

## NRDC visits on behalf of the environment

Members of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) arrived in Belize last week at the request of the Belize Alliance of Conservation Non-Government Organizations Limited (BACONGO) to meet with organizations and individuals regarding the proposed Chalillo Dam. The NRDC comprises over 500,000 members whose goal is to protect the planet's wildlife and wild places, therefore ensuring a safe and healthy environment for all living things. During a three-day "retreat" held at Chaa Creek in the Cayo District and Victoria House on Ambergris Caye, much discussion involved the threats to the wild areas of Belize, including ways the barrier reef could be affected by this project.

Jacob Scherr, International Program Director explained that NRDC is an advocacy group headquartered in Washington, D.C. which utilizes scientists, lawyers and policy experts to achieve their conservation goals. Nearly two-thirds of their income

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### NRDC

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comes from membership and contributions and a whopping 81% is directed to environmental programs. Their programs target air and energy, health, land, nuclear, urban, water and coastal, and international issues. The Macal River Valley is considered a "BioGem" project in their international program. BioGems can be found on their web site [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org) which explains the facts regarding each site. Included on the Macal River Valley site is a brief overview of the area and the wildlife inhabitants whose future is at stake: the scarlet macaw and the jaguar. It states the \$30 million dam is being funded by Canadian Fortis, Inc. and their partners, the Government of Belize. It continues to describe the potential adverse affects of hydroelectricity stating, "independent analysis has shown the proposed project to be economically unsound as well as ecologically devastating."

Another item that can be accessed on the NRDC web site is an interview with Sharon Matola of the Belize Zoo. Ms. Matola, a key person involved in opposing this project, gives a detailed explanation of the threats to the wildlife habitat in the Macal Valley. As well, a letter of protest to the CEO of Fortis is written and can be signed by the visitor to the site by a simple click of the button reading "STOP THE DAM". The last paragraph reads "Send a message to Fortis that a North American corporation has no business destroying Belize's natural heritage for private profit. Tell Fortis, Inc. not to build the dam."

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Mr. Scherr stated that the CEO of Fortis has received over 60,000 responses so far. In the web site's report it mentions that "Duke Energy, another company that had been expecting to invest in the new dam, has heard the message. After receiving more than 20,000 letters and e-mails from NRDC members and other activists, Duke recently decided to sell off its own dam in Belize and leave the country altogether."

Trustees of the NRDC consist of a wide range of professionals: CEOs, presidents, executives, foundation "chairs" as well as celebrities including actor Robert Redford, artist Maya Lin and singer/songwriter James Taylor. For the past thirty years, this dedicated organization has accomplished or helped with such issues as the 1971 Clean Water Act, 1987 International treaty on the ozone layer, deleting damaging chemicals from aerosol cans, preventing oil drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge in 1991, defeating the James Bay hydroelectric project in 1994, and getting Mitsubishi to abandon plans for a major salt factory next to the last unspoiled breeding ground of the gray whale in 2000.

In Belize, BACONGO does its part to act as a group to lobby for action on several key environmental issues. Their main objective is to protect and conserve the natural resources of Belize. Its non-governmental organization members represent all corners of the country and consist of: Program for Belize, The Belize Zoo, Siwa-Ban Foundation, Friends of Gra-Gra Lagoon, Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, Shipstern Nature Reserve, Belize Environmental Law