

BELIZE EXPEDITION

The Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge: A Race for the Environment

Jeanette Salfeety carried Wings WorldQuest Flag #1, her camera, tripod, and other gear to Belize in March 2005 to make a documentary about an historic river, a cross-country canoe race, and the environmental issues along the route.

The occasion was the Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge, an event that draws professional racers, amateur paddlers, villagers, and nature lovers to the “still wild” Macal and Belize Old Rivers to pay tribute to the ancient route, view the unique wildlife and habitats, and raise funds for environmental improvements.



Jeanette Salfeety records the Belize River Challenge as a young helper proudly displays the Wings WorldQuest Flag #1.

Jeanette documented the people, places, and issues she encountered along the 170-mile, four-day, dawn-to-dusk River Challenge, which is now Belize's largest spectator sport event. Traveling on foot and by car and canoe to villages, jungle clearings, and camps, Jeanette shot footage that she hoped would encourage people to protect the river for future generations.

THE OLD BELIZE RIVER: AN HISTORIC TRADE ROUTE

Until the highway was built in the late 1940s, the Old Belize River was the only route available for trade to western Belize.

For the ancient Mayans, the river was the main artery for trade, transportation, recreation, and the waging of war.

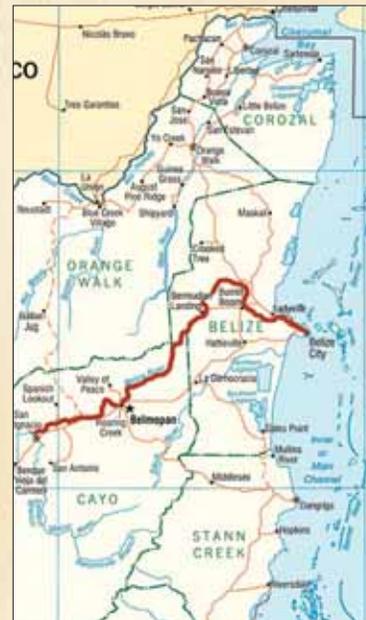
Traders plied these waters on teak rafts and in 10- to 40-foot canoes, which held up to a ton of cargo. Agricultural goods, obsidian, and jade from the interior were traded for shells, stingray spines, and fish bones from the coast. Fishermen in small dugout canoes, like the dories of today, fished the rivers.

In more recent times, the river was the lifeline for logging and for chicle traders. Tiny logging settlements sprang up on the riverbanks and still remain.

Today's race route begins in San Ignacio in the foothills of the Maya Mountains, passes through the Maya River Basin, and ends in Belize City on the Caribbean coast.

A RACE TO PROMOTE CULTURE AND CONSERVATION

The Race Committee works closely with the Belize Community Service Alliance, which is headed by Luis Garcia. The Alliance promotes environmental activities, such as reforestation along the riverbanks where erosion has occurred, as well as clean-up and anti-litter projects and environmental-ethics campaigns. Proceeds from the 2005 race have been donated to the Alliance, which has assigned these funds to build a sewage filtration system for the town of San Ignacio.



The Belize River route – from San Ignacio to Belize City in four days

Jeanette shot some video for her documentary in 2004, but decided in 2005 to focus on following a team associated with an environmental organization. She and her associate, Chris Rock, met several potential candidates in San Ignacio and chose Conservation Corridors, a British environmental monitoring group that was conducting a survey of the river's condition and health to benefit the Alliance.

VIDEOTAPING A FOUR-DAY ENDURANCE TEST

The first morning, Jeanette began by recording the pandemonium at the start of the race, as 88 canoes set off. For her next filming opportunity, she and Chris drove to a small riverside community, where a band kept everyone entertained with traditional drumming and singing while the villagers waited for the racers to arrive. She interviewed the locals and videotaped team supporters as they swam out to offer water and snacks to their race teams.

WHO

Jeanette Salfeety

WHAT

Film of longest canoe race in Central America

WHERE

Macal and Belize Old Rivers, Belize, Central America

WHY

To spread awareness of river history, culture, and environment



These activities went on for four days as Jeanette stayed on the move, filming wildlife, driving to access points along the river, talking to villagers, and videotaping, at times, from safety boats. At night, she and Chris joined the riverbank tent camps where there were friends, local musicians, food, and first aid for everything from blisters to damaged canoes. To help Conservation Corridors, Jeanette and Chris set up tents and supplied snacks for the exhausted teams.

THE RIVER EXPERIENCE IN BELIZE

The River Challenge canoeists saw landscape familiar to river runners of the past – tropical rainforests, pine forests, savannas, and mangroves.

Paddlers traveling at a leisurely pace could view Belize’s wildlife: tapirs (the national animal), black howler monkeys, iguanas, keel-billed toucans, silky anteaters, otters, margays, ocelots, fish, manatees, and dolphins. A profusion of orchids, bromeliads, butterflies, and birds added to the exotic mix, as did the adventure of passing tiny communities with evocative names such as Double Head Cabbage, Never Delay, Teakettle Village, and Meditation.



Some of the 88 teams on their way to Belize City in the 2005 Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge

EXPEDITION RESULTS

Conservation Corridors gathered data on the river for the Alliance – hourly GPS readings, average speeds, elevation, and photographs of bankside conditions

The teams observed a far greater number of fallen trees than expected, more deforestation, and more people. There were also more howler monkeys seen along the river, perhaps the result of greater inland deforestation. Conservation Corridors is sharing this data with the Alliance, which is seeking funds to continue its work

EXPEDITION PARTICIPANTS

Expedition Leader:

Jeanette Salfeety, Videographer, Producer, Director

Production Assistant, Camp Manager:

Chris Rock

Conservation Corridor Paddlers:

Rich and Lucy Wotton, Conservation Corridors co-founders (U.K.)
Ben Zong (France)
Kevin Armstrong (U.S.)
John O’Rabdown (U.K.)
Mitch Bakeman (Belize)

Belize Community Service Alliance:

Luis Garcia (Belize)

“The Ruta Maya Belize River Challenge is more than an athletic event – it is a celebration of the river.”

– Jeanette Salfeety

ADVICE ON FILMING IN A JUNGLE

- To avoid condensation on the lens, protect your camera from sudden changes in temperature.
- Carry a large waterproof bag with everything you might possibly need – tape, string, rope, batteries, paper clips, sponges, mosquito coils, scissors, bungee cords, nails, pens, candles, etc.

ABOUT JEANETTE SALFEETY

A native of Long Island, Jeanette has made over 40 trips to Belize since she first visited in 1986. For two years, she lived full-time in Belize, where she served as the U.S. Embassy’s warden for Ambergris Caye and founded the first international chapter of the Natural Guard, an environmental youth program.

Since returning to the States, she has produced dozens of video segments for television, cable, and feature film distributors, such as PBS and Nickelodeon, and she is Executive Producer of the Westport Youth Film Festival.



Luis Garcia, Jeanette Salfeety, and Rich Wotton of Conservation Corridors with the Wings flag