

Tarantulas

Should be preserved
Not chopped up with a machete

Tarantulas in Mesoamerica

When local people in villages see a tarantula their natural instinct is to smash it with a shovel or piece of wood. Or hit the unfortunate spider with a machete.

We (at FLAAR) try to help the local people understand that the tarantulas are not normally aggressive. The tarantulas, if they bite at all, it is to protect themselves and their nest area.

The best way we have learned to show that tarantulas should not be slaughtered is to put our hand on the ground, in front of a tarantula. If the tarantula rears up in a defensive or offensive posture, we withdraw slowly. But 90% of the tarantulas simply stay where they are, and in a minute or so come forward and stick out their front legs to test my fingers.



Tarantulas in Mesoamerica

Once the tarantula feels that my fingers are not dangerous, the tarantula crawls up onto my open hand.

After feeling secure on my hand, the tarantula then crawls up my arm and sits on my shoulder.

If he then tries to crawl down my back (but inside my shirt), I ask an assistant to gently remove the tarantula and put him back on the ground.

During all this we speak with the local people to explain to them that the tarantula is not dangerous (if you respect the right of the tarantula to live in peace and quiet).

We suggest that you not encourage tarantulas to run up and down your arms, since they may fall off and hurt themselves. But it is essential that local people understand that the tarantulas do not bite, sting, or attack unless they are pestered or prodded by people.

Plus, in general, wild creatures should be left alone in their natural environment.

We realize that many people keep tarantulas as pets. We are neutral on this, but prefer that the tarantulas stay outside in their complete natural habitat.



Local people are convinced the tarantula is venomous

The local people consistently tell us that the tarantula is venomous and thus should be smashed with a piece of firewood or stick (or machete). We wish to explain that having venom and using that venom on a child or adult often depends on whether the tarantula feels threatened.

But the same local villagers also tell us that snapping turtles are venomous. We have found people in the villages smashing snapping turtles with heavy wooden poles (in the creeks that flow near most Mayan villages in Guatemala). We explain to them that the turtles are just trying to protect themselves, and that the bite gets infected from the foul water or the lack of medical treatment of the bite.

In all these cases we explain, often with a Mayan language translator who accompanies us, that the turtles (or spider) is simply trying to defend itself when the children try to poke it with sticks or zap it with a slingshot projectile.



This is a turtle we found partially butchered by a local person. We are working to inform people of animal rights for all species.



In other words, if the kids could be taught not to pester the turtles or tarantulas (or snakes or other creatures) then these creatures would (normally) not bite them.

Same with scorpions; twice I have had scorpions on my body while asleep. Once the scorpion was resting on my foot in the bed.

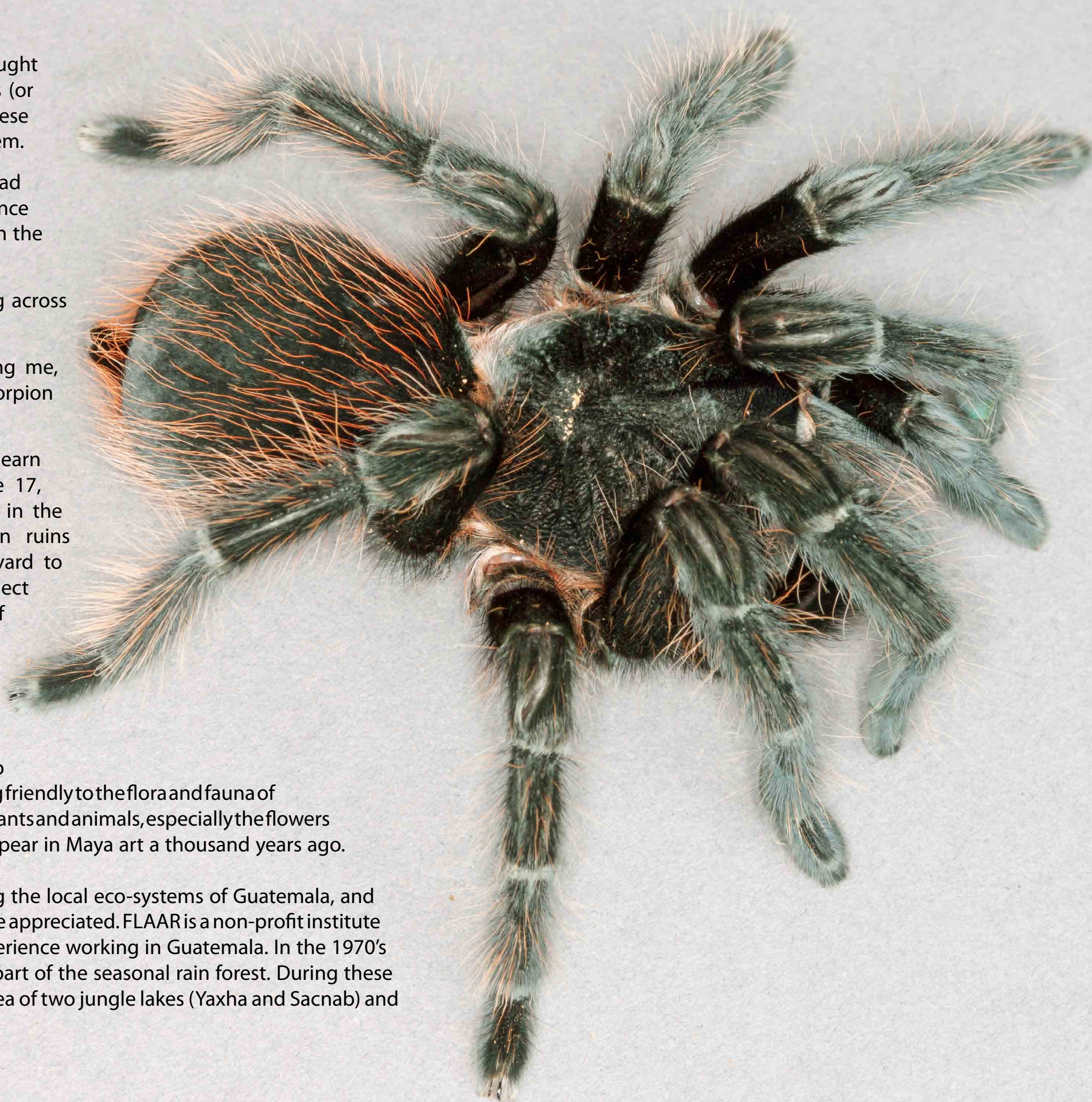
Another time the scorpion was hiking across my stomach.

In neither case did the scorpion sting me, because I did not try to attack the scorpion myself.

I first came to Mexico at age 16, to learn Spanish. I was in Guatemala by age 17, and by age 19 spent an entire year in the rain forests surrounding the Mayan ruins of Tikal. I took a year off from Harvard to work on an archaeological project there, organized by the University of Pennsylvania. I have been returning to Guatemala ever since, even when living elsewhere in the world.

We have a long range program to prepare children's cartoon characters to help educate local kids, to suggest being friendly to the flora and fauna of their areas. Our main projects are with plants and animals, especially the flowers and the birds and mammals which appear in Maya art a thousand years ago.

Funding for our interests in preserving the local eco-systems of Guatemala, and especially in public education, would be appreciated. FLAAR is a non-profit institute in the USA with many decades of experience working in Guatemala. In the 1970's we worked for five years in a remote part of the seasonal rain forest. During these years we were able to save an entire area of two jungle lakes (Yaxha and Sacnab) and have it declared a national park.



We are also working on a long-range program to help local people understand the 2000 years of flora and fauna in the sacred history of the Mayan civilization. We research all the plants and animals mentioned in the Mayan book of the Popol Vuh (the original manuscript is in the Newberry Library, Chicago).

Our work can be seen on:

www.maya-ethnobotany.org

www.maya-ethnozoology.org

www.digital-photography.org

Contact: FrontDesk@FLAAR.org







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Photographs by Nicholas M. Hellmuth