

A new kind of Ford tough

UCSB anthropologist Anabel Ford receives \$289,806 grant from National Science Foundation

By **BRIAN MACKLEY**
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Dr. Anabel Ford, a UCSB research anthropologist, has received nearly \$300,000 from the National Science Foundation to conduct comprehensive work at the ancient Maya city of El Pilar.

UCSB recently announced the grant for Dr. Ford, the director of the university's MesoAmerican Research Center.

Recognized for her discovery of the ancient Maya city center of El Pilar in 1983, Dr. Ford has since spent her career documenting and preserving the ancient site. The city is located between the dense tropical forests in Belize and Guatemala.

The new grant will allow a team of archaeologists, botanists, geographers, palynologists and soil scientists led by Dr. Ford to research how the Maya created dense settlements in the tropical forest between Belize and Guatemala.

"We are asking what geographic characteristics are influencing ancient Maya settlements," Dr. Ford said in a recent statement. "To ask this question, we need to have a settlement survey for archaeology, soil for fertility, vegetation for the environment, topography for the landscape base and the modeling for geography.

"This grant will bring into our comparative data a soil study by soil scientists and vegetation and pollen analysis by botanists from EcoSur Mexico," she continued. "They work in the Maya Forest and will bring in new and challenging perspectives on the settlement and environmental issues."

Along with researching how the Maya operated under the dense tropical forest, the grant will also allow Dr. Ford and her team to finish mapping El Pilar Archaeological Reserve for Maya Flora and Fauna that covers 5,000 acres.

Dr. Ford told the News-Press about her past work examining the ancient Maya farming system known as the milpas system, which is "a carefully managed cycle of land clearing

and crop-tree rotation that is completed with the land returning to forest."

Before her research at El Pilar, it was believed the Maya disappeared as a result of overpopulation and environmental degradation. However, through her past research studying the milpas system, Dr. Ford has demonstrated the Maya were actually skilled managers of the forest.

"Ecological imperialism has been the de facto judge and the view has impacted how to look at the landscape if you are looking for arable land that is plowable — and the Maya did not use a plow!" Dr. Ford said in a statement.

Although she is recognized as the person who discovered El Pilar, Dr. Ford said in her eyes she "encountered" the monuments.

"The name El Pilar was on maps that I found even without mention to the plazas and temples, and like Columbus 'discovering' America, it was always there — I just helped to give it value in the archeological world," Dr. Ford said. "That is another reason I use the word 'monument,' not 'ruins.' It commands respect, and gives the local community agency and values their observations and experience at El Pilar."

In addition to learning more about the ancient Maya, Dr. Ford told the News-Press her work will bring together a network of professionals, students and volunteers from the U.S., Belize, Guatemala and Mexico as well as feature an outreach component that helps teach children about the sustainability practices of the Maya forest gardeners.

Dr. Ford added that the COVID-19 pandemic has created new hurdles for research. She said although it isn't practical to do most field work right now, her team is still very much working and for the time being will focus on the modeling component of the research.

"Maybe there is something that we can learn from this project," Dr. Ford said. "Taking lessons from the past to promote a better future."

email: bmackley@newspress.com



COURTESY PHOTOS

Dr. Anabel Ford, research anthropologist and director of the UCSB MesoAmerican Research Center, has dedicated her career to documenting and preserving the ancient Maya city of El Pilar. Recently, a new grant award by the National Science Foundation will allow Ford and her team to conduct research into how the Maya built their ancient settlements.



At left, Dr. Ford and her research team gather in El Pilar, which is between the dense tropical forests in Belize and Guatemala. At right, the research team includes students and volunteers.