

Staying Transparent: The Chalillo Dam Issue

Contributed by Sharon Matola

While I was appearing on Channel 7's "Innerviews" program Thursday April 8th, I read a sheet of information pertaining to the Chalillo Dam, which was provided to Mr. Denys Barrow by officials at BEL.

The misleading information was disappointing to read. BEL continues to refer to the Chalillo Dam as a "small dam". However, the international parameters which govern size nomenclature for dams refer to any dam 15 meters or higher (Chalillo is stated to be 30 meters) as a large Dam. Keep in mind that the proposed Chalillo Dam is, indeed, a Large Dam.

The information included the approximate costs of the proposed Chalillo Dam-BZ \$40 million dollars. Yet, when I quoted the approximate capital investment for the Chalillo Dam as being BZ \$60 million dollars to a senior scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, she insisted that this was an extreme UNDER estimate of the costs necessary for building a dam such as the Chalillo Dam. So keep in mind that the proposed Chalillo Dam would likely cost much more than what we are being told it would cost. Also keep in mind that according to a World Bank sociologist, 75 percent of dams go over budget and 25 percent of the debt of developing countries is due to dams. (The Mollejon Dam is currently a large part of Belize's foreign debt).

The information sheet included statements from the World Bank which, in essence, said that developing countries needed to look at developing alternative energy source. First, when it comes to the subject of Dams and the World Bank, we need to look at the profile of this money-lending organization. The World Bank is the largest lender to developing nations.

The World Bank admits that only 13 of its 50 bank-funded dams "can be regarded as acceptable" when human rights are taken into account. In the last 7 years, World Bank projects have forcibly displaced 2.5 million people, and the Bank has admitted that virtually all of the projects had "failed to ensure that displaced people regain their former standard of living".

Is this the institution we need to advise us on energy policy?

However, due to environmental and economic shortfalls, according to a senior scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, the World Bank is no longer funding dam projects.

Should we ignore this change of policy from the World Bank?

Has anyone convinced us that our electricity rates would decrease should the Chalillo Dam project go forward? Weren't we told something similar in the early 1990's, that "electricity rates would go down with the Mollejon Dam up and running?"

Where are the reports indicating that co-generation with either the sugar

industry or citrus industry is being investigated? An "Analysis of Options" study states that electricity rates, with relation to the Chalillo Dam, would remain the same, around 9.5-10.5 US cents per kW/Hr. However, co-generation with the sugar industry, using bagasse by-product, would produce electricity at 7.5 US cents per kW/hr. This same report states that co-generation with the citrus industry may produce electricity at comparable and maybe even lower prices to that of hydro-produced power, since the production has gone up in recent years.

Utilizing these methods of energy production means that both industries could diversify, developing an alternative source of revenue. Who is investigating these potential sources of energy?

There was a remark in this same information sheet comparing the people of Belize to the Belizean Scarlet Macaw population. This referred to Belizeans as "endangered species". Is Belize going to be better off if the Chalillo Dam happens?

Will we be better off minus Scarlet macaws as local extinction is likely to occur when their breeding grounds are destroyed. Will we be better off minus healthy populations of Tapir and Jaguar? Will we be better off with fewer migratory birds spending the winter here as we effectively eradicate important over-wintering habitat

within this river network? Eliminating Scarlet as a result of the Chalillo Dam, and decreasing the populations of the above-named wildlife are not my words, but published in the 1992 report from Canadian International Power, referring directly to the Chalillo Dam and its environmental impacts.

This same information sheet seemed to indicate that for "30,000 Belizeans living in poverty", the Chalillo Dam could alleviate this problem. Please note the following, taken from a book sent to me from the International Rivers Network: "An argument often used by dam builders and backers in developing countries is that concern for the environment is a "first world luxury". In fact, the opposite is the case. The majority of people in developing countries depend directly on their environment to provide them with subsistence.

The environmental destruction caused by dams in developing countries thus carries a major human cost, which falls most heavily on the poorest sections of society. People in developing countries, in fact, can LEAST afford the environmental impacts of large dams".

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