by a scorpion, but did not die tonight anyway. ... Structure A10: Investigations at the base of the structure have revealed a series of floors abutting and going under the stairs. The summit excavations have also revealed evidence of an earlier construction, including a ripped out structural pier. At this point, we still are not sure about the construction date(s) on the building.”

— Diane Chase’s journal entry
Wednesday, March 10, 1999

The Maya believed that caves served as entrances to the underworld. The Rio Vino cave entrance is located 20 miles north of Caracol.
geographic area in Central America. Their civilization extended to parts of what are now Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador, as well as most of Guatemala and Belize. From the third to the ninth century, Classic Maya civilization produced awe-inspiring temples and pyramids, highly accurate calendars, mathematics and hieroglyphic writing, and a complex social and political order. This great civilization collapsed quickly, however, leaving many questions for those who study its impressive remains.

For more than 20 years, the Chases have been focusing on gathering the evidence that will eventually yield answers to these questions. Since 1983, they’ve been directing the Caracol Archaeological Project (part of the certificate program in Maya Studies) as part of an international research partnership with the Belizean government and its Institute of Archaeology (IDA).

Diane Chase, project director and interim assistant vice president for International and Interdisciplinary Studies, describes the educational and research benefits of the project: “Caracol is important for understanding ancient Maya Civilization, and the investigations have an impact for us today in terms of sustainable agriculture, impact on enhanced group identity, and the development of urbanism in a non-western setting. But most of all, the work at Caracol reminds us of how fragile civilization can be and of the potential ways of doing things that are very different from our own.”

**AN INVALUABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

The work at Caracol involves students in the hands-on process and represents a rare opportunity for them to gain invaluable international research experience. According to Diane Chase, students learn specific content knowledge (archaeology, ancient Maya), but also critical thinking (they need to learn what to look for and how to make interpretations of the past using only material culture and communication skills (they must communicate with tourists, visitors and the Belizean crew). They learn different ways of looking at things, the value of teamwork and research by involvement in an actual research project,” she added. “Most people think about international education in terms of short-term study abroad or international exchange programs, but there are international research efforts like Caracol that involve students in learning by doing.”

The concept of “learning by doing” has produced positive results for both UCF and the Belizean government, as students have helped to enhance research both at the Caracol site and in the field of anthropology in general. Currently, two of the three associate directors of the IDA (Brian Woody and John Morris) graduated from UCF with bachelor’s degrees in anthropology. A third Belizean student, Melissa Badillo, is a junior anthropology major at UCF and the first recipient of the Judy Glick Memorial Scholarship. When she graduates, Badillo will be the only female member of the IDA with a bachelor’s degree.

**INSPIRED PROTÉGÉS**

Brian Woody, ’94, was born and raised in Belize. His lifelong interest in ancient civilizations brought the Chases’ work to his attention at an early age. As a 19-year-old staff member at the IDA (then known as the Department of Archaeology), he worked on getting permits for the Chases. Once inspired by their work, he decided to attend UCF and earn his degree in anthropology.

In 1999, he spent his first season in the field at Caracol, and it changed his life forever.

“The experience of excavating large structures and getting to work in the jungle with the Chases was incredible,” he said. “Most students never leave the classroom; it’s all books, lectures and films, so the Caracol project represents a unique opportunity.”

Today, Woody, who married Katie Pope, ’94, whom he met as a student at Caracol, helps manage all archaeological sites in Belize. He ensures that visitors have good experiences, and he helps to maintain pristine environments on the project sites. He credits UCF with giving him a broader perspective of his field that has enabled him to apply effective management skills. He also credits the Chases with helping make his childhood dreams become a reality.

“To many people archaeology is all glory and fun, but the reality is that it’s tough work,” he said. “The Chases offer..."
students the opportunity to see what archaeological field work is really like. Their guidance and inspiration is the best learning experience a student can get."

Melissa Badillo took field notes, washed and catalogued artifacts, and woke up every day to monkeys "sere- nading" her during her six-week program in Caracol. Working in the jungle was hard to get used to, but it gave her a greater appreciation for the work archaeologists do in general. When she graduates from UCF with a degree in anthropology (spring 2006), she will return home to Belize and apply her experiences in a positive way.

"I can say that I worked in Caracol, which for a Belizean is very prideful," she said. "The Chases taught me so much, and everyone in the field knew of their work at Caracol. Other archaeologists always mention them, so me having worked with them puts a notch in my belt."

Badillo has enjoyed her UCF experience, as well. Her anthropology classes are giving her a broad base of knowledge that she hopes to apply to her job with the IDA. She worked for the IDA before coming to Orlando and wants to return to their research department. Her role would include maintaining the Caracol site, as well as other archaeological sites.

"I want to contribute in as many ways as I can to the institute for both tourism and research," she said. "From a historical standpoint, it's very important, and I want to maintain the relationship I have with the Chases and the partnership they have with our government."

UCF TOUR OF BELIZE

On March 7 - 12, 2005, members of UCF's Board of Trustees, as well as faculty, staff and alumni, made the journey to Belize to see the Caracol project up close. Among those who bought tickets for the UCF Alumni Association travel program's first trip to Central America were UCF President John Hitt and his wife, Martha. Rick Lee, '85, president and CEO of Citizens Bank of Oviedo and former UCF trustee, also made the trip. He discovered the hardships of field work in a foreign country almost immediately, as he and Dr. Hitt had to push their passenger van at the Belize airport in order to initiate a jump-start. In spite of that initial inconvenience, Lee still raves about the trip.

"It was incredible. I've been all over the place, but this was one of the most wonderful trips I've ever been on," he said. "There's no way to describe what we saw, but suffice to say the partnership between UCF and the Belizean government is going very well."

Lee believes the reputation of UCF has been enhanced greatly due to the efforts of the Chases. What impressed him were the principles of independence and cooperation that the Chases have always embodied. "The Chases have always been willing to share their work and knowledge with others," he said. "Their dedication to preserving the cultural heritage of Belize is truly inspiring."
Graduate Certificate Program in Maya Studies

Want to learn more about the Maya? Consider earning a graduate certificate in Maya Studies at UCF.

The program focuses on the ancient and contemporary peoples of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, a topic of local, national and international concern. The program is interdisciplinary with related offerings in history, political science and Spanish. The program is further strengthened by a community partnership with the Orlando Museum of Art.

The Maya Studies Graduate Certificate Program provides detailed and specialized knowledge of the ancient and contemporary Maya through a series of five well-integrated courses. Admission into the graduate certificate program is granted through the Office of Graduate Studies.

Visit www.graduate.ucf.edu for details.

Enabling students to experience this site first-hand, and many of them are giving back to the field, and their communities, in many ways.

One can’t help but think that Melissa Basilio is one of these lucky students who will be “giving back” very soon. “When I go back to Belize, I will tell everybody to try the anthropology program at UCF because it’s so great,” she said. “It’s an experience that I will take with me for the rest of my life.”

Current Caracol Archaeological Project Investigations


1985 First full field season of the Caracol Archaeological Project: camp building started; cache found in Structure A6, the “Temple of the Wooden Lintel,” and two looted tombs with painted texts are investigated in Structure B20.

1986 Discovery of ballcourt marker (Altar 21) and tomb of a royal woman, dating to A.D.

Previous Investigations at Caracol

1937 Caracol rediscovered by Rosa Mal, a lumberman searching for mahogany trees. The ruins were named “Caracol,” Spanish for “shell,” in reference to the winding logging road that provides access to the site.

1938 A. H. Anderson (Archaeological Commissioner, Belize) initially visits Caracol and notes large number of carved monuments at the site; spends next decade attempting to get an archaeologist to work at the site.

MUCH WORK LEFT TO BE DONE

In A.D. 650, the urban area of Caracol had a radius of approximately 10 kilometers around the site’s epicenter. “It isn’t possible to completely excavate Caracol within a lifetime,” said Chase. “We’re uncovering parts of the city and focusing on answering specific research questions each year or set of years.”

And so there is much more work to be done, and many more students who will reap the benefits of hands-on field investigation work under the tutelage of the Caracol. The Chases plan to focus next on the Classic Maya Collapse (abandonment of major cities ca. 900 A.D. or before). They have an idea of where to excavate to find the data they need to move forward on this problem, and they want to set up distance learning directly from Caracol to allow students who can’t leave home to participate in the field experience.

Another interesting development has Caracol currently working with UCF biologists to develop research and educational opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and faculty. They hope to develop a tropical biology and archaeology combined study abroad experience as well as research opportunities for conservation biology faculty and students. Caracol is located within a nature preserve, so we would like to enhance facilities for joint use at the site,” she said. “This would be an interdisciplinary effort at UCF and a partnership with the Belize Institute of Archaeology.”

The possibilities are endless thanks to the strong partnerships nurtured and top-notch research conducted by the Chases over the years. It all adds up to benefits and opportunities for students, which in the end translates to a well-trained workforce for everyone.

“There represents an invaluable research project,” said Woodye. “The Chases have shaped many careers by...

1974. Is investigated at Caana. Two other intact tombs with painted dates are also excavated. 1987. Initiation of settlement research at Caracol; realization that there are tomb located throughout the site and not just in the epicenter. Extensive Caracol causeway system discovered. 1988. First season of southeast sector settlement research (sponsored by H. F. Goghemhe). Recognition that population increase and building boom directly follows Tikal and Naranjo wars. 1989. Second season of southeast sector settlement work. Majority of agricultural fields, housing and causeway termini prove to be post-war phenomena. Beginning of USAID and Government of Belize funding. Discovery that Caracol was extremely walled post A.D. 800. Recognition that final phase of Caana. Caracol's largest architectural complex, was constructed post-A.D. 800. 1990. Tomb in Structure AE7; numerous caches in Structures AE2 and E6 South Acropolis found to have a major Early Classic phase. 1991. Causeway system and the site of Caracol are discovered to be ca. 7 km radius. Jade mask and turtle found in a stone box cache in Structure AE6. Intact stucco stelae is found on an earlier building at Caana. Government of Belize declares whole of Caracol area a national park. 1992. Discovery of ruler's tomb in South Acropolis and royal tombs in the Central Acropolis. Government of Belize builds all-weather road into site. 1993. Investigations on Caana locate a royal tomb in Structure B20 and deeply buried ritual deposits in Structure B19. Hieroglyphic texts are found in non-elite contexts. 1994. First of two seasons of National Science Foundation research program geared at determining settlement density and dating in the NE sector of Caracol. 1995. Continuation of study of ancient settlement. No drop-off in settlement density is found in tessels mapped outside the epicenter for 6 km to the north and south. Mapping and reconnaissance indicate Caracol (the city) to have a radius of 10 kilometers. 1996. Mapping of the central 9-square-kilometer block of Caracol's settlement is completed. Investigations in front of Structure B34 in the Northwest Acropolis uncovered a Preclassic structure (dated to ca. 100 B.C.). 1997. Investigations focussed on Southeast sector residential groups with open/collapsed/looted tombs with primary support from FAMSI; mapping extended the core coverage to more than 16 square kilometers. 1998. Excavations focused on basal architecture associated with Structures A1, A3 and A8, as well as on a residential group 500 m north of the A Group. Mapping recorded the Retro and Cerro termini and their associated causeways. 1999. Excavations focused on axial trenching of the basal stairs of Structures A2 and A3. A residential group was investigated immediately north of the epicenter. Mapping concentrated on recording an east-west transect 6 kilometers north of the epicenter. The Caracol Site Museum opened in late March. 2000. Excavations focused on structures within the southwest walled area and one residential group immediately south of this area. Mapping concentrated on terraces in the Chiquisteria area. Belize's Tourist Development Project, under the direction of Belizean archaeologist Dr. Jaime Awe, began extensive "tourist-proofing" of Caracol's buildings. Front-page coverage in New York Times on Caracol as an "edge city." 2001. Excavations focused on the palace structures in Barrio and Caana in preparation for their final stabilization by the TDP. Extensive Terminal Classic trash deposits were recovered in the Barrio excavations. On Caana, Structure B19 was investigated at its summit and base, the rooms in the NW Quadrant were completely cleaned and recorded, and two elite tombs were found at the base of Structure B19. 2002. Excavations focused on Structures A13, B28 and F1; a deep plaza test was also dug in front of Structure B33. A new stela was found in front of Structure B28 and a new stucco stele was recovered in association with Structure B19. The content and drawings of two residential tombs, recovered by the TDP, were processed. 2003. Excavations focused on finding "attached specialists." Five smaller buildings adjacent to Caracol's South Acropolis were excavated. Four burials and intact garbage from a collapsed Protoclassic chultun were also recovered. Conjoined work was also done with the Belize Tourist Development Project as they began the stabilization of the buildings in the South Acropolis. 2004. Excavations continued to focus on attached specialists. Small structures immediately east of Barrio and west of Caana were excavated. These investigations recovered Terminal Classic one-of-a-kind building and three Early Classic interments. The Belize Tourism Development Project concluded work in January; last 10 miles of the road to Caracol were paved during the summer. 2005. Investigations focused on locating non-palace Terminal Classic occupation associated with small structures in the vicinity of the epicenter. Structure B59 proved to be a late vaulted building with interior stone piers. Structures B40, 42 and 44 yielded a series of tombs, burials and caches that spanned the Protoclassic to Terminal Classic Periods.

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