

Sunday, September 2, 2001

AMANDALABELize

Meb Cutlack on Chalillo

August 30, 2001

Dear Editor,

This is in answer to your request for debate on the Chalillo issue. If the Chalillo dam were just about the price of electricity, it would still fail to be the answer to Belize's electricity problems in the future. The truth is that Chalillo is about much more. It is about the almost unstoppable powers of finance and big business to dictate - out of personal greed, and only sometimes, ignorance - courses of action which will directly affect the population of the country without regard for the betterment of the people - but with total concern for profit for the few.

When Mollejon, the first dam, was built, all the experts (local and foreign) warned that the dam would not perform as its sponsors insisted. The dam still went ahead. The construction of Mollejon meant an immediate rise in the cost of electricity for all Belizeans and ONLY the purchase of cheap Mexican electricity has stopped a further increase. The sponsors of the Chalillo dam insist that the second dam will enable Mollejon to produce the power that was promised initially. There is

absolutely NO PROOF of such a result, because not only does the Macal River become an almost dry creek in the dry season, but BEL itself obviously has grave doubts about the truth of its claims; it is already talking about the need of a third dam at Vaca.

It is not my intention here to go into the more sensible power alternative of using our declining sugar industry to assist in future power needs, which would not only provide cheap power but also reinvigorate the North of Belize - unhappily never a major concern of Belize City politicians or businessmen. There is also the alternative prospect of many years of virtually free power from a chip generator at Augustine in the Pine Ridge to take advantage of the now dead Pine Ridge Forest. These are separate arguments.

What I would like to point out is that, whether it is our personal preference or not, tourism, and particularly eco-tourism, is currently our largest single Balance of Payments earner. It is also potentially our best, if not only, major foreign currency earner for the future. The financial powers in both public and private sector have, to my mind, a very

cavalier attitude towards the destruction of the base of this industry, which will result from building the Chalillo dam.

I would also like to point out that following the privatization and sale to majority foreign ownership of all Belize's previously locally-owned utilities (electricity, telephone, water and sewerage), these bills must now be paid in U.S. dollars. The present shaky state of the Belize dollar, and even the unlikely prospect of devaluation, or parity with the US dollar, would mean electricity rates would have to go up no matter how well Chalillo performed. Power from bio-energy from our sugar cane waste would not only provide jobs for Belizeans, but also enable part payment of our electricity in Belize dollars.

Finally, anyone doubting the seriousness of the inevitable erosion of our eco-tourism base from the building of Chalillo might like to look through this section of the report delivered this week to Fortis & BEL from the British Natural History Museum: "We predict that the resulting static water body and profound alteration to the highly

(Please turn to page 35)

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(Continued from page 4)

seasonal river flow regime from the proposed development will negatively impact wildlife by the potential loss of 70-80% of riparian shrubland habitat, critical for local populations of Baird's Tapir and the Scarlet Macaw during the dry season.

· Similarly a loss of 20-22% of habitat for Baird's Tapir, Morelet's Crocodile and Scarlet Macaw during the wet season.

· Imposition of a dispersal barrier that may seriously curtail national and regional links among populations, fragmenting the remaining habitat and thereby reducing genetic exchange.

· Probable changes to the ecological function of the river ecosystem by modifying water quality and flow patterns downstream and replacing a dynamic, rapidly fluctuating, highly oxygenated water body with a larger and near-static water body.

Alteration of turbidity and sedimentation levels to which downstream species and ecosystems are adapted.

· Effects of road construction, human settlement and expansion associated with the dam and reservoir, which will have a significant negative overall impact on wildlife populations throughout the region."

The British Natural History Museum report continues: "For these reasons, the project is likely to cause significant and irreversible reduction of biological

diversity, initially at the population level but later potentially at the species level, some of the species affected being of international importance.

· Fragmentation of the proposed Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.

· Rapid reduction in the already endangered population of the Scarlet Macaw subspecies (*Ara macao cyanoptera*), leading to possible extirpation of the species from Belize.

Reduction in the numbers of migratory birds from the United States and Canada over-wintering in the area or feeding temporarily en route to South America.

· Reduction in nutrients and essential biological debris materials that facilitate the productivity of downstream ecosystems.

· Negative impacts on biodiversity and ecological interactions extending well beyond the dam and its impoundment.

· Serious negative (and probably long-term) accumulative impacts from illegal hunting and settlers as a result of increased access to the area caused by improved roads and more navigable waterways."

I hope that you will, in fairness towards open debate, publish these comments.

Meb Cutlack

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Belizean to the bone!**