



PRESS RELEASE

**Belizeans' Right to Decide: The Chalillo Dam
- Contributed by Belize Audubon Society**

At the recently concluded World Conservation Congress in Amman, Jordan, the Belize Audubon Society was instrumental in convincing the Congress delegates to adopt a motion calling on the Government of Belize to 1) maintain its record of environmental stewardship; 2) continue to protect the populations of the endangered species found in Belize; and 3) continue to require that fully transparent and participatory environmental impact assessments be completed before any decision is made on the proposed Chalillo Dam Project. The approved motion was far more sensitive to the Belizean due process of environmental laws than the motion originally proposed by the U.S. NGOs - Natural Resources Defense Council, Conservation International, and Defenders of Wildlife.

The original motion proposed by the U.S. NGOs called on the National Environmental Appraisal Committee (NEAC) to reject any plans to build the Chalillo Dam, and demanded the Government of Belize to prevent the construction of the Chalillo Dam Project.

The Belize Audubon Society maintains that at this stage it is premature to call for a stop to the construction of the dam. The Environmental Impact Assessment has not been completed. Notably, a comprehensive wildlife study, called for by the NEAC, has not been undertaken. Any position on the dam at this stage would not be based upon sound science.

The Mesoamerican delegates (representing Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama, including State representatives) were alarmed by the original motion which, if passed, would have imposed wills and made efforts to break and supersede the legal process of the environmental impact assessments of the developing country of Belize. Therefore, the BAS, with the support of the Mesoamerican members of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), was able to negotiate proposed revisions to the original motion based on the principle of autonomy and sovereignty of the state of Belize.

The Mesoamerican delegates participated as active partners in the negotiations with the three U.S. NGOs, convincing them to agree to significant changes to their proposed motion. Instead of calling for a stop to the construction of the dam, the revised motion, which was subsequently endorsed by the Congress, calls for 1) responsible deliberation of the proposed Chalillo Dam project, 2) for the laws of Belize on environment and environmental impact assessment (EIA) to be respected, 3) for transparency and participatory processes, and 4) for the Government of Belize to maintain its record of environmental stewardship.

The approved motion also strongly reaffirms that all decisions regarding the proposed dam project must take into account the best interests of the Belizean people and their desire to achieve balanced development.

A copy of the approved motion is attached for reference. The original and the approved motions can be viewed at www.belizeaudubon.org/html/news/12r.html.

The Canadian International Development Agency has allocated the grant funds to support the regional terrestrial ecological studies in the Macul River Valley area. The results of these studies will complete the environmental impact assessment process for the proposed Chalillo dam. The Society looks forward to reviewing the completed EIA, which it expects will be completed by the latter part of 2001.

The Society will invite in the very near future representatives of the media to a session to discuss this and other related matters.