

The pros and cons of Chalillo

The Macal River Chalillo Project is inviting Belizeans to review the study documents which have been prepared for a proposed complimentary dam known as the Macal River Upstream Facility.

The documents have been lodged with the Department of the Environment in Belmopan, and may be inspected during working hours by any interested party.

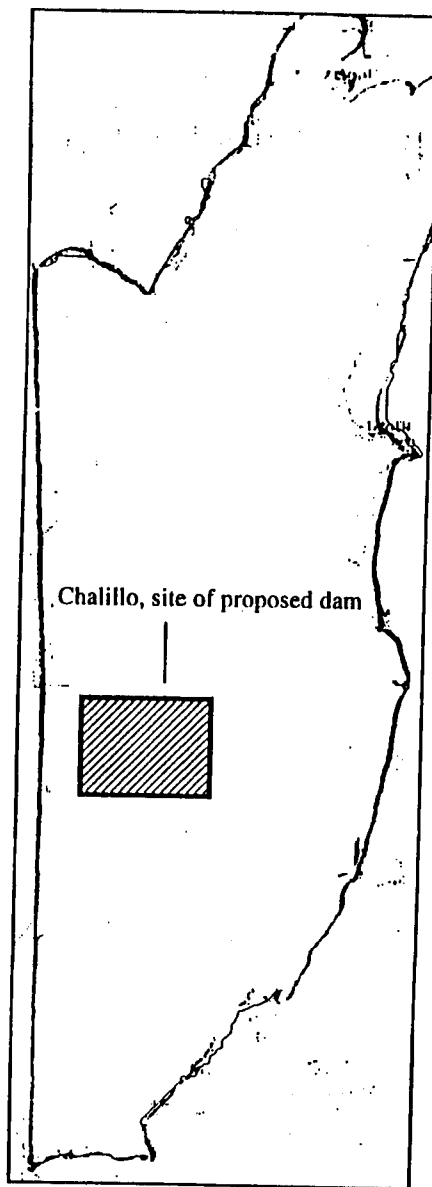
In 1992 the Belize Electricity Limited paid for an environmental impact assessment and feasibility study of the Upper Macal River which rejected the Rubber Camp site as environmentally unsuitable.

Today a second environmental impact assessment and feasibility study is being completed by a Canadian company, Agra CI Power.

An announcement from the Project spokesman, Mr. Norris Hall, states that the Canadian environmental specialist will be working with a local team of environmental consultants, headed by Mr. Jose "Pepe" Garcia, a civil and sanitary engineer and manager of the consulting firm Tunich-Nah Consultants. (He also happens to be the president of the Belize Audubon Society).

The study will include specialist inputs in ecology, forestry, wildlife, fisheries, water quality and archeology, according to Hall. The impact of siltation and the social and economic impacts are also included.

Under a separate agreement



Map courtesy of the
Macal River
Chalillo Project.

Belize Electricity Limited has also awarded a contract to Swissboring Overseas Corporation Limited to provide drilling and geotechnical information at the proposed dam site at Chalillo. This study will determine soil types, type and strength of rock formations and search for geological faults.

Other reputable research and scientific institutions have also offered their assistance to the government of Belize and Belize Electricity Limited to help in the making of a sound decision for the construction of a holding reservoir at Chalillo, based on environmental, economic and social considerations.

Ms. Sharon Matola of the Belize Zoo, has come out strongly in opposition to the Chalillo site for environmental reasons.

She notes that the proposed Rubber Camp was rejected by a previous environmental impact study, but that "both sites are within five kilometers of each other," and both sides have similar reservoir and surface area characteristics, and both have "several environmental impacts, such as the loss of riparian habitat, reservoir drawdown and changes in flow regime".

Matola points out that the proposed Chalillo Dam, which is to be 30 meters high, will not be a small dam., and quotes the C.I. Power Report to show that "reservoir flooding will eliminate alluvial terraces, flooding 1170 hectares or 90 percent of existing ri-

parian vegetation" and affecting downstream conditions for human living as well.

Chalillo Project statements suggest that there will be "miniscule" flooding of the Raspaculo River, Matola says, but initial reports are showing that 90 percent of the riverine habitat on a 10.5 kilometer stretch of the Raspaculo River will be destroyed, including the only known nesting site for the Scarlet Macaw Parrot. These birds depend on certain riverine plants for food - plants which would disappear when the surrounding countryside is under water.

The suggestion that the Scarlet Macaws can be translocated would be met with disbelief and reprisal from the biological community both in Belize and abroad, Matola argues.

Matola concludes her arguments against the dam by pointing out that the proposed construction will have the potential to increase downstream riverbed erosion and change water temperature, making it warmer and so affect aquatic life and riparian vegetation downstream.

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