

THIS WEEK



TAKING FLIGHT:
scarlet macaws will
be flooded out

Concrete jungle

Dam set to go ahead despite danger to wildlife

WHAT'S the point of gauging the environmental impact of a dam before it's built? Not a lot, if a row over a proposed hydroelectric scheme in Belize is anything to go by.

A group of leading biologists reckon the Chalillo dam would destroy an area of rain-forest containing rare and threatened species. But the companies that commissioned the biologists' report are not following its recommendation that the dam should not be built, one of the report's authors told *New Scientist*.

The dispute has highlighted growing concerns over the value placed on "environmental impact assessments". Last year, a report by the World Commission on Dams warned that recommendations about whether a dam should go ahead are no longer welcomed—contrary to the intention when EIAs were introduced in the 1970s. Instead, EIAs have evolved into devices "to render dams acceptable when the decision to proceed has already been taken" by recommending ways to lessen their impact, says the commission.

Scientists from the Natural History Museum in London conducted an EIA of the proposed dam project, which is scheduled to start construction next month in the former British colony of Belize in Central America. In their official report, the researchers say that the Chalillo dam would do irreparable harm to one of the most biologically rich and diverse regions left in Central America, and they "highly recommend" that the scheme be dropped.

"What is the point of scientists undertak-

ing environmental assessments if they are ignored or rubbished rather than being taken into proper consideration?" asks Alastair Rogers, a co-author of the report.

The proposed 35-metre dam is to be built on a remote stretch of Belize's Macal River and produce electricity for the surrounding provinces. It would flood 11 square kilometres of the river's pristine forested flood plain in remote mountains near the border with Guatemala.

The area contains rare species such as jaguar, Baird's tapir, Morelet's crocodile, ocelot, howler monkey and a population of 60 to 100 scarlet macaws—a subspecies of parrot of which fewer than a thousand remain worldwide. The report says the dam would "cause a rapid reduction and probable

eventual extirpation" of the birds.

The Canadian arm of the British engineering firm AMEC, a consultant on the construction of the \$30 million project, commissioned the Natural History Museum to analyse the impact of the dam on wildlife as part of a wider EIA. The company has shunted its 105-page report into an appendix to the five-volume assessment, prefaced with a warning saying that it is "a draft report, and readers should formulate their conclusions accordingly".

But Rogers told *New Scientist*: "There are many scientists who are deeply concerned about this project and believe the facts speak for themselves." Rogers, a colonel in the British Royal Marine Reserve, has led five scientific expeditions to the dam region.

AMEC denies trying to bury the report. Fortis, the Canadian company that runs Belize's electricity industry and will own the dam, says that the report contains significant inaccuracies, including false claims that several species are endangered. The scientists deny this.

Fortis chief executive Stanley Marshall also recently claimed on Canadian radio that "from the time this report went to Britain it has been continuously leaked to environment groups and influenced by them". But Rogers denies that activists have influenced the report. In a letter to the Belize government in September he said: "It is absolutely clear that constructing a dam at Chalillo would cause major, irreversible negative environmental impacts and destroy many important archaeological sites."

Fred Pearce

