

FOR ACTOR Harrison Ford, who made his name performing heroic jungle rescues in his role as Indiana Jones, it's payback time. He has thrown his support behind a campaign to stop the Chalillo dam, a proposed 46-metre hydroelectric facility to be built on the Macal river in Belize, which environmentalists fear will flood nearly 3,000 acres of the richest rainforest terrain in Central America.

Nestled between the Central Maya Mountains near the Guatemalan border, this verdant stretch of the Macal river's upper valley is a protected national park and a natural habitat for some of the world's most endangered species. Its remote jungle is one of the last large havens for Baird's tapirs, Belize's national animal, jaguars, which roam 40 miles day in search of food, Morelet's crocodiles, southern river otters and a species of scarlet macaw believed to number barely 100.

Environmental agencies have long viewed the proposed dam with consternation, but Ford's intervention is having a positive impact. A resolution protesting against the dam will now be heard at this month's World Conservation Congress meeting in Jordan, organised by the



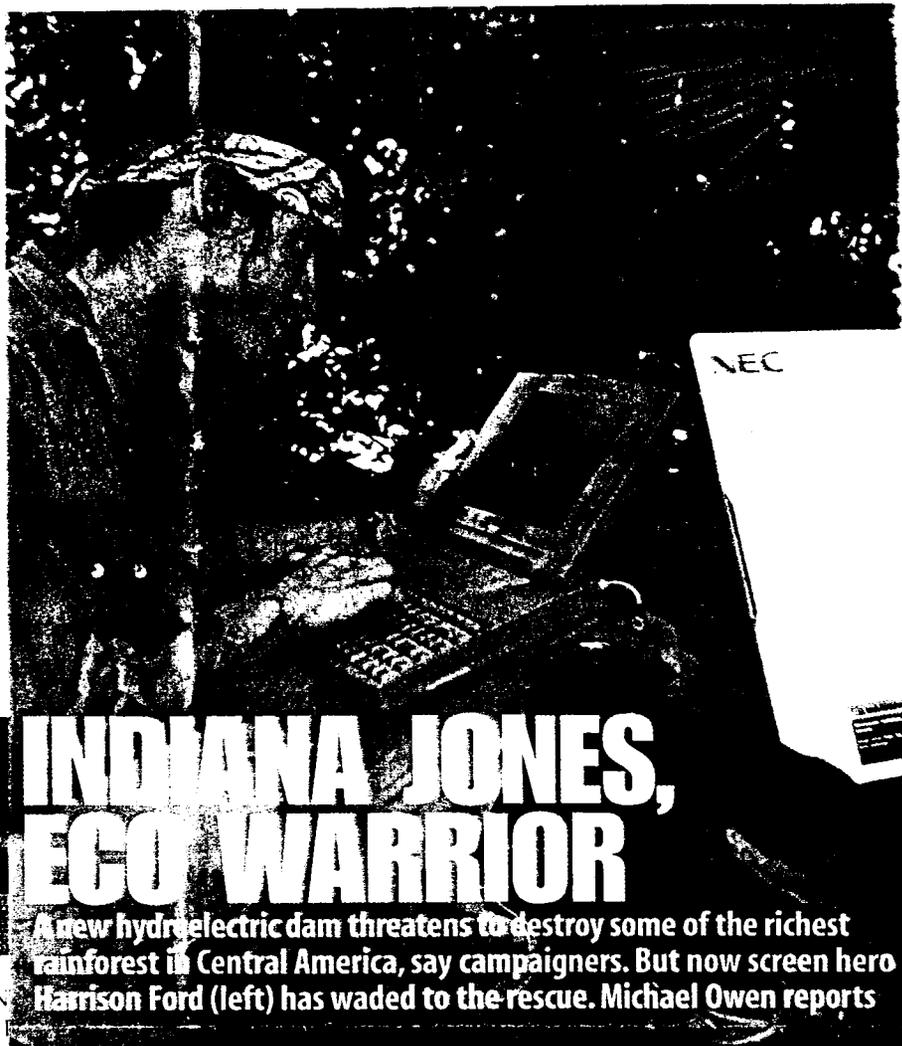
CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

In his first public statement on the issue, Ford told High Life: "Considering that Central America has lost some 70 per cent of its forests due to land alteration over the past 40 years, it is imperative that responsible action is set in place so that remaining natural resources are protected.

"We're talking about wildlife so rare it has been reduced to critically fragmented populations and even driven to extinction in some parts. Preserving this river valley and the rich biodiversity found there reflects an integrity when it comes to leaving a healthy natural heritage for future generations."

Ford's interest in Belize's ecology dates back to 1986, when he filmed *The Mosquito Coast* there with Helen Mirren and the teenage River Phoenix. Based on Paul Theroux's novel, the film follows the



# INDIANA JONES, ECO WARRIOR

A new hydroelectric dam threatens to destroy some of the richest rainforest in Central America, say campaigners. But now screen hero Harrison Ford (left) has waded to the rescue. Michael Owen reports

attempts of a frazzled inventor to establish a new community in the Central American jungle.

"Harrison is very concerned about what is happening in the Macal valley and wants to come in heavy," says Sharon Matola, one of the leading environmentalists fighting the project. "He has drafted letters to help the campaign. It is imperative this does not go ahead. It will destroy an eco-system that is not duplicated anywhere else in the Caribbean."

Rising water would not only prove catastrophic for the region's environmental balance. It would also submerge ancient sites of the Maya civilisation, including an area that was once an outlying district of the city of Caracol, which in 500AD had a population of 180,000. Downstream from the dam, the livelihood and welfare of native people dependent on the river would be threatened.

A spokesman for Belize Electricity Limited, one of the companies behind the £20 million dam, said: "We are aware of the need to balance development with prudent environmental management, and have traditionally proceeded only where developments are proven to be environmentally friendly.

"The benefits of the Chalillo project are many. It will help BEL to deliver on its promise of reducing the cost of electrical power. In addition, the development will greatly help to manage the Macal river, which is prone to flash floods with devastating economic loss to the residents in the area. Studies show that Chalillo will have a very minimal impact on the environment, particularly to wildlife in the area."

Before a new impact study is published next year, campaigners are grateful that Indiana Jones is riding to the rescue once more. **High Life**

## Contributors

PHOTOGRAPHY/CORBIS/HULTON GETTY

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