
[Belize: Canadian company to dam the Macal River](#)

The Belize National Environmental Appraisal Committee (NEAC) announced in November 2001 that the government has granted environmental clearance for the construction of a proposed hydro-scheme (see WRM bulletin 44) slated for an undisturbed river valley within the Central Maya Mountains near the Guatemalan border, conditional upon the development of an Environmental Compliance Plan (ECP), which will incorporate the mitigation measures identified in the environmental impact assessment, along with others recommended during the evaluation process. Belize Electricity, Ltd (with Canadian Fortis Inc. holding a majority stake) is behind the project, with governmental support.

But huge dams are no longer being constructed in most industrialised nations around the world, despite their increasing energy needs. No wonder. The World Commission on Dams issued a report (November 2000) that has brought international attention to the numerous downfalls of dams, pointing out that the mitigation factors have been largely unsuccessful. Nor do dams provide flood control. Conversely, they increase devastation through the emission of "greenhouse gases" --as equally detrimental as the burning of fossil fuels--, the increase of disease in tropical countries, and the waste of precious freshwater resources.

The area known as the Upper Macal and Raspaculo River valley represents a cradle of biological productivity. It is the last known breeding area for the endangered Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao cyanoptera*), with less than 250 birds remaining in the country, and provides a sanctuary for other endangered species such as the Central American tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*), southern river otter (*Lutra longicaudus*), and Morelet's crocodile, (*Crocodylus moreleti*). This area is also important for migratory bird populations.

A 1992 Environmental Impact Assessment produced by Agra CI Power Ltd., estimated that "over 90 percent of riparian (riverine) habitat would be destroyed," if the dam were built. The report, by a subsidiary of Agra, Inc., a Canadian based international engineering, construction and technology company, predicted that serious environmental damage would occur downriver from the proposed dam site, impacting the lives of people who depend on the river for sustenance. The Agra assessment found that the dam could kill fish by generating sulfide gases as vegetation rotted in the reservoir, and by changing seasonal river flows.

"We are gambling with our natural resources, treasures that are not duplicated anywhere else in the region," said biologist Sharon Matola, director of the Belize Zoo and a vocal opponent of the project.

The Macal River feeds the Belize River, which empties into the Caribbean Sea. Off shore stands the largest barrier reef in the Western hemisphere, a popular destination for tourists from around the globe. Tourism is currently the largest contributor to the country's Gross National Product. "It took millions of years of evolution for this habitat to reach its current unique state. It is unacceptable to trade that for a dam, which under the best of circumstances, would provide electricity for perhaps 50 years. This is environmental crime of the highest degree," warned Matola.

Dam proponents continue to stress that the dam is needed to "alleviate poverty" and to "ensure independence from Mexico". However, as the old story goes, people do not benefit from this kind of mega-projects fostered by corporate interests. The only recipe to "alleviate poverty" is sustainable development.