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What you should know about Belize's Macal River valley



The Macal River and its tributaries in Belize are the only known nesting sites for the world's largest and most spectacular species of scarlet macaw. Sharon Matola, a biologist, scarlet macaw expert and the director of the Belize Zoo, describes the area as "the cradle for biodiversity for Central America" and "the only place in Central America where [scarlet macaws] live unmolested." This area also forms part of Central America's best remaining jaguar habitat. According to one of the world's leading jaguar experts, Dr. Alan Rabinowitz of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, flooding this valley by building the Chalillo dam would "disrupt the integrity of the jaguar's habitat in Belize," making it "a festering wound in the body of one of the largest intact jaguar sites." Many of the area's wildlife species are already extinct in other parts of Central America.

The Chalillo dam would fracture the Meso-American Biological Corridor, a vast tract of forest stretching from Mexico to Panama, established by the nations of Central America to protect migration routes and breeding grounds for predatory cats, migratory birds, and other species. The dam would also submerge two ancient Maya settlements.

Who is behind the plan to flood the home of the scarlet macaw, the jaguar, and other endangered species?

Fortis, Inc., a billion-dollar Canadian corporation which owns electric utilities in three provinces, is also the majority owner of Belize Electricity Ltd., which wants to build a dam on a remote stretch of Belize's Macal River. The proposed 35-metre high dam would flood almost 1,000 hectares of lush rainforest, home to some of the world's most endangered species. This undisturbed jungle is one of the last large havens for Belize's national animal, the tapir, for jaguars (which roam 40 miles a day in search of food) and for river otters, freshwater crocodiles, howler monkeys, ocelots, and scarlet macaws, fewer than 200 of which remain in Belize.

The power company's own consultants told it that the project's overall impacts on wildlife populations would be "major, negative, long term and local to regional." Moreover, the same consultants advised that "the benefits of the Chalillo dam project are significantly lower than the costs." Other studies show that it is cheaper to import electricity from gas-fired producers in Mexico than to build Chalillo. Cogeneration using sugar and citrus waste by-products is another more reliable and economical alternative.

But Fortis has monopoly power over Belizean electricity consumers, which allows Fortis to charge Belizeans monopoly prices to ensure a profit.

(over)

How you can help



Black howler monkey

Opposition to this catastrophic dam is growing worldwide. Robert Bateman, Harrison Ford, scientists and environmental groups from Belize, Canada, and the U.S. are united in demanding it be stopped.

More than 20,000 ordinary citizens have sent letters, postcards, e-mails and faxes of protest to Fortis President Stanley Marshall.

Two-thousand, four-hundred representatives of governments and conservation organizations, as members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, resolved at their recent World Conservation Congress that Fortis should scrap plans for the dam unless it can show that wildlife habitat would not be significantly harmed.

Sharon Matola, the award-winning director of the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, says "trading off millions of years of biological evolution for a hydro scheme which, at best, would last 50 years, is an environmental crime of the highest degree." She says there is more than enough evidence to show that the dam should not be built, but "with funding from Canadian taxpayers, Fortis is trying to sweep the evidence under the rug in an attempt to promote the dam."

If you agree that Fortis should not flood this precious valley, and that Canada should not help destroy the world's biological and cultural heritage, add your voice to the campaign to save Belize wildlife by sending an unequivocal message to:

Stanley Marshall

President and CEO, Fortis, Inc.
Fortis Building, 139 Water Street,
St. John's, Newfoundland, A2B 3T2
Tel. (709) 737-2800, Fax (709) 737-5307
E-mail: smarshall@fortisinc.com

AND

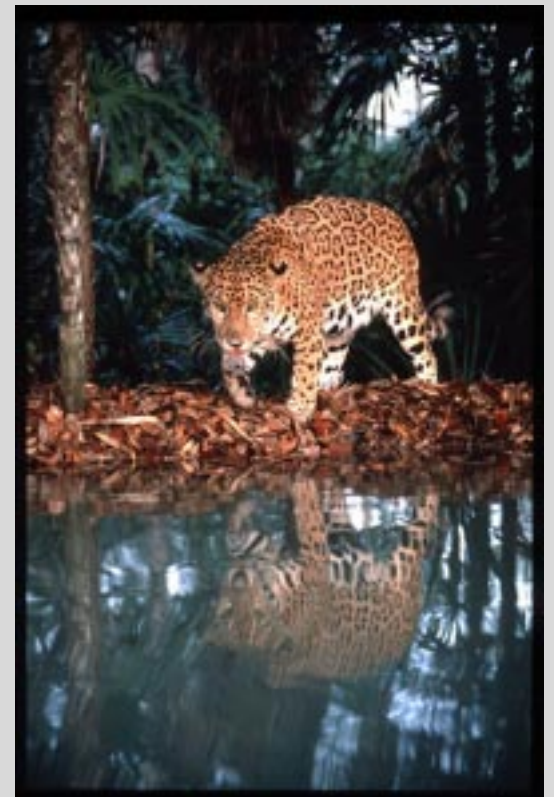
Maria Minna

Minister for International Cooperation (responsible for the Canadian International Development Agency)
200 Promenade du Portage
Hull, Quebec, K1A 0G4
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E-mail: maria_minna@acdi-cida.gc.ca

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CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, is our federal government's foreign aid agency. Using the Access to Information Act, Probe International has learned that CIDA is backing the Fortis bid to flood the scarlet macaw's rainforest habitat. In the name of foreign aid, CIDA gave almost \$250,000 to the world's third largest engineering company, Toronto-based AMEC, to prepare a "project justification report" and an environmental impact assessment.

Amazingly, CIDA is refusing to release this assessment, arguing that it has no legal obligation to do so.



Jaguar

All photos courtesy of the Belize Zoo.

*For more information about the role of Fortis and CIDA, please see the Probe International website:
www.ProbeInternational.org.*