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PRESS RELEASE

Belize Launches National Action Plan to Strengthen Protection and Recovery of the Critically Endangered Hicatee

Belmopan, August 26, 2026.

The Government of Belize (GOB), through the Ministry of Blue Economy and Marine Conservation (MBEMC) and the Belize Fisheries Department (BFiD), officially launched the Hicatee Conservation and Action Plan 2026–2031 during day four of the Belize Climate Week, establishing a coordinated national framework for the long-term conservation and recovery of one of the world's most endangered freshwater turtles.

The Plan focuses on the conservation, management, and protection of the Central American River Turtle (*Dermatemys mawii*), known locally as the Hicatee or Tortuga Blanca. The species is classified as Critically Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and is recognized as one of the twenty-five most endangered turtle species in the world.

Developed through a collaborative process involving the BFiD, the Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education (BFREE), the Turtle Survival Alliance, Zoo New England, and other key stakeholders, the Plan provides a roadmap for ensuring viable, self-sustaining Hicatee populations throughout Belize.

The 2026–2031 Plan establishes eight conservation goals supported by 58 actions, addressing key priorities including stronger enforcement and regulatory frameworks; public awareness; habitat protection and restoration; population research and monitoring; captive management and reintroduction; and greater community participation in the conservation and sustainable management of the species.

Among the principal threats identified are illegal and unsustainable harvesting, habitat loss and degradation, riparian deforestation, wetland drainage, and pollution of aquatic ecosystems. Addressing these pressures will require coordinated action across Government, conservation organizations, researchers, and communities.

The GOB has formally endorsed the Plan and, through the MBEMC and the BFiD, has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting implementation through inter-agency coordination, policy alignment, technical support, and the mobilization of national and international resources.

The launch of the Hicatee Conservation and Action Plan 2026–2031 represents an important step in Belize’s continued efforts to protect its biodiversity while strengthening the ecosystems and communities that depend upon healthy freshwater resources.

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