

Let's all be calm about this!

Meb Cutlack

Reporter Feature Writer

Come! Come! Sharon and Norris!

It is sad to see two such committed environmentalists as Sharon Matola and Norris Hall fall out over the environmental issues surrounding the proposed upper dam.

My own opinion is that, at this moment, with the government promising and seeking total input and openness from ALL, on the subject of the dam, it would be a good idea for everyone to reserve judgement until all the facts are in. Let us first urge, seek and present, as government has suggested, all the possible information and knowledge available on:

- 1) The need for the dam.
- 2) The possibility of alternative energy sources.
- 3) The relative and true costs of hydro power against other energy sources.
- 4) The long-term effect on the lower Macal and Belize rivers of the various height and flow options that are being studied.
- 5) The long-term effects of flooding the up-river areas, again taking into account the various height options that are being discussed.

The new dam cannot and should not be something hurried through with input only from those sources committed, for one reason or another, to its completion. It is

not a matter just for the Department of Economic Development, but also of concern to the Ministries of Tourism, Public Utilities, Agriculture and the Ministry of the Environment.

The entire project also needs all possible input from the NGOs such as The Audubon Society, the BTIA & BETA, SPEAR and certainly not least, the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center. This is exactly what the Belize Government and Norris Hall, speaking for the Macal

record, to point out that in my view, there is no single person in this country who has done more for conservation and conservational awareness than Sharon Matola.

The Belize Zoo, which she created virtually single-handedly from a borrowed piece of land and a few animals left over from film-making, has taught two generations of Belizean children, and in many cases, their parents, the value of the country's wildlife and also the extraordinary beauty and diversity of all the flora and fauna of Belize.

It is absolutely essential that true research from all interested parties be presented and analyzed and only then should a final decision - to go ahead or not with the dam - be made.

River Chalillo Project, have promised.

I can think of no other project in the history of Belize since Independence that any government has been more open about. This invitation to input is something entirely new in the history of Belizean government and politics and something that, unless it is taken advantage of, will vanish.

All those parties, and the general public, who have been invited to submit ideas, information or criticism should do so with thoughtfulness and accuracy but perhaps also, at this stage, with as little emotion as possible.

Sharon and the Zoo have also, in themselves, become a proud symbol of Belize. "How do I get to the Zoo?" Is a constant first question asked by visitors. "Where's the zoo woman?" is sometimes the second question - and no wonder. It wasn't long ago that Sports Illustrated devoted a nine-page supplement just to Sharon and the zoo. It was one of the widest read magazine articles ever published.

I would also like to say to Norris that Sharon's "hidden agenda" is in reality an open and easily seen agenda: a true and absolute love of Belize, her people, the country's wildlife and its environment.

I would add that this also an-

often, through many governments and over many years, when I have been in Belize and out of Belize, I have picked up a newspaper and seen Norris's byline. Inevitably it has been in defence of Belize's environment - and often when few others were prepared to stand up and be counted.

It is absolutely essential that true research from all interested parties be presented and analyzed and only then should a final decision - to go ahead or not with the dam - be made. Premature pronouncements that the dam is going ahead at any cost, or unnecessary hysteria about its effects, before a final decision is made, are detrimental to Belize as a whole.

Matola's press release last week should be considered no more than an early contribution to the debate that lies ahead and as such, not really deserving of quite the severity with which it has been greeted. She is, after all, speaking from the heart.

Good news item of the week: Government has announced that "NITCH," the National Institute for Culture and History, will be discussed in open forum in San Ignacio on Wednesday, March 17, before moving further into law.

Interested parties should make a point of attending.

Bad news item of last week: That a Cuban national, Reinaldo Bustamente, who has served his sentence here for illegal entry, is still languishing in prison - be-