

Letters to the Editor

Chalillo Dam potential impact on jaguar

Dear Editor,

During a recent trip to Belize, while I was participating in a documentary film about jaguars and the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve, I was shown a series of press releases by both Norris Hall and Sharon Matola. In these articles they debate issues of habitat and the threats to wildlife which would be caused from the inundation that would result from the Chalillo Scheme dam project.

At first seeing my name used by Mr. Norris Hall in relation to jaguars, I discussed the issue with Ms. Matola and relayed some facts about jaguars which I thought might be important. At this time, I would like to have the opportunity to discuss some additional aspects of jaguar biology and its relevance to current issues in Belize.

A recent international workshop in Mexico city which endeavored to bring together the world's jaguar biologist and discuss the state of our knowledge of jaguars, produced a series of maps showing key areas and high priority sites throughout the Americas where there should be a focus on studying, protecting, and managing long-term jaguar populations. Within Central America, Belize stood out as a major area for jaguar conservation. More importantly however, the forests of Belize were shown to be part of a contiguous forest block extending into Guatemala and parts of Southern Mexico, highlighting the fact that the continued integrity of this region was one of the highest priorities for ensuring the survival of jaguars for future generations. It needs to be understood that, while a jaguar in the Guatemalan Peten may never meet a jaguar from the Cockscomb, there needs to be genetic exchange between these subpopulations which will occur only as long as there is mostly intact forest habitat between these areas. This genetic exchange is absolutely essential to guarantee long term survival of the region's jaguars.

While the Cockscomb Basin and other wild-sites of Belize still maintain

seemingly healthy jaguar populations, none of these populations are large enough to survive into the future, if they are cut off from other jaguar populations in other areas.

Furthermore, the survival and well being of any single jaguar population is completely dependent upon healthy prey base, which generally needs a healthy habitat. Development projects that create large barriers such as reservoirs and alter or remove crucial components of jaguar habitat, namely intact reverine systems and forest habitat, definitely serve to cut off and isolate jaguars and other wildlife populations from each other, and threaten their future survival.

Whether development projects such as the Chalillo Dam proceed or not, and if the benefits outweigh the cost, must ultimately be decided by the government and the people of Belize. However, if are to examine biological impact, then it must be realized that some development activities a far worse than others for wildlife, particularly when considering wide ranging carnivores such as jaguars. Any development scheme in the middle of pristine forest areas, which destroy natural waterways, inundates areas of natural habitat, and opens up areas to roads and other human activities, is one of the worst impacts that an intact jaguar population could face. This fact, on top of the recent declaration at an international jaguar workshop makes this particular project very worrisome to me. The Chalillo project sit in the middle of some of the country's best jaguar habitat and could definitely affect jaguar dispersal patterns and genetic exchange into and out from the Cockscomb Basin, currently recognized as one of the world's premier sites for jaguar conservation. At the very least, this project would disrupt the integrity of the jaguar habitat in Belize

and would be a festering wound in the body of one of the largest intact jaguar sites throughout their entire range.

I appreciate the opportunity to voice my opinions and I hope that I have made this issue, as it relates to jaguars in Belize, a little clearer.

Signed: Dr. Alan Rabinowitz

Equality Before The Law

Dear Editor,

It is a known fact that the Government of Belize, at least in respect to its Police Department, owes thousands of dollars for services rendered to it by citizens.

Two examples are: first a previous police photographer who was unpaid accounts going back for a period of five years of \$6,767.00 dollars. Second a certain hotel owner, who is owed in neighborhood of \$6,000.00 dollars, for providing food and lodging at the request of police authorities for past years.

The above are only two incidents, in one small town in Belize.

The question, of course, is how many thousands of dollars are years behind in being paid to citizens?

My second question is, should there not be a public accounting, produced at the end of each fiscal year, by Government, showing the total of all the unpaid vouchers outstanding more than a one year?

Any citizen who had such unpaid debts may be brought to account for unpaid vouchers is almost an impossibility for the red tape involved makes their action prohibitive.

We therefore suggest, it is long past the time when some enlightened politician, should advocate a public accounting and disclosure of the thousands of dollars owed by our government to citizens.

Who knows? Perhaps this is Taxation without representation? In Belize the tax payers pays his monies to our government, and if in the long run he fails to do so, may even be incarcerated for not doing so. In short he is made to pay by law, but it appears our