

Life After last Flight

Time moves on, and the one constant remains: Change. Nearly five years has passed since the Privy Council decision ruled 3-2 in favour of Fortis/Bel and the Government of Belize to build the Chalillo Dam. Since that time, and the subsequent publication of Bruce Barcott's THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE SCARLET MACAW, significant events, relative to the building of the dam, and the publication of the book, have occurred.

The two principal Belize Government leaders, Said Musa, who served as Prime Minister during the time of the Chalillo Dam battle, as well as Ralph Fonseca, the former National Security and Housing Minister, were charged in December 2008 with the theft of 10 million USD, from the people of Belize.

These are the same government Ministers who supported the naming of Sharon Matola as an "Enemy of the State", referring to her actions aimed at halting the Chalillo Dam development scheme.

Since the Chalillo Dam has gone "on line", in 2006, electricity prices have risen. A third dam is now being constructed, more habitat is being destroyed. Diesel fuel is still being bought from Mexico to address the energy needs of Belize (a standard cry from BEL/FORTIS was that the Chalillo Dam would see Belize independent of foreign fuel purchase).

The quality of the Macal River, due to the construction and operation of the Chalillo Dam, has decreased significantly. People who swim in the river complain of "after-itch", and skin rashes. Some people report that they no longer swim in the river, due to its "post Chalillo" profile of decreased quality. Many resorts located along or nearby the Macal River have installed swimming pools so that their guests will have a healthy option for bathing. Unfortunately, for people living in villages along the river, the "swimming pool alternative" does not exist.

People have been warned, too, that eating fish from the Macal River is no longer safe. This is due to increased levels of the heavy metal, mercury, detected in these river fishes. The increased levels of this dangerous element are a suspected result of the unavoidable biological decay brought on by dam construction. The Belize Government and the public were warned

about this potential health threat, as part of the campaign to stop this project. These warnings were dismissed.

In October 2008, massive amounts of rain caused serious flooding of the Macal River. The National Emergency Management Organization, NEMO, published that "life-threatening floods in communities along the Mopan, Macal and Belize rivers resulted from these floods" .

Businesses, homes and other infrastructure were destroyed. 269 people were evacuated from their homes. The total direct losses were estimated to be at 11.3 million BZD.

BEL/FORTIS claimed that the destructive floods would have been far worse if the Chalillo Dam were not there.

They chose to ignore a profound article and accompanying editorial in The Reporter Press, 2 November 08, which noted that the flooding river raged into San Ignacio minus natural-occurring sediments. A sediment-free river, as hydrologists will confirm, flows with horrendous force, causing grave changes and associated damages. Sediments, previously part of the profile of the Macal River, were held back by the dam.

Belizeans continue to be charged with some of the highest electricity rates in Central America. BEL/FORTIS, meanwhile, boasts of huge profits being made from its utility interests. A current conflict in Belize is seeing the Public Utilities Commission, PUC, challenging BEL/FORTIS to return some of these profits to the Belizean rate-payer. In a press conference hosted by the PUC, on March 3, 2009, Chairman John Avery again accused Belize Electricity Limited, BEL, of deliberately misrepresenting its financial position. The PUC states that BEL/FORTIS owes the Belizean consumer approximately 20 million dollars in rebates (April 09).

The Natural Resources Defence Counsel, NRDC, continues to work tirelessly to see that justice is brought into the equation of questionable, unsound development projects. Fortunately, projects which ultimately reduce the quality of the environment, and the living standards of citizens depending on these environments for a healthy life profile, will always receive their deserved legal address.

The Belize Alliance of Conservation NGOs, BACONGO, has grown and continues to be an important voice in Belize, drawing appropriate attention to projects which show environmental mis-direction.

The Belize Institute of Policy and Law organization, BELPO, took the Department of the Environment, DOE, to court over the lack of their seeing that BEL/Fortis implements the Environmental Compliance plan, ECP. To date, there still exists no emergency evacuation plan. In the event of a dam break, which could happen from excessive amounts of rain as a result of severe storms or hurricanes, people living downstream of the Chalillo Dam have no warning system that would assist in alleviating certain disaster.

In July 08, The Belizean Courts ruled in favour of BELPO. However. nearly one year later, the ECP still has not been addressed on this level

The Belize Zoo, TBZ, continues to put forward strong initiatives in an effort to preserve the biological diversity in Belize. These efforts are principally aimed at promoting the conservation of the Jaguar and the Harpy Eagle. Conservation strategies promote the concept of "Landscape Conservation": Protect the forest home of the Jaguar and the Harpy Eagle and the future of many species receives a secure future, as well. In early April, TBZ was nominated for the Belize Tourism Board, BTB, Award "Education Organization of the Year". On April 22, TBZ was presented this honoured award during as part of BTB's 9th Annual National Awards Ceremony.

"People Changes" at TBZ, since the publication of LAST FLIGHT OF THE SCARLET MACAW, are important timepieces.

The Belize Zoo staff, now, minus the burden of the zoo being involved in hard environmental battles, has time for productive environmentally-oriented activities. This includes their putting energies into professional training, both in-country and across borders, serving as members on Boards of Directors, attending both international conferences and meetings in Belize, training foreign students as zoological assistants, and contributing photography to zoo projects - these are just a few of the dynamic activities TBZ staff is involved with since the Landfill issue and the Chalillo Dam project are no longer present in "Zoo Time".

The Scarlet Macaws remaining in Belize have shown a decline in number. Some of the birds

return to the Upper Raspaculo River valley, however, they do not find the river they once knew or their nesting trees which grew alongside that river. The Scarlet Macaws find a lake, or a "mud-hole", as it has been referred to in the height of the dry season, due to the Chalillo Dam. They return in a vain effort to carry out their nesting regime. No successful nesting activity has been noted or reported. The attempts to place "nest boxes" in the area which the Macaws once used as a vibrant nesting region, and have these "new homes" replace the traditional nesting trees, have been a total failure.

Reports requested from BEL/FORTIS about Scarlet Macaw activities in the area of the constructed Chalillo Dam, by TBZ, the University of Belize and the Forest Department, have been ignored.

The Scarlet Macaws still remaining in Belize represent a remnant, displaced, and highly-disturbed population. Just thirty years ago, it was reported that "flocks of Scarlet Macaws" could be seen flying down the Macal River towards the town of San Ignacio. The construction of the Chalillo Dam, and associated human behaviour, i.e. poaching, will work to see the sad prediction made by BirdLife International, come true: That there will most likely be a local extirpation of Scarlet Macaws within two generations.

THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE SCARLET MACAW is used in at least five Universities in the USA, as required reading for Environmental Science courses. Many people come to TBZ and state that the reason for their visiting Belize is all due to the reading of this important book.

Life after LAST FLIGHT OF THE SCARLET MACAW, for Sharon Matola, and for the important institution she founded and still directs, is happy, challenging, and continues to move forward with positive force.

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