



AZA Supports Community Education in Guatemala

CEF CONSERVATION
ENDOWMENT
FUND

By Marta Curti

The Harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*) is one of the largest and most powerful raptors in the Americas. An imposing figure, it is three feet tall from tip to tail, boasts a seven-foot wingspan and has rear talons the size of grizzly bear claws. As a top predator, feeding mainly on arboreal animals, it helps maintain the ecological balance within the Neotropical forests in which it lives. Unfortunately, the Harpy eagle has been extirpated from much of its former range, in large part due to human persecution.

In the 1990s The Peregrine Fund (TPF) began a captive-breeding and release program for this species and in 2002 added an environmental education component to its conservation efforts in Panama, which would prove important in keeping many of the released eagles alive. Surveys conducted in local communities revealed that people were shooting these magnificent raptors mainly out of fear and curiosity, based, in large part, on myths such as the one that tells of Harpy eagles carrying off entire houses and eating everyone inside. Through our years-long educational program we were able to eradicate many negative human behaviors toward raptors in Panama.

But there was still much work to be done. When some of the captive-bred eagles released in Belize began to disperse into Guatemala, their presence was met with awe – “I can now die

happy” said one of the park biologists when he saw a Harpy eagle for the first time; and fear – as documented by the two eagles shot and killed in the country. It was clear that the conservation of this species could not succeed until we were successful at changing human attitudes and behavior wherever Harpy eagles are found. Thanks to a grant provided by AZA Conservation Endowment Fund, TPF conducted an environmental education program in fourteen key communities in Guatemala. We worked with adults and children alike, presenting colorful images of Harpy eagles and interesting information about their habitat, diet and behavior.

The highlight of our efforts was a teacher training workshop approved by the country’s Ministry of Education. For three days eighteen local teachers learned about the biology of raptors, how some migrate and why, about the food chain and about the importance of conserving this charismatic group of birds. Through these efforts we were able to dispel some of the negative myths and attitudes that surround raptors and replace them with factual information relevant to community members’ lives – the first, most important step in preventing direct human-caused raptor mortality.

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