



*Pilot Projects founder and director Scott Francisco with a pucte wood plank in Guatemala, 2012*

## THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

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### Mapping 100 years in the forests of Uaxactún

April Greene — February 17, 2015

We hope you've become acquainted with the [Brooklyn Bridge Forest](#) (BBF) project since its start in 2008.

In a nutshell (perhaps in this case the nut of a Latin American [breadnut tree](#)), the iconic boardwalk of the Brooklyn Bridge is made from tropical hardwood—beautiful, durable wood that, unfortunately, has a history of unsustainable sourcing that leads to forest destruction.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

The BBF project proposes to take the exact opposite tack: to harvest tropical wood ethically and sustainably from the Uaxactún rainforest in Guatemala using a community stewardship model. This new model will use revenue from the boardwalk replacement process to protect an ancient forest and provide a local community with lasting, essential forest resources, while still ensuring that this mighty bridge is continually outfitted with safe, top-grade hardwood.

Pilot Projects last visited the Uaxactún rainforest in 2012, and we couldn't be more pleased to be heading there again in a couple of weeks. Our ten-day trip will kick off with a community festival featuring a game of Mayan football and a communal dinner on the central plaza—which is an [abandoned airstrip](#) in the middle of a lush forest. Families and local officials alike will be there to learn about the project, share their visions for the future of the community, and discuss how the BBF can help their area thrive.

This time, we're also very fortunate to have four interns from the [Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy](#)—along with Dr. Jeremy Radachowsky of the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) and Dr. Sarah Jane Wilson of [International Forest Resources and Institutions](#) (IFRI) at the University of Michigan—joining us to help with everything from interviewing local Mestizo people to [banding trees](#) (to determine their age) to the trekking and Mayan ruin-ogling that define and enrich any trip to this part of the world.



Top: Jeremy gets a forest-growth update tour in 2012  
Bottom: The Uaxactun community sawmill that will cut the planks for BBF

But among so many great opportunities and assignments, we're most excited about our design role in creating a groundbreaking timeline that documents the history of forest clearing, conservation, and use in Guatemala. We'll be culling interviews and research going back over 50 years.

The timeline will also compare forest conservation and community involvement across a spectrum of different forest management models: strict preservation (no human usage); community stewardship and low-level extraction; and private land ownership.

We know now that strict preservation is not working. Strict controls prevent local people from reaping the benefits of the land they've lived on for over 100 years, leading to unsustainable poaching and illegal extraction (both of which are all too common in vast "preserved" forest areas). Conservation happens on private land, but too often, more lucrative cattle ranching wins out, and forests are felled and burned for this low-productivity practice. Community-based management has the best track record so far, conserving forests more effectively than strict preservation while encouraging people to pursue a sustained, meaningful livelihood.

Our timeline will show—in a compelling, graphic presentation—how community conservation efforts have preserved forests and traditional use practices, and sustained the local population—even in the face of political unrest and ever-shifting global markets for forest products—over the past 25-plus years. We can't wait to see how it will look, what it will be able to teach us and others, and how it might inform the BBF project going forward.

Better get to packing our camping supplies! We look forward to sending updates from the road—er, the forest floor.

Tags: [brooklyn bridge forest](#), [wildlife conservation society](#), [mcgill university](#), [sustainability](#)

Back to **THE**SANDBOX

