

Fortis is Dam Stubborn: Public Meeting Held on UPEI Campus to Discuss Environmental Implications of the Chalillo Dam in Belize

by Stuart Neatby

BACKGROUND

The Chalillo dam is a hydroelectric dam set to be constructed in the Mountain Pine Ridge Area of Belize, a Central American country bordering Mexico and Guatemala. The dam's construction is being undertaken by the Belize Electric Company (BECOL), which is owned by Newfoundland-based Fortis Incorporated. Fortis also owns Maritime Electric, as well as a variety of other energy producing companies such as Niagara Power Ltd and Caribbean Utilities Ltd.

The Chalillo dam, if built, would flood a large section of the Macal River Valley, believed by many to be a sensitive ecological area. For two years, there has been a large battle waged between Fortis and environmental organizations, such as the Sierra Club of Canada, Probe International, and the Belize Alliance of Conservative Non-Governmental Organizations (BACONGO). These groups, as well as many respected scientists and conservationists, allege that the Macal River Valley contains important habitats of many endangered species such as jaguars, tapirs (an ancient relative of the horse) and scarlet macaws (colourful parrots found only in Central America).

The threat to the scarlet macaw population, in particular, has been taken seriously by many, as it is believed that their numbers have already dwindled drastically due to poaching and habitat destruction. Alistair Rogers, a well-known expert on the Macal River Valley, has estimated that there are currently fewer than two hundred of these birds left in Belize, while other environmental groups claim that less than one thousand of these birds are found anywhere in Central America (and subsequently the world). Most of the Belizean habitats for this bird are

found within the Macal River Valley.

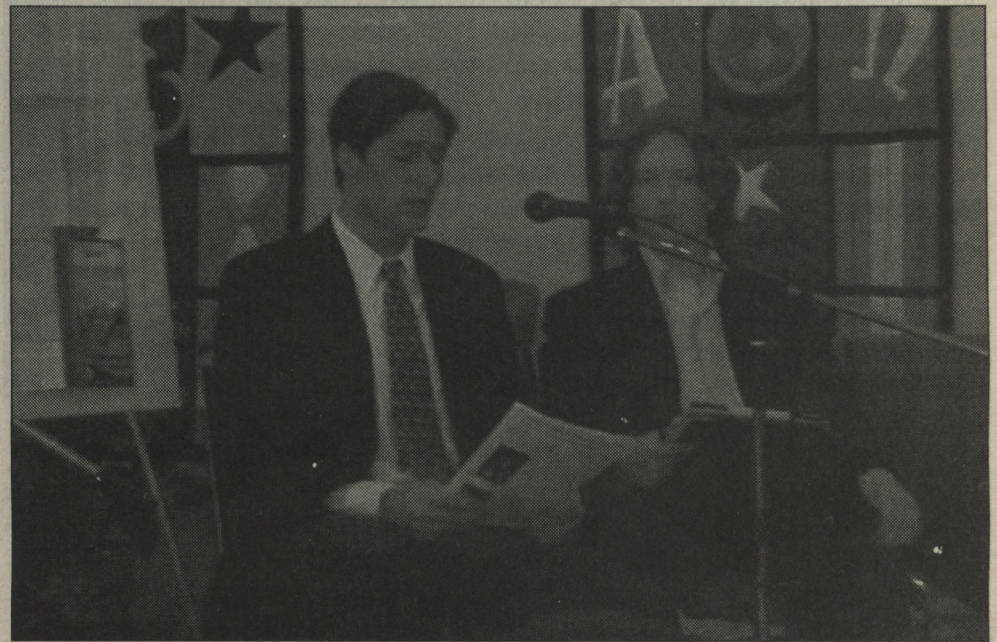
Many environmental organizations have also made the claim that Fortis is overcharging the people of Belize for their electricity, claiming that the energy rates are three times higher than the Canadian average. Furthermore, there are several sites containing Mayan ruins that are found within the area that would be flooded. Several archaeologists have written to Stanley Marshall, President of Fortis, requesting or outright demanding that the construction of the dam be delayed or cancelled completely.

Fortis has taken steps to study the environmental and social impacts that its dam would have. The Belize Electric Company, and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) commissioned AMEC, a British-based engineering firm, to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the dam project. This assessment concluded that the dam would be "the most economical option for generating power within Belize," and stated that it would "translate into better overall service to its customers."

Yet there are many aspects of the EIA study that have drawn criticism, the most significant of which was a study done by AMEC's own wildlife consultants, the British Museum of Natural History. The Museum's study was very critical of the whole project and claimed, among other things, that the dam would result in "significant and irreversible reduction of biological diversity in Belize, initially at the population level, but later potentially at the species level, some of the species affected being of international importance."

THE MEETING

It was with these sorts of concerns in mind that the UPEI chaplain-



The dam meeting.

cy centre held a public meeting to discuss the Chalillo Dam on a snowy Tuesday afternoon on January 22 of this year. The panel contained two representatives from Maritime Electric: Angus Orford, Manager of Customer Service at Maritime Electric, and Enrique Riveroll, an electrical engineer at Maritime Electric, who grew up in Belize. Also present, to a degree, was John Evans, the Project Manager of the Chalillo dam, who conducted the meeting via telephone, speaking to the audience through an expensive-looking speaker phone. Rounding out the panel were two UPEI students, Bartholomew Buckeye Bottoms, a student at the Atlantic Veterinary College, and George Marshall, an economics major who has been involved with many social justice groups, including an assembly of youth that travelled to the Dominican Republic in the summer of 2001.

The discussion began with speeches by Orford and Riveroll, who both stressed the importance of the economic development that the Chalillo dam would bring to Belize. They pointed to the level of poverty

that currently exists in Belize (currently standing at 33 percent), and argued that greater access to electricity would benefit the economy. Riveroll also claimed that, in a telephone conversation with Belize's Prime Minister Said Musa the previous evening, the Prime Minister had assured him that the people of Belize were in favour of the Chalillo project.

John Evans, speaking from Newfoundland, gave a well-argued speech, stressing the growing demand for electricity in Belize. He also downplayed the environmental concerns surrounding the dam, claiming that none of the species found in the Macal River Valley is endangered. He also claimed that Pine Bark Beetles had destroyed much of the forested areas in the region. He stated repeatedly that all development projects are bound to have some sort of environmental impact, implying that the benefits brought about by the dam will outweigh the effects it will have on the River Valley.

Responding to these points, Bottoms expressed a great concern for the natural habitats that would be lost if the dam were to be constructed, par-