



SHARON MATOLA, DIRECTOR OF THE BELIZE ZOO, RESPONDS TO NORRIS HALL AND THE BELIZE ELECTRICITY BOARD

I would first like to extend my gratitude to your newspaper for allowing this important response to be stated. And I also thank Mr. Hall for inviting my comments to his letter.

Allow me to clarify where the information appearing in my press release was obtained.

Data on the area of habitat destruction by inundation as a result of the Chalillo Scheme dam project and the imminent threats to the wildlife found there, was taken directly from the report of the Canadian International Power Services Inc. on the Environmental Impact Assessment Rubber Camp and Chalillo Schemes, published in July, 1992.

Information about the Usamacinta dam project and the impact on tourism on that region of Mexico was received from Instituto de Ecología, UNAM, Distrito Federal, Mexico. This referred directly to the impact that dam would have on the archaeology and natural resources found at the site of Yaxchilan, and took into consideration the economic value of this ancient Maya site.

To further address Mr. Hall's comments: The information I have received and used for natural history training sessions presented to tour guides and forest wardens and personnel of the Forest Department, is that nature-based tourism (ecotourism) is the largest foreign exchange earner and contributor to the GNP. According to the Belize Tourist Board, tourism in Belize is on a steady increase, and this undoubtedly empowers our GNP.

The strength of this industry is further reflected in the development of the Protected Areas Conservation Trust (PACT). Without promise of a growing tourism industry, the development of PACT would not have happened. As a result, each visitor to Belize pays a tax upon leaving, which is contributed to this Trust, further infusing the economic base of Belize - and all reflecting back on a growing ecotourism industry.

Mr. Hall misinterpreted my reference to the Upper Macal River and Raspaculo River, and its relationship to ecotourism. He also misinterpreted the information I had presented to him about the ecology of our Belizean Scarlet Macaw population.

This was particularly surprising to me, as he made the effort to tape record our meeting on the 24th of February, and could have referred back to his tapes of our conversation. During this meeting, I explained that the unique vegetation profile of the Upper Macal and Raspaculo River was the very reason that wildlife flourishes there.

The nature of wildlife is that it is dynamic - in other words, animals move from one place to another. The many species of animals finding ample food in these river valleys breed there, but they also leave from there and travel out to other parts of Belize. This biological movement reinforces ecotourism, simply because it keeps various species of animals present in connected forests throughout the country. I did not indicate that these river valleys should be tourist destinations. Their invaluable role to our ecotourism industry is to act as a "wildlife factory", providing a wealth of species which then move out and about to other parts of Belize, and subsequently and hopefully, are experienced on some level (sightings, tracks, for instance) by those interested in Belizean natural history.

I will again use the jaguar as an example, as Mr. Hall did in his letter. Scientific studies have shown that a male jaguar will travel 45 miles in one day to search for food.

According to Alan Rabinowitz, there is no question that the jaguars found in the Cockscomb Basin travel miles and miles in search of prey, and as these river valleys are within easy range of their territory, hunting there, as part of their overall feeding ecology, is highly possible. Alan Rabinowitz only further confirmed what I had written about this threatened area and its relationship to jaguar populations in Belize. I had the opportunity to spend three days with Alan Rabinowitz, March 1-4, at a meeting in Mexico City, where we discussed this very issue at length. He welcomes further contact, should anyone wish to discuss how the Chalillo Dam scheme could affect jaguar populations in Belize.

Mr. Hall stated that my comments about the dam having a negative impact on our jaguar populations were, "distorted and misleading". I would like to point him in the direction of FIGURE 10 in this same Canadian International Power report. Under the heading, IMPACT EVALUATION MODEL FOR JAGUAR, it cites that the RESERVOIR CREATION would lead to a final result of: LOCAL/REGIONAL JAGUAR POPULATIONS WITH ALTERED ADULT AND CUB SURVIVAL, which is then followed by a question mark as to how this altered environment would affect reproductive behaviour and genetic exchange for the jaguars now using this area. Yes, I took that information and interpret that it, "bodes a negative future for jaguars in Belize". Alan Rabinowitz concurs with this, Mr. Hall.

The comments that Mr. Hall made about the remaining Scarlet Macaws in Belize were not based upon facts. There is no evidence that these rare birds breed anywhere else in the country except within the valleys of the Upper Macal and Raspaculo Rivers.

This information is based upon the only comprehensive field study ever undertaken about our Scarlet Macaws, under the auspices of Wildlife Preservation Trust, Int'l (WPTI). And the study is showing that while flocks of Scarlet Macaws do appear at certain times of the year in the village of Red Bank, they travel there to feed upon the plentiful fruits of trees such as Polewood and Wild Annato. Macaws are known to travel tens of kilometers a day to reach food sources. While Red Bank, during certain months, may be a favored feeding ground for the Scarlet Macaw, it is not a breeding ground.

However, Scarlet Macaws also depend on the Upper Macal and Raspaculo Rivers for food. The WPTI Scarlet Macaw team has photographed these birds eating fruits of certain species of vegetation found along the riverine habitat slated for destruction, should the Chalillo Dam project go forward. The Canadian International Power report repeatedly states that, "Over 90% of riparian (riverine) habitat would be destroyed". Also, within this threatened habitat are documented nest sites of the Scarlet Macaw. Mr. Hall may remember that I showed him slide transparencies of these nests, and pointed out on a map, where exactly these nests were located.

His reference to my suggesting that the site of Caracol would be affected by the Chalillo Dam is a misinterpretation. The Upper Macal and Raspaculo Rivers were an outlying district, somewhat of a "suburb" of Caracol, if one wishes to look at it in that perspective. Many remnants of the Maya civilization remain there; most remain unmapped.

The mapping of this region, with regard to the Maya influence found there, was another recommendation stated in the report by the Canadian International Power officials. A thorough and systematic investigation of Maya influence in this region has not been accomplished.

Mr. Hall states that I am "going strong on international contacts". A major reason for doing this is to obtain more information about dams, reservoir creation and environmental impact, which I will share with the Belizean public, other NGOs in Belize, BEL, and the Belize Government.

My recent contacts with the Environmental Defense Fund led to the following information: While BEL refers to the Chalillo Dam scheme as a "small dam", being 30 meters in height, the actual parameters defining "small dams" and "large dams" state that "any dam 15 meters and higher is considered to be a large dam". The proposed Chalillo Dam is a large dam.

Of further concern, I was told that in the United States, there is a complete halt to any construction of dams, due to their negative impact to the environment, and weak economic value. These facts should be taken into serious consideration.

I stand by my statements that referred to the construction of the Chalillo Dam as environmental crime. How can any of us, if we harbor any degree of respect for the natural resources of Belize, and realizing that our country is being viewed more and more as a model for the sound management of its wealth of biodiversity, and realizing the vital role that our natural resources plays in building a strong and healthy economy, accept the construction of a dam which would eradicate a huge area of pristine environment, an environment that does not stand alone in its natural profile, but one that has an affect on the forests which are connected to it, and then - under the very best of circumstances - this dam would last for just 50 years? Is this a sound and sustainable move forward, Mr. Hall? Are we satisfied to trade one of the most unique, if not THE most unique environments in the region for a 50-year-old dam project?

For the record, to address additional misinformation in Mr. Hall's letter: neither The Belize Zoo nor myself has ever endorsed Tilapia farming in Belize. Neither The Belize Zoo nor myself endorsed the development of any dolphin theme park. In fact, I spoke out strongly about this very issue, both at the Lamanai Meeting, and subsequently on Channel 5 television. And of course, to once again air out the logging issue that Mr. Hall mentions - The Belize Zoo supported the development and implementation of management plans that would attempt to engage sound forestry practices in Toledo, and throughout Belize.

My agenda is not hidden, as Mr. Hall has suggested. I decided a very long time ago that I would dedicate my life to the preservation of natural resources. Through circumstances, Belize became home. As founding director of The Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, I think this very organization reflects my commitment towards the preservation of our natural resources. My actions taken with regard to the Chalillo Dam scheme also reflect my commitment to preserve the natural resources of Belize. No hidden agenda exists. Everyone needs to be aware of the serious implications that this project could have on our environment.

I wish to end this by inviting Mr. Hall, all interested BEL officials, officials from the Government of Belize, and the general public to a presentation by ecologist Martin Meadows and myself at the San Ignacio Hotel, 16 March at 7:00 p.m. The presentation, with slides, will be about the Chalillo Dam issue.

And again, my sincerest thank you for providing me with the opportunity to further clarify my position with regard to the Chalillo Dam scheme.