

New Hydro-dam poses serious concerns

by Sharon Matola

Belize, a country approximately the size of the state of Massachusetts, and with a population numbering less than 300,000 people, has enjoyed a growing industry based on its wealth of natural resources.

People from all over the world have been visiting Belize in increasing numbers to experience the bountiful natural resources found here. Over 36% of Belize is under some state of official protection, the basis of a natural splendour which is absent from other countries in the region. Viewing howler monkeys, manatees, scarlet macaws, jabiru storks and other animals in some of the country's protected areas are events that visitors and their Belizean guides can count on. Finances coming into the country from ecotourism now make up the largest part of the nation's GNP, and more and more Belizeans are seeing their livelihoods empowered from this growing industry.

However, this will abruptly change if plans to build a dam, known as "the Chalillo scheme", are realized. The site location, on the upper Macal River, the headwaters of the major tributary of the country, the Belize River, sits in the singular most important habitat in Belize for endangered species.

The 1100 hectares which would be inundated provide the only known breeding grounds for a sub-species of Scarlet Macaw, *Ara macao cyanoptera*, estimated now to number less than 200 in Belize. The Central American tapir, *Tapirus bairdii*, flourishes. This region, the upper Macal and Raspuaculo rivers have been noted in the IUCN Tapir Action Plan as one of the last strongholds in Central America for this endangered species.

Southern river otters and Morelets crocodiles are found in healthy populations in this very territory. This river valley also provides vital overwintering grounds for a variety of North American migratory bird species.

The abundance of prey species, who call this river valley home, provide ample food for the country's healthy jaguar population. The area slated for the Chalillo Dam, a mere ten kilometres west of the Maya Divide, provides a robust feeding ground for the jaguars who travel back and forth from the Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve. These large cats require huge areas to roam in order to sustain their numbers. The proposed dam scheme, if imple-

mented, poses a negative future for jaguars in Belize.

The key to the rich biodiversity found in this central Maya Mountain river network is the dynamic structure of its habitat - riverine vegetation is prolific. This herbaceous vegetation, thick and lush along the sun-baked riversides, lacks the toxic alkaloids found in shaded, forest-dwelling plants. As a result, these now undisturbed river valleys provide a tropical "all-you-can-eat" situation for the wildlife found there. Is a similar habitat found in other regions of the country? No. The Upper Macal River and Raspuaculo River remain unique in this aspect - unmatched in biological integrity due to the profile of its flora which has evolved over the course of millions of years.

This, coupled with the fact that the river systems are nestled within a protected area, National Park and Forest Reserve, provide a haven unmatched in the Central American region for the species found there.

"The implementation of this plan to construct a dam will be the death knell for the remaining Scarlet Macaws of Belize", reports Sharon Matola. Matola, for the past two years, under the auspices of Wildlife Preservation Trust, has been involved in field studies aimed at revealing the biology of this rare bird. She has accomplished wildlife surveys in this now-threatened area for eight years.

"The only place in this country where the Scarlet Macaw is known to breed is in the Raspuaculo and Upper Macal River Valleys. This is even stated in a report written by a Canadian power company in 1992". This same report states that serious environmental impact would occur down river from the proposed dam site, affecting the lives of people who depend on these river systems for their own sustenance.

The report issued by the Canadian power company mentions that a question exists as to how the marine environment would be affected by the dam's proposed presence. The Belize River empties into the Caribbean Sea, approximately 50 kilometres to the northeast, and off-shore stands the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere.

"I clearly cannot see any pragmatic sense to this ill-conceived project", Matola continues. "Water quality is threatened, aquatic resources are threatened, endangered species which are now providing the economic base for so many Belizeans would disappear, and for what? For a hydroelec-

tric project that, as stated by a Power Company report, 'under the very best of circumstances, would last perhaps 50 years' - this does not appear to be a wise move forward".

Are there comparable situations in the region to look upon for direction? "For many years, the Mexicans had planned to dam the Usamacinta River (a large tributary between Mexico and Guatemala flowing into the Gulf of Mexico), however, the fact that the area which would be flooded included rare and endangered species of wildlife as well as ruins of the ancient Maya, halted the project's development". In fact, it was solidly shown that this area of Mexico, with its rich natural and cultural resources, contributed a great deal to that country's economy.

Another point to consider looking upon this threatened area of Belize, is that over one thousand years ago, it served as an outlying district to the region's most grand Maya civilization, centred a few kilometres to the southwest, and known as Caracol.

"This river area has never been mapped with regard to the Maya influence once found there, and I would think that it is somewhat of a moral responsibility to see that these ancient treasures are preserved for the cultural pride here in Belize", states Matola.

At this time, the Government of Belize has given the project the "green light", but is awaiting the results of an Environmental Impact Assessment which will shed light on the full impact

of the Chalillo hydro scene. "I know that the Belize Electricity Board is full-speed ahead on this, they are attempting to see that roads are put into this remote area, they've surveyed the dam site, they told me that they are keen to do the project and that any project involving energy has its own environmental impacts".

Many people consider it a "done deal", because it is high on the Government of Belize's development agenda. Matola continues to maintain that it would be a huge mistake for Belize, should the project go forward. "We are talking about drastically reducing the base of economic activity for so many of the people here. We are gambling with our natural resources, treasures that are not duplicated anywhere else in the region. This is not a sound move."

Are there alternative options to this scheme? Matola feels that stronger relations need to be formed with Belize's neighbour to the north, Mexico, in establishing a sound linkage in energy collaboration, and also, looking at other Caribbean countries, those with much higher populations than Belize, to appreciate how they have answered their respective power needs. "There is a bottom line to this issue", Matola adamantly states, "It took millions of years of evolution for this habitat to reach its current unique profile - it is unacceptable to trade that for a dam which, under the best of circumstances, would live for 50 years. This is environmental crime of the highest degree".

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