

August 12, 2001

Abandon Chalillo: A statement by the Belize Ecotourism Association

We, of the Belize Ecotourism Association, express our support and encouragement for the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System Project recently inaugurated. This, as well as other treaties of recent years that recognize and protect the biological corridors and natural resources vital to the environmental health of the entire region, if upheld, will be instrumental in assuring a sustainable future for Belize, as well as our neighboring countries.

While the region, and Belize, in particular, has the largest area of undisturbed forest remaining north of the Amazon, it is being threatened on every side by human impact and development. As the one industry that relies most critically on the delicate balance of both conservation and development, ecotourism is now facing numerous challenges. It is hardly necessary to point out that while neighboring countries have suffered serious environmental degradation in recent years, they have also arrived at solutions to some of the challenges that we now face in Belize. So, we look to our neighbors to learn from their successes and failures, so that we may hopefully duplicate their successes and eliminate the possibilities of their costly failures from our own experience.

With that in mind, the Belize Ecotourism Association's board of directors and members would like to formally address the controversial Chalillo Dam Project.

The World Commission on Dams has issued a report that has brought international attention to the numerous downfalls of dams, pointing out that the mitigation factors have been largely

unsuccessful. Nor do dams provide flood control, in reality increasing the devastation, as did the Patuca Dam in neighboring Honduras. We are deeply concerned that Fortis and BEL are misleading the public and our Government with their claims of the benefits of Chalillo. With serious consideration, and using all of the information and resources at our disposal, we have come to the following conclusions:

There is insufficient data available to determine that the Chalillo Dam would be able to perform as projected. Given the inaccurate projections of the Mollejon Hydroelectric Project by the same consultants, we do not have confidence that the Chalillo Project will succeed in providing the additional power. A proposed third dam at Vaca Falls and the accompanying roads and infrastructure would further jeopardize the increasingly valuable ecotourism potential of the entire area.

Even if the dam is constructed within budget and performs as projected, there is not enough information or evidence available to prove it is economically feasible or that it is a wise choice for development of the nation's energy potential.

Furthermore, it is still unknown what cultural, geological or biological features found only in this area would be inundated and lost forever for a limited supply of power available for a few decades at best. The value of these irreplaceable resources to both our nation and the ecotourism industry is significant. It is a tremendous stretch of the truth for Fortis to say that Chalillo

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would use a "renewable resource." We consider it criminal to burden our developing country with debt and high infrastructure costs without having carefully considered every loss and every alternative.

To date, a study of other options for energy sources has not been produced, some of which may turn out to be more economical and sustainable. Especially promising is the discovery of crude oil here in Belize, which is already providing low-cost power in other areas of Central America. The power shortages in the United States may also launch a new wave of technology that may prove more cost effective, without the destruction of our environment.

If the previous concerns were adequately addressed, there is still insufficient data regarding the long-range environmental impacts of the project, including the loss of one of the richest and most important wildlife habitats remaining in all of Central America. This habitat is as crucial to the health of our terrestrial wildlife populations as the reef is to our marine life. It goes without saying that no consideration would ever be given to destruction of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef for the purpose of generating power. Water quality, stream flow down river, fragmentation of wildlife corridors,

deforestation in watershed areas, erosion and potential damage to the reef and many other issues have not been properly studied or evaluated. It is the law of our nation that a thorough, independent Environmental Impact Assessment is mandatory prior to any development of this nature.

With today's environmental research and hindsight, dams are no longer being constructed in most industrialized nations around the world, despite their increasing energy needs. Many dams were found to be not economically viable. They were also found to be detrimental, because of the emission of "greenhouse gases," conducive to the increase of disease in tropical countries, and a wasteful use of precious freshwater resources.

Dams change the chemical, physical, and biological processes of river ecosystems. They degrade free-flowing systems by altering river levels, blocking the flow of nutrients, changing water temperature and oxygen levels, and impeding or preventing fish and wildlife migration. Many dams constructed without knowing their full consequences are now being decommissioned and removed, at great expense to taxpayers. Belize cannot afford to risk such consequences.

For the above stated reasons, and still

others left unsaid, the Belize Ecotourism Association cannot support the Chalillo Dam Project. We urge Fortis and Belize Electricity Limited to abandon this proposal and pursue other options to provide for the nation's energy needs that are both economically and environmentally sustainable. We urge our representatives and the Government of Belize to prevent further expenditure of our time, energy and resources on this project, and move in a new direction that includes Belize in the regional grid, using genuinely renewable resources and providing low-cost, long-term solutions to our energy needs.

This position is submitted by the Belize Ecotourism Association Board of Directors, and was approved by a majority of our members on June 21, 2001.