

portrait

Rafael Morales Fernandez, 1919–2003

We of the University of Pennsylvania Museum's Tikal Project are saddened to hear of the passing of an old friend and colleague, Rafael Morales, who died on May 29, 2003.

Rafa became the first director of the Tikal National Park in 1959 and served in that capacity until 1969, when he became director of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Guatemala City. As park director, he instituted policies for the protection of the natural environment and the ancient ruins. Under his direction, the huge park was mapped — an accomplishment that allowed Museum archaeologists to expand the map of the ruins and discover the limits of the city and its defensive moat. He was also the instigator and director of Operación Rescate, or Operation Rescue, which saved many fine examples of Maya monuments and pottery during the worst period of archaeological looting in the Petén. Many of these pieces are now on display in the National Museum. Rafa also facilitated the ongoing alliance between the Institute of Anthropology and History and the Asociación Tikal, a private organization that has helped to fund many National Museum projects. After the 1976 earthquake, Rafa became the first director of Prehispanic Monuments at the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala.



Tikal Project member
Rafael Morales,
first director of the
Tikal National Park,
April 21, 1961

Rafa was born in Santa Cruz, Alta Verapaz, on October 27, 1919. As a child he lived with his grandmother in Coban before being sent to Guatemala City for his education. As a young man, he went to manage his father's farm in the Petén, where Tikal is located. When the Tikal park directorship was established, he was the only person willing to live in the jungle, which he had grown to love.

At Tikal Rafa met Vivian Broman, who had already excavated for three seasons at the site, and in July 1960 they were married. At Tikal and in their house in Guatemala City, Vivian and Rafa raised a son, Peter (now of Minneapolis) and a daughter, Cecelia (now of Monterrey, Mexico). For decades Vivian and Rafa have opened their homes to hundreds of Mayanists, from Penn and other institutions around the world.

Rafa was a quiet man of dignity and warmth who loved to talk through the night with us around a jungle campfire. His calm and erudite vision of what the ruins at Tikal might become has contributed enormously to the World Heritage site that exists today.

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