

ecosystem. Sapó National Park is at the core of an immense forest block that has not been disturbed or fragmented to the same extent as the rest of the Upper Guinean forest ecosystem, and as such it offers an important conservation opportunity. A long-term biological monitoring programme has been set up in SNP that will provide data on wildlife populations and trends. The details of this can be found in a recent report that is available from the authors.

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### Mesoamerican biological corridor threatened by hydroelectric dam

Sustaining the remaining biodiversity of Mesoamerica is the remit of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor Project (MBCP). This forested corridor, stretching across the Central American isthmus, will provide a verdant landscape, allowing valuable genetic exchange between species, and will address the spatial requirements of species: room to breed, forage and utilize various types of habitat. These elements are necessary for the maintenance of healthy populations.

An important area of the MBCP is a block of forest known as the Selva Maya (Maya Forest). Encompassing 22,000 km<sup>2</sup>, this is the largest tract of contiguous forest north of the Amazon Basin. Crossing the boundaries of Belize, Guatemala and Mexico, this section of the MBCP provides a sanctuary for threatened species in northern Central America.

However, the integrity of this forest is currently threatened by a Canadian-backed hydroelectric dam project known as 'Chalillo Dam'. Should the dam project go ahead in the central Maya Mountains of Belize, a unique river valley will be inundated. This river valley has been shown to be the principal reproductive grounds for the subspecies of scarlet macaw *Ara macao cyanoptera* in Belize. All field studies of this subspecies indicate that less than 200 of these rare parrots remain in the country. The proposed dam would also negatively affect another threatened species, the Central American tapir *Tapirus bairdii*, which is categorised as Vulnerable on the 2000 IUCN Red List, as well as fragment the hunting grounds of the region's large carnivores, such as the jaguar *Panthera onca*, which is categorised as Lower Risk/near threatened.

Independent financial analysis of the proposed dam has shown that it is not economically viable. Furthermore, the Canadian-based company, Fortis Inc., is under a moratorium that prevents it developing a similar project on its home ground. The amount of power that would result from the proposed dam is projected to be 6–8 megawatts. Those opposing the project are encouraging Fortis to look at other energy options. Co-generation, which would involve the burning of sugar waste to provide a local source of energy, is being strongly promoted. This would remove the threat to the MBCP, and empower conservation efforts in the northern Central American region.

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### Update on coltan mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Tantalum is a rare, blue-grey metal that has a wide range of uses, including in the manufacture of capacitors to store electrical charges in portable computers and mobile phones. There are tantalum deposits in many parts of the world, including Australia, the Americas and Asia, but when a world shortage occurred in 2000 (primarily because of a demand for PlayStations) the biggest impact was in Africa.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), thousands of miners entered World Heritage Site national parks to mine 'coltan', the African name for an ore of tantalum and its sister mineral, columbium or niobium. The name coltan is derived from columbite-tantalite. To support these mining camps, professional hunters killed vast quantities of wildlife for meat. One of the worst affected species was the Eastern lowland, or Grauer's, gorilla *Gorilla beringei* ssp. *graueri* that occurs only in DRC and whose population may have been decimated.

During 2000 the price of tantalum skyrocketed from \$40 per pound to \$500 per pound, but it has now returned to its original level. There has been speculation that falling demand is related to the downturn of the high-tech industries, global recession, development of alternatives to tantalum, expansion of mining in Australia and international pressure for a boycott of Central African tantalum. Whilst all of these elements may have contributed, one of the key factors is that during the shortage in 2000 panic-buying by major companies led to the creation of massive stockpiles. Those companies are now using up their expensive stock and the market is therefore depressed. Although demand appears to have slumped, this is probably temporary.