

Opponents of dam take battle to TSE

Environmentalists try
to save Belize forest

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ATLANTIC CANADA BUREAU

HALIFAX — A fight over the future of a Central American forest is to hit the Toronto Stock Exchange today when leading environmentalists launch a new campaign against Fortis Inc.

Environmentalists in both Canada and the United States want the Newfoundland-based hydro company to scrap plans to build a dam on the Macal River, in Belize.

They say the dam will destroy one of the last wild forests in Central America, an area crucial to the survival of several rare species, including the Central American tapir, the scarlet macaw and the jaguar.

"I have been all over Central America and I have never seen an area richer in biodiversity than that valley," Sharon Matola, director of the Belize Zoo, told The Star yesterday. "I just can't believe they would do this."

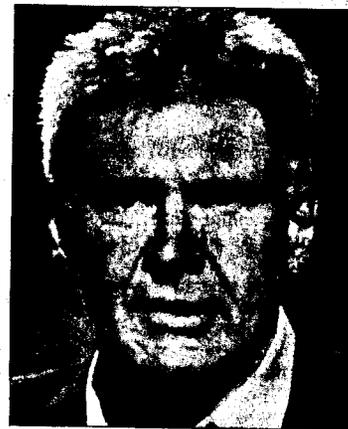
Matola will join Elizabeth May, director of the Sierra Club of Canada, Robert Kennedy Jr. of the Natural Resources Defence Council and other activists at the Toronto Stock Exchange to launch the new campaign designed to pressure Fortis shareholders about the dam.

The fight between Fortis and the environmentalists has been going on for almost a year. Environmentalists have already run national television ads on the topic, and newspaper ads in areas where Fortis does the most business.

Fortis owns controlling interest in the only power company in Belize. It wants to build a dam upriver from an existing dam, saying the extra power is crucial to the development of the country. The Newfoundland-based company has strong backing from the Belize government and a new environmental assessment financed by the Canadian government.

The environmentalists have star power — a member of the famous Kennedy clan is spearheading the drive, and actor Harrison Ford, who filmed a movie in Belize, has lobbied against the dam. They also have environmental reports criticizing the dam.

Both sides accuse the other of out-



HARRISON FORD: Actor lobbies against construction of dam that could destroy a forest.

and-out lying about everything from the amount of land to be flooded to the relative rarity of the species that will be affected.

"It is extremely arrogant for North American environmentalists to say we can develop these dams in our own country, but other countries cannot," said Stan Marshall, president and CEO of Fortis. "They don't want to let the people and the democratically elected government of Belize make their own decisions."

Marshall said the river valley has drawn the focus of environmentalists only because so many Americans live in Belize and because so much of the country is already protected as wilderness.

"It is a tragedy that because Belize has done such a great job of protecting the environment, now they can't develop anything because everyone thinks of the whole country as a park."

Matola said that's not true, that the river valley is unique. "You can go five kilometres on either side of it and you don't see the same biodiversity at all."