

Dumping on Paradise

An environmentalist reports from the jungles of Belize

BY ALLEN HERSHKOWITZ

Flanked by impenetrable expanses of primary rainforest, the Sibun River begins unseen, high in the Maya Mountains of Belize, as a complicated web of tiny, rain-fed ribbons. As these rivulets trickle down the range's northeast slopes, they converge and gather force, cutting deep troughs in the forest floor and funneling life-giving nutrients toward the main river channel. Here at its source the Sibun is crystalline and pure—and it stays that way for most of its 90-odd miles, finally emptying into the Caribbean Sea, just south of Belize City.

Today I am kayaking the middle reaches of the Sibun, here translucent green, with my friend and guide, Sharon Matola. In the last few hours, she has shown me a bare-throated tiger heron, emerald hummingbirds, the tracks of a tapir (also known as a "mountain cow"), four-foot termite mounds, and a bird called a chachalaca. Matola is a

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Baltimore-born biologist who came to Belize nearly two decades ago to look after some native animals on the set of a wildlife documentary. When funding for the film dried up, so did her job. "I asked them what they were going to do with the animals," she once told me. "They said, 'Feed the small ones to the big ones and shoot the big ones.' Can you believe that?"

That doomed menagerie, which included a jaguarundi, an ocelot, and peccaries, eventually became the Belize Zoo, which today receives 40,000 visitors a year, including 15,000 children. Matola, now a citizen of Belize, is the zoo's executive director and an ardent conservationist. On a sandy beach in the middle of the river, she picks up an armadillo shell and, handing it to me for inspection, announces that it is the remains of a jaguar's dinner. Perhaps most important to my time with Matola is this: When thirst overtakes us, we dip our mouths in the Sibun to drink.

In another year, that may be impossible. If Belize's government has its way, the Sibun River basin will be home to the country's largest landfill, and therefore most of its trash, and even its hazardous waste. That is why I am here. A

year ago, Matola called on NRDC to investigate whether the proposed dump, named the Mile 27 Landfill, would be a problem. My prognosis: It would be a very big problem. And not just for the zoo, which is right next to it. The Tropical Education Center, Belize's leading environmental training facility, has its drinking water well a mere half mile from the landfill. Even worse is the fact that a dozen villages use the Sibun daily for drinking water and fishing. These villages have now formed their own conservation group, the Sibun Watershed Association, to protect the river's ecosystem against projects like the landfill. But the government is not easily swayed.

In December, the Mile 27 Landfill came one step closer to being a reality when Belize's Department of Environment voted to accept the landfill developer's own "Environmental Impact Assessment," a technical document that is supposed to evaluate the project's environmental hazards. The developer, a Canadian company called Stantec International, Inc., produced the most flawed assessment I have ever read. For example, the document actually states that the noxious odors and carcinogenic gases from



Pure enough to drink: Belize

the landfill will be scrubbed clean by the surrounding vegetation—an idea with no technical merit.

The government ignored more than forty pages of analysis we produced detailing why Stantec's report should be rejected. On the day it was accepted, some 300 outraged people took to the streets of Belmopan, Belize's capital, in protest. The government told the demonstrators they were being "misled" by the environmental community. I wasn't exactly surprised by this official response. Three months earlier, an editorial in the government newspaper called Matola and NRDC staffers "enemies of the state," because of our campaigns against Mile 27 and another rash project: a hydropower dam on the Upper Macal River (see sidebar). More recently, the same paper deemed us "international terrorists." On this peaceful paddle, where my conversation with Matola centers around the miracles of nature, the labels seem absurd.

Jacob Scherr, the indefatigable director of NRDC's International Program, made our work in Belize a priority with good reason. Massachusetts-sized Belize is part of an ecologically rich slice of our planet that conservation biologists refer to as the "Latitudinal Diversity Gradient." This means that Belize, located on the Caribbean Sea east of Guatemala and south of Mexico, boasts superior geography for supporting plants and wildlife. In addition to crocodiles and manatees, it is home to margays, pumas, howler

monkeys, pacas, and myriad butterflies. There are 4,000 species of flowering plants, including 250 orchids; 520 species of birds; 130 species of mammals, including 70 kinds of bats; and 700 types of trees. Belize claims the world's only jaguar preserve, and its coral reef stretches for 175 miles—the longest in the Western Hemisphere.

What Belize doesn't have is a way to deal with its garbage. Head south on the Western Highway out of Belize City, and after whiffs of salty breezes, your nostrils will be assaulted by another aroma: that of the country's largest dump. The Mile 3 Landfill (so named because it is three miles from Belize City) is a putrefying, swollen marsh of garbage slop the size of two football fields. Here, sharing space with bands of black vultures, are the country's poorest citizens, who live on top of the landfill in huts cobbled together from scrap wood and cardboard. Located farther from the city—and also the public eye—Mile 27 is slated to replace Mile 3 as Belize's major dumping ground.

In 1998, the government of Belize named "mismanagement of waste" its number-one environmental problem. The Mile 27 Landfill is a bad way to fix it. Landfills release hundreds of carcinogenic gases and liquid chemicals, and controlling this toxic discharge means, first, controlling exactly what goes in—but Mile 27 will get it all, including liquid solvents, pesticides, oils, commercial waste, and most of Belize's household trash. Furthermore, according to Stantec, any con-



BELIZE CAMPAIGN UPDATE

NRDC activists have punched a hole in plans to construct the Chalillo Dam, which would flood crucial Scarlett macaw and jaguar habitat in the Macal River Valley. After receiving some 20,000 letters of protest, Duke Energy of North Carolina, a major potential backer of the project, has sold a smaller dam it owned in Belize and is leaving the country. That still leaves Fortis, Inc., a multibillion-dollar Canadian company that owns Belize's only electricity utility, pushing ahead to build Chalillo. Fortis's Belizean allies are waging an intimidation campaign against local critics of the dam, while U.S. and Canadian environmentalists are stepping up the pressure on Fortis. NRDC has named the Macal River Valley one of its twelve threatened BioGems. Keep up with the campaign and all the BioGems by visiting www.savebiogems.org.

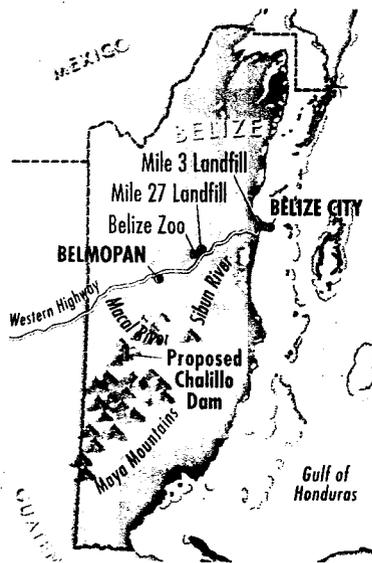
taminated liquids will "ultimately drain into the Sibun River." That is true. Layers of plastic liners with leak-detection devices are a minimum requirement for environmentally sound landfill technology, but Mile 27 is being designed without

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even the most basic of these measures. Stantec says Belize cannot afford liners, an argument that doesn't sit well with the villagers whose water will be poisoned.

Worse, the Mile 27 site is a former quarry whose geology consists of limestone, karst, and marl—rock so porous that waste will ooze into the Sibun as if through a sieve. I trekked to the site last spring with the head of the Tropical Education Center, Tony Garel. It was an utterly rainless season, the worst drought in twenty-four years, yet

Projects such as the Mile 27 Landfill and the Chalillo Dam threaten the ecosystems of Belize.

we saw large pools of water in the quarry, clouded by suspended and moving silt—evidence that an underground water system was filling them. If Mile 27 is built, that groundwater will percolate through a few thousand pounds of garbage before pouring into the Sibun. Even the World Bank's guidelines on landfills, which are very lax, state that they should not be located near limestone, much less on top of it.

The best hope for stopping Mile 27 lies with the Washington, D.C.-based Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), a funding agency similar to the World Bank, and the likely source of financing for the project. It is exactly because of projects like this one that people took to the streets of Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Geneva over the last year, and that collective anger over heedless globalization has made the agency more wary of projects that are, by any reasonable measure, environmental nightmares. Early last year, NRDC's Jacob Scherr alerted IDB to Mile 27's problems, and IDB

responded by demanding that Stantec explore alternative sites for the landfill. It also told Stantec to fix the many technical problems in the original Environmental Impact Assessment. But when Stantec turned in its revised report—the one recently approved by Belize's environmental officials—it had done neither of these things. For now the funding is on hold, and NRDC has petitioned IDB to reject the project permanently.

Back on the river, Matola and I pull the kayak up into the brush and climb onto a rock to watch the water glide past toward the sea. She points out shadows cast by the canopy of cohune palms and bamboo, and spots a footpath at the riverbank used by a village deeper in the forest. Those villages are what make Mile 27 so deplorable. If developed, it will ruin the water supply of thousands of local people. As for Matola, the government newspaper published an essay reminding her that sometimes people who do this kind of work "get killed." But when I ask her whether she would ever return to the United States, she answers without hesitating. "What would I do there? This is my home."

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