
Pristine Belize forests threatened by dam project

With 22,960 square kilometres and 220,000 inhabitants Belize is the smallest and less populated country in Central America. 83% of its territory is covered by forests, most of them in a pristine state, and 40% of the country is now protected as parks and reserves. As in many other Southern countries dam megaprojects are a major problem for Belize's forests and people.

The Chalillo Dam projected in Belize would flood 1,100 hectares (2,718 acres) of primary forest, engulfing the valleys of the Macal and Ruspaculo rivers in the Central Maya mountains, near the Guatemalan border. The works would destroy this fragile ecosystem that is a site very rich in biodiversity. The dam's flood waters would also bury archaeological sites of the Maya civilization dating from the 5th century.

Opponents to the project argue that there are alternative answers to the country's energy needs, such as better energy collaboration policies with neighbouring Mexico. A 1992 Environmental Impact Assessment produced by Agra CI Power Ltd., estimated that "over 90 percent of the riparian habitats would be destroyed," if the dam were built. The report also predicted that serious environmental damage would occur downstream from the proposed dam site, impacting the lives of rural villages which depend on the river for sustenance. The assessment also found that the dam could kill fish by generating sulphide gases as vegetation rotted in the reservoir, and by changing seasonal river flows. Ecotourism, which is one of the largest contributors to Belize's GNP will also be affected by the project.

Source: Sharon Guynup, web site: <http://ens.lycos.com/ens/apr99/1999L-04-06-01.html>. Olman Segura et al, "Políticas forestales en Centro America", IICA, San Salvador, 1997.