

INTERVIEW WITH CONSERVATIONIST SHARON MATOLA

Sharon Matola is founder and director of the Belize Zoo and NRDC's local partner in the fight to stop construction of a dam that would flood the Macal River valley—home to the jaguar and a rare subspecies of scarlet macaw. Matola founded the Zoo in 1983, when the wildlife documentary filmmaker she was working for finished a film project and was sent to Borneo, leaving Matola to deal with an animal menagerie. Having been told to get rid of as many of the animals as possible, she decided to start a zoo instead. Today, the Zoo is an internationally known institution that educates over 17,000 schoolchildren annually about the wonders of tropical nature.

Before she started the Zoo, Matola was in the U.S. Air Force, a biology graduate student, and a lion tamer with a traveling Mexican circus. She is the author of several children's books about animals.

Q: How did you become a conservationist, and why?

A: I've always loved nature. I can remember, as a kid who loved animals, wanting to be a vet — but have you ever met an animal who loved their vet back? Conserving the wild earth, keeping natural resources intact for future generations is the way I want to spend the rest of my life.

Q: Does the Zoo take animals out of the wild?

A: Absolutely not. All of the Zoo's animals were either born here, orphaned and brought in by local people, or captive bred at other zoos. Also, some are rehab animals, and others were the "pets" of people who discovered they couldn't care for them.

Q: And how does keeping captive animals dovetail with conserving wild habitats?

A: The Zoo is a "last resort" for animals that would die if it weren't available as a refuge.



Big John, the crocodile, was living in a city canal and because of his nine-foot length, the order was given to shoot him. We rescued him from being shot. And one of our jaguars was the cub of a jaguar shot on suspicion of killing cattle. He could not be released into the wild; he needed care.

Belize has the only protected area in the world set aside for the preservation of jaguars — the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary — but it's still rare for people to see them, since they're nocturnal. And now Belizeans can stand within five feet of this magnificent animal and feel proud that their country still has a healthy population of them, and that lands have been designated for their protection. The Zoo fosters a kind of "patriotism of nature."

Q: How did you first get to know the Macal River?

A: I've served as the chairperson for IUCN's Tapir Specialist Group, and that has taken me all over Central America, interviewing people and going into wild habitats looking for tapir. The tapir, by the way, is a 500-pound endangered mammal with a long nose, related to the horse and rhinoceros and dating to the time of the dinosaurs. And that's what took me to an area called the Upper Macal and Raspaculo river valley.

I have never gone to the valley and not been moved by its beauty, by the way the mist settles over the river in the mornings and lifts slowly as the sun rises. And now this

astounding place is going to be dammed and flooded. There are spider monkeys and Morelet's crocodiles there, a species believed to be extinct until it was rediscovered in Belize . . . and the first jaguar I ever saw in the wild was in that valley.

Q: Why is this habitat so important to the jaguar's survival?

A: Wildlife moves. The nearby, 100,000-acre Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary is a mere ten miles east of the Raspaculo, and male jaguars will travel 45 miles in a single day, searching for prey. And jaguars don't know when they're leaving the sanctuary; they roam. The river valley provides an abundant prey base for them.

Q: And what about the rare scarlet macaws that live there? How did they first come to your attention?

A: While we were out there studying tapir, we saw scarlet macaws — flying low, flying high. They weren't a formal part of our study, but then something happened in 1997 which galvanized the conservation community: the village of Red Bank shot 20 scarlet macaws and ate them.

This is one of the rarest birds in Central America; we've determined there are far fewer than 200 of them in the country. As a result we started education programs. We have instructors who go to schools and teach children about how to treat your scarlet macaws, which is not to shoot them.

Q: Tell me about the dam. Who wants to build it, and why?

A: There are two corporations that are the movers behind the dam project, Fortis Inc, a billion-dollar Canadian company, and Duke Energy International, based in the U.S. It's worth mentioning that the part of the valley that would be flooded is in a supposedly protected area, the Chiquibul Forest Reserve, which has incredibly rich biodiversity.

There's another dam owned by Duke, the Mollejon, about 13 kilometers downstream from the proposed Chalillo dam, and it doesn't get enough water in the dry season, so the new dam would be intended for dry-season storage. However, no hydrology studies have been undertaken to determine if the rivers could even provide sufficient amounts of water in the dry season to see the Chalillo

fulfill its role as a dry season storage dam. I should mention: The name of the valley, Raspaculo, means "scrape your butt," referring to the lack of water in the river during the dry season.

Q: What effect would the dam have on the river valley and its wildlife?

A: It would all be underwater. More than 2000 acres of unique habitat. A recent study by the World Bank showed that the vegetative community found in this river valley is a type of community found in only .03% of Belize — and 80% of it is in the area slated to be flooded. The proponents of the dam are ready to eradicate this extraordinary environment and see the end of these species for nine megawatts of power, which is nothing.

Q: How about the people who live downriver? How would the dam affect them?

A: In 1992, CI Power said there could be a problem with methyl mercury accumulation. Methyl mercury is a central nervous system toxin. But no one's really addressed that to these people. Hydrogen sulfides would also be formed in the reservoir.

I was talking to one of the villagers downstream from the Mollejon dam who said that in the dry season they have to go down to the river at four in the morning to bring water back.

Because if they wait till the afternoon when the dam releases the water, it's got a strange oily film on it. If their children bathe in the river, in the dry season, they get a prickly rash. The physical and chemical parameters of the river are definitely going to change if this second dam is built, and the fishing availability to these people is definitely going to change. Two comprehensive economic analyses of the Chalillo dam point to it causing a rise in Belizean electricity rates, yet I've seen no evidence of "benefits."

Q: Is this a fight we can win?

A: The battle's not over, but in the final analysis, I have to believe we'll win. And I have to tell you: That is sacred land up there. It's worth fighting for, it's worth taking risks for. Everything is interconnected in the biological world . . . we have lost so much of the planet, bit by bit and piece by piece. And that is exactly how we have to save it, piece by piece.

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