

# IDEAS takes a look at Chalillo

by Adele Ramos

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The February 2002 edition of the newsletter *IDEAS*, produced by the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR), features the 4 P's of the proposed Chalillo project: politics, privatization, preservation and power.

In its cover story, "*The Chalillo*," SPEAR highlights 5 critical concerns: (i) that crucial national policies (such as Belize's energy policy) need to be properly articulated; (ii) that there is the need for public consultation that moves beyond the slavish fidelity to "the plan" and allows for inputs for change; (iii) that authorities need to develop the willingness to monitor public utilities in the best interest of Belize; (iv) that there is a need for independent assessment of

national development projects (regardless of governmental or private aspirations); (v) and that the Chalillo is representative of the peace-meal approach to development that Belize's political leaders have unapologetically embraced.

Contributor, Dawn Sampson, BECOL/BEL public relations officer, gave her views on "*Why Belize needs Chalillo*." Sampson said that Belize presently demands 280 GWh, of which Mexico supplies 48%.

*"By the time the Chalillo project is completed, the demand will be in excess of 325 GWh.*

*"When it comes on stream, Chalillo will reduce dependence on imported sources of energy from about 48% to 23%, and the energy it will produce is the least cost option."*

But Sampson also noted that a price reduction to customers cannot be guaranteed, because energy imports and diesel generation would still make up 37% of the energy supply mix, and prices from the two vary in tandem with the cost of oil and gas.

In her rebuttal, "*Why Belize does not need Chalillo*," Sharon Matola of Belize Alliance of Conservation NGO's (BACONGO) and the Belize Zoo, said that the project would have a number of negative impacts, including lowering the quality of water used for bathing, drinking and fishing; flooding of an area that holds Mayan ruins, un-looted and undocumented, which may reveal information on the Mayas who inhabited the area 1,000 or more years ago; loss of biodiversity; and potential structural problems.

For his part, Senator Barry Bowen, in the feature titled, "*Belizean Rights*," maintained that Belize has only one constant source of energy: rivers. Bowen wrote that the three dams – Mollejón, Chalillo and Vaca – would utilize the only river capable of producing a significant amount of energy.

*"Belizean river water is free and it is the right of all Belizeans to use it as is needed. The efficiency of hydropower is obvious as is demonstrated by its being used on every continent of the world and the numerous projects being built at this moment,"* Bowen stated.

The project — the subject of much controversy in the past over whether it will be to Belize's benefit or detriment — has been in the press lately because of allegations that the country's environmental laws are already not being adhered to in the project's early stage.

The National Environmental Appraisal Committee (NEAC) granted conditional approval last November, however, since the Environmental Compliance Plan has been awaiting finalization, no works were to have been started in the area.

Candy Gonzalez of the Belize Institute of Environmental Law and Policy, in her piece, "*Laws are made to be followed*," noted that, "*a site visit on January 15, 2002, confirmed they had already begun cutting lines and beginning other activities.*"

Gonzalez said that a vote was called for on November 9, despite the lack of very important information, the lack of public hearings and the fact that serious gaps remain.

The February issue of *IDEAS* presents a wide discourse on the Chalillo issue. For its next issue, May 2002, SPEAR is calling for submissions on the theme, "*The Economic State of Belize*." Possible areas of focus include privatization, the national debt, and the economy and crime.

Submissions should be made by Wednesday, April 10, 2002, to P. O. Box 1766, or 5638 Gentle Avenue, Belize City, Belize.