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UCSB Archaeologist Says Innovative Plan For Maya Research Site Is Making Major Strides

Excellent color slides of El Pilar available on request

The spectacular Maya temples of Mexico and Central America are among the most stunning relics of the world's past civilizations and are indicative of an ancient people sophisticated in religion, politics and science.

But for all their grandeur, such public edifices suggest little about the details of daily personal life.

It is precisely such details that University of California, Santa Barbara archaeologist Anabel Ford has been seeking in her effort to preserve, excavate and restore the El Pilar Maya site along the border of Belize and Guatemala.

And after years of planning, organizing and negotiating, her international team of scholars, government officials and indigenous people is on its way.

Ford will make a progress report on the El Pilar Program with a lecture and slide show from 5 to 9 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 25 in UCSB's Multicultural Center.

Potluck dining will precede the talk.

The public is encouraged to attend.

Ford's vision for El Pilar has differed from those represented in the excavation and reconstruction of ceremonial pyramids at sites such as Chichen Itza, Palenque and Tikal.

At El Pilar, she has focused on studying Maya domestic life: how and where did the Maya live and work.

"We don't need another Maya temple," said Ford, who serves as director of UCSB's MesoAmerican Research Center.

Instead, while El Pilar is believed to have been a metropolis and government center equal in size to the others, Ford and her team have begun their reconstructive efforts with a Maya house and garden.

"None of the other sites show that," she said. "No other site has a house as a feature."

The project, called the Tzunu'un House and Forest Garden, recreates the dwelling of a family of elite status.

The house, which opened to visitors June 24 after completion of the first stage of presentation,

features living, dormitory and kitchen areas, storage and a religious shrine surrounding a courtyard.

Work was also completed this summer on a path through the home's garden area.

A British volunteer youth group, Raleigh International, donated the labor.

Other projects included initiation of a major mapping program with Keith Clarke, a UCSB geography professor, and the construction of rest rooms for visitors. El Pilar hosted about 2,500 tourists this year.

On the organizational side of things, Ford was able to forge more bonds between the Belizean and Guatemalan people with agreements between area conservation and community development groups and was granted seed money from the United States Agency for International Development promote such unions.

But perhaps the biggest accomplishment from Ford's perspective was the setting in motion -- finally -- of

plans and agreements carefully put in place over the past two decades.

Last year, the governments of Belize and Guatemala agreed on a management plan and vision statement.

This year,

Ford's team began making it happen "We're actually bringing it all into action," Ford said.

Initial reviews from all involved parties are encouraging, Ford said.

"Reaction is universally excited and very positive," she said.

"They're saying, 'Let's keep the forward momentum.'"

Such momentum has Ford and her team planning to seek and map other ruin sites on more of the nearly 5,000 acres in the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna.

Excavation will continue in selected areas of the reserve.

"We'll be working on an example of a more common house, too," Ford said.

Collaboration with local community groups could be an economic boon to the indigenous peoples of the region, particularly in Belize and Guatemala. Ford's plan for the site, so long in negotiation, calls for local peoples to develop tourism and agricultural interests in the project.

Ultimately, the local community will be the custodians of the project and to that end must also be the beneficiaries of it, she said.

For Ford, work will go on raising funds for the project.

Several million of dollars will be required to complete the effort over the next five years, she said.

"We're always strapped financially," she said. "It's a very entrepreneurial project and it is expanding."

Donations are always welcome.

About UC Santa Barbara

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