

flood more than 1,000 hectares of the Macal River Valley in Belize.



Sharon Matola/Belize Zoo

Valley of the damned

BELIZE Hydro-electric generation scheme threatens crucial habitat for rare Central American species.

Plans to build a hydro-electric dam in the Macal River Valley in Belize have been denounced on the basis that it will flood more than 1,000 hectares of pristine rainforest and makes no economic sense.

The Macal River Valley is widely regarded as one of the richest natural areas in Central America. A critical habitat for Baird's tapir and famous for high concentrations of jaguars, keel-billed motmot and the endangered Morelet's crocodile, it is also Belize's only known breeding site for scarlet macaws.

But the Chalillo Dam will flood 1,170 hectares of the valley, cost an estimated £20 million and, according to John Reid of the US-based Conservation Strategy Fund, has a 70 per cent chance of losing money. An initial feasibility study carried out by Belize Electricity Limited (BEL) also found the project was not viable.

Mexico, which in 1999 supplied 22 per cent of Belize's power, can produce electricity at about half the price. In addition, many dam opponents say that, if more home-grown power is required, then the best option is *bagasse*, a sugar-cane-processing by-product with which many other tropical countries already produce electricity. This would also help support Belize's ailing sugarcane industry.

US-based Duke Energy

International recently quit the Chalillo project, partly because of vociferous local and US opposition. The dam is now being funded by Fortis, a Canadian-based multinational conglomerate which own 67 per cent of BEL.

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is currently being carried out and should be completed by June or July. "It's very easy for people to oppose the project and make accusations," said chief executive officer Stan Marshall. "Let's do the science and then decide."

Fortis also claimed that a more recent feasibility study has concluded that the dam will make money, assuming that BEL would be unable to increase the supply of electricity that currently comes from Mexico. **ADRIAN BARNETT**

Action

- The World Conservation Congress has called on Fortis and the Belize Government to cancel the Chalillo Dam unless studies show the project would not cause environmental degradation.
- More details at www.savebiogems.org
- Contact Belize's Prime Minister, the Honourable Said Musa, at: primeminister@belize.gov.bz
- Messages can also be sent to Fortis President and CEO H Stanley Marshall. Fax: 001 709 737 5307.

The latest genetic research has r the number of genes which differ cats or even fruit flies. So what d

Before *The Origin of Species*, the question of what distinguishes humans from other species was pretty much a non-question. Though we no longer supposed that our planet was at the centre of the universe, most people in the western world still believed that God had created us *ex nihilo* and that we alone were created in God's image. It was therefore our godly task to have dominion over the rest of creation in all our glorious separateness.

Apart from an enduring rump of fundamentalists, who continue to campaign to ensure that evolution cannot be taught in US schools, we now see it very differently. Our knowledge of evolution has put us in our place, not as the acme of creation, but just as the latest organism in an unfolding of life stretching back to the first single-celled bacterium 3.5 billion years ago.

In February this year, publication of the first results of the Human Genome Project went one stage further. It demonstrated that, though we are still unique and still 'special' (not least because we are the only species – so far as we know – that can reflect on its own uniqueness), we are not that different – genetically speaking, that is.

The biggest shock was that we have so few genes. Those involved in the project had sort of assumed that because we're so much bigger, so much cleverer and so much more 'special' that we'd have to have more genes than other species. Not so. Our 27,000 to 40,000 genes put us in the same league as dogs and cats. That's just five times as many as a bacterium and twice as many as a fruit fly. What's more, 90 per cent of our genes are similar to the genes of a mouse and

99 per cent related. Incidentally, the idea that counts contribute to gene frequency for a lot of should be that it, o count inheri

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● Jonathon Porritt is the chairman of the Commission and programmes director o