

Should BACONGO sit on NEAC?

The National Environmental Appraisal Committee (NEAC) is an arm of the Department of the Environment (DOE). NEAC is charged with the responsibility of appraising environmental impact assessments (EIA) submitted to the department whenever activities are planned that affect the environment, as is the case with BEL in the building of a dam at Chalillo.

Environmental impact assessments are just that, assessments on how the development would impact the environment. The EIA includes mitigation measures in areas where the developer feels that the impact to the environment would be negative and there is something he can do about it. It is the duty of NEAC to independently assess EIA's and approve them, reject them, or approve them with conditions that would include additional mitigation measures as well as benchmarks to monitor and continuously assess the impact the development will have on the environment.

NEAC is made up of officers of the Department of the Environment and members of the NGO community; perhaps the most important one in this instance being The Belize Alliance of Conservation Non Governmental Organizations (BACONGO).

BACONGO is made up of a number of environmental organizations: the Belize Audubon Society, Programme for Belize, Toledo Institute of Development and Environment, Belize Zoo, Shipstern Nature Reserve, Sibun Watershed Association, Association of Friends of Freshwater Creek, Forest Reserve, Green Reef, Friends of Gra Gra Lagoon, Friends of Five Blues Lake and the Siwa Ban Foundation.

BACONGO has been, up until the loss of its Executive Director recently, the most vocal opponent in the environmental movement against the building of the Chalillo dam. This opposition has cost BACONGO one of its largest, if not the largest, member the Belize Audubon Society. The Audubon Society has gone on record saying that it will not make any statements regarding Chalillo until the EIA is complete.

BACONGO on the other hand has made statements, produced advertisements, conducted seminars, and have traveled to Canada to apprise even the Canadians of why Chalillo is bad for Belize. Should BACONGO, then, be allowed to sit and appraise an EIA on which it has already made up its mind without having first seen the EIA? The judge cannot be on the jury too.