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THE REPORTER

Sunday March 28, 1999

Proposed dam not a

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Contributed Article

Interest continues to grow in San Ignacio over the proposed building of a second dam in the Raspaculo area in Cayo District.

It was three months ago that Cayo Civil Society informed Cayo BTIA about the proposal at one of their meetings. BETA had already written the Minister of Tourism for further information. Subsequently, last month, the Cayo BTIA called a public meeting at which Mr. Norris Hall, public relations officer of the Macal River Chalillo Project, and Mr. Sooknandan, BEL engineer, made presentations. All speakers tried to explain away opposing concerns.

Ms. Sharon Matola a wildlife specialist from the Belize Zoo has vigorously opposed the building of the dam strictly from an ecological standpoint. Last week Ms. Matola, together with Mr. Marin Meadows, ecologist, gave a public presentation in San Ignacio where they showed the possible downside effects the dam would have on the wildlife and ecosystem of the area.

The Belize Audubon Society also, has announced that they are working on a position paper with respect to the building of the dam, which they will release shortly.

The number that turned out at the last gathering surely indicated that more and more, people are taking an interest for one reason or the other. Quite noticeable was the fact that more non-Belizeans were present at both sessions, and more so at the second session. Most of the non-Belizeans were into tourism or tourism-related occupations. Surely, they see the absolute need for protecting the environment if its destruction will reduce the number of tourist visitors. Also, one must not lose sight of the fact that Belize, in particular Cayo, offers to out tourism investors from abroad a wholesome environment of peace and natural freedom, which is now a fast diminishing commodity, especially in devel-

oped countries. There is, therefore, every reason to stand up for the protection of the environment in Belize. I will refrain in this essay to address the economic spill over on Belize as a result of tourism investments. Let me just say that he who controls the money has almost full control of the economy.

It was at the second gathering that Mr. Luis Obando of SPECTE, a grass roots NGO dedicated to protecting the flora and fauna of a stretch of the Macal, struck on the real concern over the building of

terestingly, Mr. Hall, at the last session expressed great concern for the 75,000 Belizeans who are below the poverty level and for whom the supply of electrical energy would be an economic benefit. Again Mr. Obando wondered whether the ordinary people would say "yes" to the question, "Would you want more electrical energy, given the implications?"

The buzzword nowadays is "globalization." Our political leaders tell us everyday that we cannot stop the trend and that we had bet-

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Mr. Obando pointed out that his organization is in touch with over 1,000 Belizeans who make a living from the Macal but who have not been brought into the "dam picture." Everyone else was engaged in arriving at a decision, which would necessarily affect the river people, but that they had not been asked for their views. These are people who cannot come to a meeting in San Ignacio.

It is no surprise, though, for this is how things are done in Belize. A handful of politicians and business people make national decisions for everyone else. In fact it happens sometimes that one person only is authorized to decide for the whole country. Our laws are full of instances where after all is said and done, a minister of government decides for every one. Perhaps this is why Belizeans do not get excited over the dam. They believe that at the end of the day, a handful will make the decision.

This type of decision-making is morally wrong when considering the fact that the results of whatever decision is made will fall upon the ordinary masses. They are the producers of wealth, who would be taxed to pay for the dam. In-

ter prepare ourselves for it. This attitude is a straight sell-out, if the exploring of alternative strategies is not even placed on the agenda. In Creole we say, "We li down an dead." More electrical energy will result in the increased sale of appliances to the 75,000 poor Belizeans and television will bring the unaffordable tastes of people from the developed countries into the living rooms of these poor Belizeans. Nevertheless, this is development, according to the globalization yardstick.

Mr. Hall stated that \$400,000 has already been spent by BEL (paying foreign enterprises?) for carrying out studies on the proposed dam project. More will yet be spent. And, of course, the contract for building the dam will be given to a company coming from a developed country. Mr. Hall did not answer when asked whether the company now doing the planning and assessment is the same one that did it for the first dam.

We are informed that one of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) team members is a social scientist. It would be interesting to know what his assessment of the social impact of the dam will be. Was it not for this reason that ESTAP was established in Toledo, in order to prepare the people for the social changes that will come about as a result of the building of the Southern Highway?

Nevertheless, Mr. Hall has repeatedly stated that there will be the utmost transparency and that no decision will be made without proper consultation. We shall see.

Come what may, Belizeans, must stay awake and let our opinions be heard - on everything that affects our lives - not just every five years.

people's dam

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