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## Belize: The old story about dams and development

In the last issue of our bulletin we included an article on Belize, calling it a country "where forests can still be saved." We should have added: "if the government and a Canadian power company allows it." The fact is that the Canadian based Fortis Inc. -- which also holds a majority stake in Belize Electricity Ltd.-- is planning to build a dam along a branch of the Macal River.

Environmentalists in Belize are carrying out actions to prevent this happening, because the project would flood a sensitive jungle habitat whose thick riverbank vegetation offers a bountiful green feast for tapirs, jaguars and scarlet macaws. The area where the dam is proposed is part of a biological corridor that Central American nations are trying to preserve against broader encroachment. "This is the center of biodiversity, not only for Belize," said Sharon Matola, the director of the Belize Zoo and one of the dam's most outspoken opponents. "This is the cradle for biodiversity for Central America. Look at the scarlet macaw; they breed in that river valley. This is the only place in Central America where they live unmolested."

The pro-dam lobby has reacted with the usual arguments, beginning by attacking the involvement of "foreign" groups supporting local environmentalists. Along those lines, Prime Minister Said Musa said: "We don't think it is fair for these environmental groups to be beating up Belize over this little dam when their own countries have so many of them. Now they are trying to tell us we can't have one." He appears to have forgotten that Fortis is also foreign and if this "little dam" were to be implemented, it would be beating up Belize's environment, not because of its environmental or social concerns but simply for profits.

In turn, the local press has --with no evidence at all- accused opposers of the dam of being lawbreakers and terrorists. A few leading citizens have called the environmental groups enemies of the nation that are trying to impose racist schemes to keep Belize undeveloped, while more moderate pro-dam positions have said the environmental groups are denying this country the kinds of modern conveniences that others take for granted.

The debate between environmentalists and developers and government officials has become so heated that some local opponents of the dam say they have become targets for retaliation. Kimo Jolly, a teacher and environmentalist, said he had been dismissed from his teaching job recently after holding a seminar that touched on the dam as well as the proposed sale of Belize's water authority to overseas investors.

In sum, the old false antagonism between development and conservation. In spite of all the internationally agreed commitments for biodiversity conservation, in spite of the growing awareness about the impacts of environmental destruction, it is still being perceived as a necessity for the achievement of "development." The much publicized concept of "sustainable development" continues to be but an empty slogan only useful for continuing business --and destruction-- as usual.

Within that context, the environmentalists' struggle to protect the Macal River deserves our wholehearted support. The notion that national and international environmental organizations are

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trying to "beat up" Belize or to keep it in a state of undevelopment constitute only a bad excuse for avoiding the real issue. The Macal need not be sacrificed and we sincerely hope that this project will be definitely shelved. Development and conservation are both necessary and must go hand in hand.

Article based on information from: David Gonzalez, 'Upbeat Plan for a Dam in Belize Turns Nasty', March 2, 2001, the New York Times; Ricardo Carrere's personal observations in Belize