

RAIN FOREST AT RISK

Canada's dark side in Belize



HARRISON FORD

I first became acquainted with the majestic rain forests of Belize in the 1980s while filming *The Mosquito Coast*. In that film, I play a man whose singular obsession to create a utopian civilization in the tropics makes him blind to the harm he inflicts on the world around him.

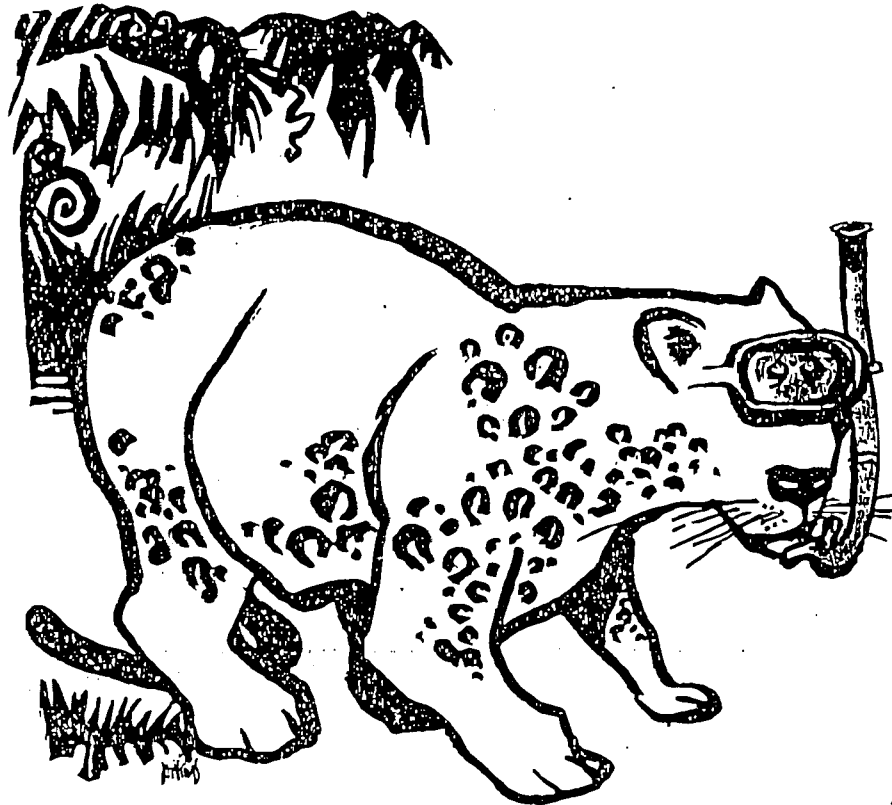
Unless we act soon, we will witness a tragic twist on this fiction play out in real life. This time, the vision belongs to Fortis, Inc., a \$1.6-billion Canadian power company. Fortis, based in St. John's, wants to erect a \$45-million dam that would flood the Upper Macal River Valley, while turning a blind eye to the ecological devastation the dam would wreak on the area's lush flood plains, undisturbed since the time of the ancient Maya.

Economic experts expect this dam will lead to higher electricity rates for Belizeans because Fortis will want to cover its capital costs. Meanwhile, Fortis has ruled out alternative options such as cogeneration technology — for example, capturing waste energy from existing facilities to generate electricity.

Fortis not only ignores the economic experts, but also dismisses environmental opposition to the dam as uninformed. Yet 18 of the world's leading scientists and naturalists, including David Suzuki and Peter Raven, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, have joined the Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club of Canada, Newfoundland groups and others to protest this environmental disaster. Citizens of Belize living downstream from the proposed dam site, as well as Belizean environmental groups and business groups, including the Belize Ecotourism Association, are also opposed to the dam.

Ironically, Fortis couldn't build a dam like Challoo at home in Newfoundland, where public pressure has led to a moratorium on dams that destroy riverine wildlife and fisheries.

Earlier this week, Fortis released a five-volume environmental impact assessment and a proposal to build the dam. Belizean government officials, who have a financial stake in the dam's construction and have been pro-dam from the beginning, have



ANTHONY BINKINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

60 days to determine whether the project gets the green light. Now the clock is ticking on a decision that has been rigged in favour of Fortis's dam from the outset.

Here's how Fortis set it up: To prepare an environmental assessment to support Fortis's dam, the Canadian government's foreign aid arm, CIDA, hired AMEC, a multinational engineering company that also happens to be a major dam developer. CIDA cloaked its assessment of the dam in secrecy; no documents were made public and no public input was solicited. If that isn't bad enough, Canadian taxpayers are footing the \$250,000 bill.

Fortis's perfect environmental scheme hit a snag, however. AMEC subcontracted a piece of the job to the Natural History Museum of London. Unfortunately for Fortis, the Natural History Museum wasn't prepared to mince words about the dam's devastating effects on Belize's wildlife. The Museum's scathing report says

that the dam would cause "significant and irreversible reduction of biological diversity" and fragment the proposed Mesoamerican Biological Corridor — an international effort to maintain the connections between the few remaining forested areas of Central America.

The report states that the dam would cause a "rapid reduction in the already endangered population of the Scarlet Macaw subspecies (*Ara macao cyanoptera*, a large, colourful parrot), leading to [its] possible extirpation" from Belize.

This means the possible extinction of wildlife in the Macal River Valley, home to some of the world's rarest and most endangered species, including Belize's national animal, the tapir, howler monkeys, and a rare community of Morelet's crocodile. The valley is also one of the last places on Earth where jaguars thrive.

For now, Fortis stands firm. But few companies are immune to mass public

outrage. Earlier this year, activists generated more than 30,000 e-mails as letters through www.savebiogens.org/macal and successfully pressured American power giant Duke Energy to abandon support for the dam.

H. Stanley Marshall, Fortis's president and chief executive officer, has said that he would withdraw the project if his report showed that the dam would cause untoward damage to the environment.

We must now hammer our message home to Fortis's CEO. Tell him not to let the Macal Valley down the river. Ask him if a short-term deal in Belize is worth destroying the wildest place in Central America — forever.

If he's a man of his word, he will do the right thing and abandon the dam now.

Harrison Ford, who starred in numerous films, including the *Indiana Jones* and *War* movies, is an active conservationist.