A team of archaeologists and anthropologists at Indiana University are making important contributions to knowledge about the Maya civilization. The Maya, who occupied major portions of Central America and southern Mexico, flourished for hundreds of years, reaching the peak of their development between 250-900 A.D. Yet there were smaller Maya communities that persisted much longer, well into the 16th century around the time of the Spanish Conquest. Such a community is Chau Hiix, about 25 miles north-west of Belize City, which IU archaeologist K. Anne Pyburn and her team have been excavating over the past seven years.

In 1990, Pyburn had already been working for a number of years at various Maya sites in Belize. Friends from the local village where her husband, IUB anthropologist Richard Wilk, was conducting ethnographic work, asked if they would like to visit some Maya mounds located deep in the rainforest alongside a maze of lagoons. Dreading to find yet another looted and plundered Maya city, they were instead astonished to find a site one kilometer wide by 12 kilometers long with hundreds of structures, including some 20 monumental buildings in a central area, the highest over 70 feet tall, all of which appeared undisturbed by human activity for the past 500 years. "When we finally left," she later wrote, "we did not feel as if we had visited an archaeological site; we felt that we had visited an abandoned but very real place, somehow still alive after hundreds of years of solitude." Pyburn named the site Chau Hiix (pronounced “chow heesh”), the word for jaguarundi in Kekchi, a Maya language spoken in Belize, after seeing one of these rare wildcats peering out at them from the jungle.

With major support from a National Science Foundation grant and permission from Belize’s Department of Archaeology, Pyburn established a field school at the site. Over the past few years, she has been excavating Chau Hiix with different teams of university students, and working with the local villagers. This past summer’s team, including 10 undergraduate students enrolled through IU’s Overseas Study program, made some exciting new discoveries, finding two well-preserved tombs under the floors of one of the main structures, dating to around 1,000 A.D. These contained skeletons and a variety of artifacts, some made from non-local jade and obsidian, indicative of trade in manufactured items. Not only do these burial sites attest to considerable wealth under local control, but this wealth is surprising for being so late in Maya civilization.

Just as important, Pyburn thinks she has found evidence of an extensive canal and dam system of irrigation, indicating that the Maya of Chau Hiix could have had the capacity for year-round harvests and thus been able to support a larger population whose wealth was increased through trade. Her IU colleague, Della Cook, who also was on
education, examined the alternative perspectives of maps.

Ambassador Ralph Earle, deputy director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, introduced the third global issue by leading a discussion on conflict management at the level of arms treaty negotiations. Translating theory into practice, Dudley Weeks, director of the Partnership LifeSkills Center and two-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, guided the group through numerous scenarios of conflicts and their cooperative resolutions. He also made clear the relationship between conflict resolution at the level of individuals and at the level of nations. Speakers from other world areas described the ongoing conflicts between Tibet and the Peoples’ Republic of China, and between Chechenia and Russia. The video, Talking Peace (1995), with Jimmy Carter, stimulated a thoughtful discussion of the action which participants could take to contribute toward global solutions.

For their part, participants created three lesson plans, for which they could receive graduate credit. These plans were to reflect some aspect of each global issue, and show how international materials and concepts could be integrated into the standard curricula. These lesson plans will eventually be published so that a wider audience can benefit from them.

More general activities included an Internet tutorial on international resources and Web sites, a joint area studies workshop offering the teachers various outreach resources, a interactive video link with teachers in Soweto, South Africa, and an international college and career opportunities panel to guide them in counseling their students.

Each area studies center hosted a culture night of music, food, and customs, attended by many of the campus’s international community. In the dormitory, international feature and short films were available for participants to choose from and discuss.

The teachers who attended the institute were wonderfully diverse. Two were from abroad, one a headmistress at the American International School in Bangkok, Thailand, and the other a teacher of French and English at the Gymnasium for Global Education in St. Petersburg, Russia. From Indiana were secondary school teachers teaching every kind of subject—world civilizations, world religions, sociology, Latin America, Russia, China, English, Spanish, and mathematics.

Another institute for teachers and one for high school students is scheduled for July, 1998. There are plans to include an overseas field trip. For further information, contact the International Studies Institute, 201 N. Indiana Avenue, IU Bloomington; Tel: (812) 855-0756; fax: (812) 855-6271; Web site: http://www.indiana.edu/~global/

—Deborah Hutton, Coordinator

BELIZE from p. 1

the recent dig, concurs with that finding.

Pyburn has always been interested in the rise of class formation and economic relationships in Maya societies. But unlike other Maya scholars who have focused on the larger well-known sites where the politically powerful ruled, she has preferred to work in the smaller cities and communities, seeking evidence of political and economic changes in the lives of everyday folk. The recent skeletal and artifact evidence provided by the two tombs point to a shift of power away from the inheritance of land to one based on other sources of power, such as manufacturing and trade. Her reconstruction could eventually lead, she hopes, to an explanation of why some Maya communities collapsed while others continued to thrive long past the 10th century.

Pyburn’s work at Chau Hiix also enables her to put into actual practice an ethical dimension of archaeological work that she strongly believes in. Beyond merely contributing to scientific inquiry, she sees the need to have her work bring meaning as well as tangible benefits to the community in which her work takes place, so that they have a real interest and a stake in the project. Their vision of “community-oriented archaeology” led Pyburn and Wilk, in 1992, to found the Center for Archaeology in the Public Interest, which publishes a journal, Public Archaeology Review, dedicated to promoting this archaeological ethic.

They realized that their good fortune in finding Chau Hiix was due to the trust they had been able to build among the nearby local community members, a non-Maya people who had lived in the area for more than 300 years, had known of the Maya site, but had protected it from the outside world. Today the site is being worked, maintained, and preserved by members of that community, Crooked Tree, under Pyburn’s direction. Any museum-quality artifacts found at Chau Hiix will remain in Belize as property of the country’s Department of Archaeology.

Pyburn’s long-range vision is to reconstruct and preserve Chau Hiix as an archaeological park which will provide educational and cultural programs for the community, be a source of national pride for the country, attract outside visitors, and sustain the local economy through tourism. “If it should come true, the villagers will be rewarded for their selflessness and vigilance,” she says.

—RMN