

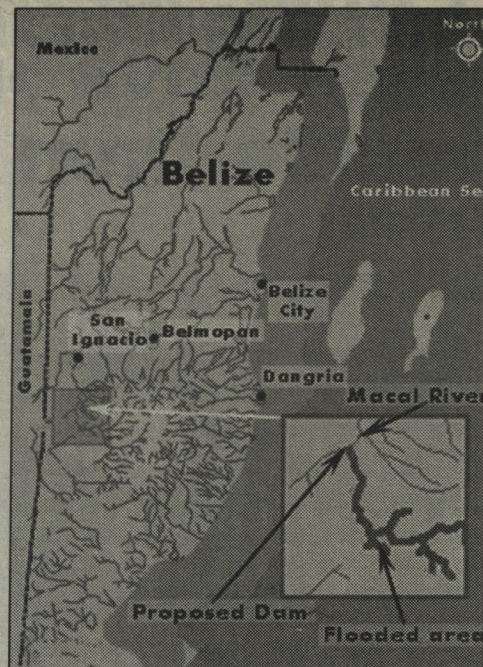
ticularly for those of the scarlet macaw. He pointed out that there is documented evidence that there is a particular Belizean variety of the scarlet macaw that had a strong presence within the Macal River Valley. This Belizean Macaw population would be greatly threatened by the dam's construction. Also, due to the large outcry that this dam has created among scientists such as Alistair Rogers, Sharon Matola, Alan Rabinowitz, and many others, he suggested that further study be conducted in the area prior to Fortis going ahead with construction of the dam.

George Marshall also expressed concerns about the project. He cited the lack of consultation in regard to AMEC's EIA which was submitted to the government of Belize earlier in 2001. In response to the completion of the EIA, Dr. David Suzuki, Alistair Rogers, and many other scientists had prepared reports that spoke out against the dam. These reports were not even filed by AMEC. It is required by Belizean law that consultation be conducted with Conservationist groups for a project with a potentially serious environmental impact. This simply has not happened for the Chalillo project, though the Musa government has publicly thrown its support behind Fortis.

Marshall agreed that the economic benefits that would be brought to the people of Belize are very significant as well, and made the case that though the Chalillo project had its faults, it would likely be beneficial for the economy and people of Belize.

Audience turn-out for this meeting was small. Only about six or seven people were able to attend, and there were few questions. This was very unfortunate as, had the weather been better, there likely would have been several people from Eco-PEI, a local environmental network, that would have come out to show their concern.

Although Maritime Electric's representatives were well prepared with their arguments, there were also several strange arguments presented regarding criticism of the Chalillo dam. John Evans in particular seemed defensive about the project, accusing environmental groups of discrediting



**The proposed dam site.**

the dam in order to raise funds for themselves. This is a pretty ridiculous claim to make, as most of the campaign against the dam has been conducted by non-profit organizations, like the Sierra Club. Also, in response to a question I raised about the British Museum of Natural History Study, which was very critical of the Chalillo project as it stands now, Mr. Evans seemed to claim that the museum actually ignored the findings of one of its researchers based in Belize. This would seem to be a very serious accusation to make, as the British Museum of Natural History is a very reputable ecological organization. Mr. Evans did not elaborate on this claim.

#### MY OPINION

The sheer volume and variety of environmental concern that have been raised about the Chalillo dam cannot simply be dismissed. Though Fortis representatives are fond of denying the existence of any endangered species in the Macal River Valley, there are at least six species found in this area that are listed as being threatened with extinction by the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Many experts and citizens that have voiced concern about this dam, including David Suzuki, actor Harrison Ford, and well-known environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy

Jr. It is fair to say that there is a growing scientific community of geologists, archaeologists, conservationists, and biologists that oppose the dam. And although Fortis claims that the people of Belize are in support of the Chalillo dam, a recent demonstration of four hundred citizens in Belize's capitol city of Belmopan seems to suggest that there is a great deal of opposition to the project as well. Though a demonstration of four hundred people does not seem overwhelming, it should be noted that the population of Belmopan is only five thousand people according to the CIA World Factbook..

Criticism of the project cannot simply be dismissed, and there are indications that Fortis is beginning to realize this. Recently, Fortis announced that it would not award AMEC the contract to design the Chalillo dam. AMEC had previously been the prime candidate for this contract, despite the fact that environmental and social justice groups claimed a potential conflict of interest, as AMEC had previously conducted a favourable Environmental Impact Assessment for the project several months earlier.

However, this is not to say that the dam would offer no advantage for Belize. At present, Belize imports 50 percent of its energy from Mexico. The price of this energy is indexed to oil prices, so it tends to fluctuate. Also, this energy seems to be quite unreliable, as many areas of Belize have simply been cut off from power due to energy shortages in Mexico. While it does seem that Belize needs some other supply of energy within the country, the Chalillo dam is not

the only option. The British Museum of Natural History suggested alternate sites for the dam within the Mountain Pine Ridge region, which would have less of an impact on the surrounding area.

Also, many have suggested that Belize's energy needs could be provided by the burning of Bagasse, a fuel that is produced as a by-product from Belize's sugar cane industry. The very fact that these options exist, and are being given some credit by newspapers in Belize, such as *The Belize Times*, lends more weight to the argument of whether or not the Chalillo dam is the best means for providing Belize's energy needs. Though the Chalillo dam should not be dismissed, its construction should be delayed for the purpose of further study. However, as things stand now, this does not seem likely.

At present, road clearing work around the proposed site of the dam has begun. Fortis, after having planned this project for nearly a decade, does not seem content to wait any longer.

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