

March 4, 1999

A REPLY TO SHARON MATOLA'S ARTICLE

The Director of the Belize Zoo, Ms. Sharon Matola, has launched an attack on a Government plan for the consideration of alternative sources of electricity, including a proposal for a new dam in the upstream area of the Macal River known as Chalillo.

Matola was earlier invited, and attended, a meeting with representatives of the Government and Belize Electricity Limited to discuss the issues in a forthright manner. After this meeting, she chose to put out an "Urgent Press Release" under the headline, "Pristine Belize Habitat Under Serious Threat". This release was riddled with exaggerations, half-truths and distortion of facts, which she circulated by e-mail both nationally and internationally.

Ms. Matola also wrote to a colleague saying that she is "going strong on international contacts". The release is apparently designed to serve Ms. Matola's hidden agenda and to pander to international agencies that have little information on the country of Belize.

While the Government and Belize Electricity Ltd. are committed to transparency on the issue of the Macal upstream facility, the position taken by the Director of the Belize Zoo displays bad faith and does not augur well for further dialogue.

Space will not permit a point by point correction of Ms. Matola's distortions and half-truths in the press release. However, there are some issues that must be addressed.

The Belize Zoo (or is it Ms. Matola's?) press release states that, "36 percent of Belize is under some state of official protection". In fact, it is more. Sixty percent of the country is under forest cover and 40 percent is in protected areas, including Half Moon Caye, which is the country's first national monument.

The Director of the Belize Zoo also states that, "eco-tourism now makes up the largest part of the nation's GNP". This is grossly untrue. Indicators from the Central Statistical Office show that the main contributor to GNP is agriculture - mainly sugar, citrus, bananas and more recently, shrimp farming. The second most important contributor includes agro and other industries, including electricity. Eco-tourism is not even placed in a separate category, and falls under Trade, Restaurants and Hotels.

The "urgent press release" from the Belize Zoo and which is attributed to the Zoo's Director also wrongly states that, "the 1100 hectares which would be inundated, provide the only known breeding grounds for a sub-specie of Scarlet Macaw..."

In fact, less than 600 hectares (765) will be flooded as a water holding area for the dam, should it be built at the Chalillo site of the Macal River.

To serve her agenda, Ms. Matola states, with little scientific evidence, all sorts of charges about the endangered species and sub-species of the Scarlet Macaw.

When consideration was being given to the second dam on the Macal, two sites were considered - the upper Rubber Camp area and down stream at Chalillo. For both economic and environmental reasons, and based on extensive studies, it was decided not to proceed with a dam at Rubber Camp. With that decision, the habitats of a number of endangered species remain protected. These include a blind catfish, Morelet's crocodile, a river otter and the keel-billed Motmot. Initial studies also suggest that there will be very little impact on the Macaw colony in that area.

With regards to her reference to eco-tourism, this area of the Chiquibul Forest is hardly accessible, and therefore does not in anyway contribute to this industry and will very unlikely become a beaten path for visitors. Even if the dam is built, the area will remain virtually inaccessible.

Ms. Matola should know that the Northern Biological Corridors and Protected areas of Belize do not include the Chalillo and Rubber Camp areas. Her wild assertions that the area is being considered as a World Heritage Site are not true.

What is true is that an area of the Chiquibul Forest has been recommended as a "National Wilderness". This recommendation was made a few years ago by a Forest Management Unit of the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) of the British Government. It does not include the area that is being considered for the Macal River Chalillo Project.

The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, which was co-authored by Justin Jacobs and Anselmo Castaneda, recommends ways to conserve and use "sustainably"; ~~Belize's biodiversity~~ and natural resources in rational ways.

With further reference to the Scarlet Macaw parrots, very reliable scientific sources dispute Ms. Matola's claim that the Raspaculo area, which is in the same area of Chalillo (the Raspaculo is a branch of the Macal River), is the only breeding ground for this bird. Other sources say, "the population of Scarlet Macaw has increased dramatically, especially within the northern biological corridors of Belize. This includes the Maya Mopan and Red Bank areas in the southern region of the country."

With reference to the Maya Divide of the mountain range in the area, Matola's statement that the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve (actually it is the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary), is a robust feeding ground for jaguars which will be affected and that this, "bodes a negative future for jaguars in Belize", is misleading at best. Alan Rabinowitz, the author of the 1986 book, "Jaguar", would certainly disagree with Matola's distortion of the scientific facts, which resulted from his long and dangerous study of this creature in Belize.

The Director of the Belize Zoo also misrepresented the facts relating to the Mexican Government's decision to suspend the construction of a dam on the Usamacinta River, which is between Mexico and Guatemala. While there were some environmental concerns, for which there were mitigating factors, the main reason why the dam was not built was more for socio-economic reasons that required planning for the re-location of communities. Besides, the proposed dam on the Usamacinta diminishes by a very large scale what is being proposed at Chalillo.

But if Ms. Matola is so concerned about environmental impact, why is it that she is suggesting that this country should continue to buy high priced electricity from Mexico at U.S. 21cents/kwh during peak hours?

She has not offered any other options for meeting Belize's growing demand for electricity to fuel the growth and development of this poor country.

She makes very colourful and dramatic references, for special effects, to "this threatened area of Belize", which over one thousand years ago, "served as an outlying district to the region's most grand Maya civilization centered a few kilometers to the southwest, and known as Caracol". It makes good copy for readers with no knowledge of the country and its laws.

Ruins of the late great Maya civilization are scattered all over Belize. They are all protected under the Ancient Monuments and Antiquities Act. Furthermore, any small dam on the upper Macal River has absolutely no bearing on the Caracol Maya temple. This is far-fetched.

Matola continues to be short on facts, long on fiction, and overtaken by her passion for her own hidden agenda, as she continues in her press release to make very wild charges. She states that "this (Raspaculo) river area has never been mapped with regard to Maya influence once found there".

A few years ago Peter Dunham of Cleveland State University conducted a Maya Mountain mapping of an archaeological survey, which include the area referred to by Matola. Belize Electricity Ltd. will also do another survey as it continues the feasibility study for the proposed dam and the completion of the Environmental Impact Assessment. These will be done within the guidelines of Belize's Environmental Protection Act, 1992, and the Environmental Protection Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations, 1995.

An international company, Swissboring Overseas Ltd., will also be conducting geotechnical investigations of the proposed dam site.

Despite assurance to the contrary, Matola also went strong on her international contacts, telling them that the Government of Belize, "has given the project the green light", and that roads are already being put in this remote area.

Investigations continue along with other considerations for alternative sources of renewable energy. The roads that are in the area are very old logging roads. No new roads are being built. Despite the present position, Ms. Matola has hysterically declared that, "this is an environmental crime of the highest degree".

But where was Ms. Sharon Matola when the rights of the Maya people (who, like all of us, make up the biodiversity), were being ignored; when their lifestyle and culture were threatened, and the sacred Maya temples of their ancient past were also at risk because of illegal logging by Malaysian loggers who wreaked havoc on the pristine forests of Southern Belize?

Where was Ms Matola when the environmental community of Belize declared their objection to a Dolphin theme park that would have been contrary to the principles of promoting eco-tourism in this country?

Why did she publicly support the introduction of an exotic Tilapia fish into the country's waterways when it was known that they posed a serious threat to the indigenous fish life?

She refused to be a signatory to the Lamanai Room Declaration of 1997, which called for a stop to these and other environmental sins.

Ms. Matola's press release does not indicate a desire for meaningful consultation on the issues. As committed as we are to full consultations and transparency on the Macal River Chalillo Project, we ponder Ms. Matola's hidden agenda, and would welcome her transparency.

We look forward to further consultations on this issue.

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