

ROOTS AND REEF

21st December 2009

JAMAICANS GO HOME!



One of the Jamaican boats still moored at Punta Gorda as we go to press. Note the fish traps.

People smelled something fishy when Jamaican fishing boats piled high with fish trawling cages were spotted off the coast of Placencia and Punta Gorda. Once again, as is so often the case in our country, it was a deal that had been signed and agreed to, except none of the players told the public.

It seems that the Jamaicans have literally destroyed their supply of fish in their own waters using dynamite and chemical methods (Rotenone), so now they have turned their attention to Belize.

An agreement between Rio Grande Fishermen Cooperative (PG) and PG Fisheries Company (Jamaica) and witnessed by Victor Vasquez of the Fisheries Department would allow Jamaican fishermen to catch 40,000 pounds of fish every month for up to thirty or more years in Belizean waters, and export it all but 10 - 15% back to Jamaica. This would include marine fish, freshwater fish, shellfish, lobster, crab and seaweed. Fish cages, a technique that scars the coral reefs and seabed, would be used to fish in our waters.

On December 9, 2009, TIDE sponsored a public meeting in PG, where people from as far away as Hopkins Placencia, Seine Bight, Independence and Monkey River forcefully and insightfully opposed these agreements and demonstrated the power of the people of Belize when confronted with an obvious wrong.

While GOB says that the Jamaicans in PG must go (and they haven't yet, as of the time of the writing of this article), this PG joint venture is just the beginning. Other contracts to sell the right to fish in Belize waters to foreign companies are in the making. Rainforest Seafoods, a Jamaican company owned by Brian Jardim and partnered with Mr. Michael Duncker (from Jamaica) of Aquamar Shrimp Farms at Big Creek would allow Jamaican fishing of our waters for export purposes. We hear word of another foreign venture in Belize City.

South American and Asian companies purportedly also want to fish in our waters. The Japanese just gave GOB several hundred thousand dollars to install solar energy on government buildings. What do they want in return? They have destroyed their own marine environments: they turn to us. And they will destroy our seas too if we allow them. This issue affects everyone in our country. When it comes to the sea, Belizean people have a heart that most don't have any more. Heart we have, and in abundance, but here's what we **DON'T** have:

•**WE DON'T HAVE** a government that abides by the established LAW to protect our fisheries. This law dictates a process to be followed. For at least the past year, and maybe since UDP came in, GOB has sabotaged this process by bypassing the Fisheries Advisory Board. The Fisheries Advisory Board's (FAB) role is to review all proposals (like these Jamaican proposals) and either approve or deny.

Fisheries then takes the FAB recommendations to the minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, who then presents them to Cabinet. Instead, proposals are being taken directly to Cabinet, without any input from anyone who knows anything about BELIZEAN fishing. Consultation is totally bypassed: voices of expertise are not heard.

- **WE DON'T HAVE** a law that prevents the national Government of Belize from granting fishing licenses to foreign countries. For the first time in Belize history, the Jamaican/Duncker Rainforest Fisheries deal cuts out the co-ops and allows all the fish caught in cages to be exported out of the country: no fish would be reserved for our own people.
- **WE DON'T HAVE** any required public consultations. This foreign fishing has far reaching and profound consequences for all of us in Belize. All public opinion is relevant. However, we were told at the PG meeting that NO public consultation is required - if the private companies involved want our opinion, they can ask for it, but don't HAVE to ask for it.

All of this needs to be changed!

- **WE NEED** a law that prevents the Government of Belize, regardless of political affiliation, from selling the birth-right of Belize - our fisheries. And, we don't want any "ministerial discretion" involved - NO minister should be able to flout the law and do whatever he or she wants, no matter what WE want, or what the LAW says. The Fisheries Advisory Board is there for a reason, and EVERY SINGLE PROPOSAL THAT AFFECTS OUR FISHERIES SHOULD GO THROUGH THAT BOARD. No exceptions.

And, as Andre Requena said so eloquently at the PG meeting, we need to get out and make a stand. In the words of Mr. Requena, that is the only way we will see progress in Belize.

HOW CAN YOU HELP? - SEE P4



A Jamaican on a tourist visa unloading crates containing refrigeration equipment at PG. What a way to spend your holiday!

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BLESS OUR LAGOON!

A multicultural service of celebration and blessing of the Placencia Lagoon was held on Friday 27th November at the Serenity Resort on the Placencia Peninsula. Over 200 people from the Placencia Peninsula attended the Service, including honoured guests British High Commissioner Mr. Patrick Ashworth and his wife, Mrs. Pauline Ashworth.

The event was held to ask God's blessing on the Lagoon, and for wisdom and fairness in the use of its natural resources.

The ceremony, which was M.C.'d by Mr. Rene Villanueva of Love FM, began with Garifuna drumming and singing from Mr. Bobby Sanchez and his singers. Rev. Lorna Sampson prayed the Lord's Prayer in Garifuna, and the 23rd Psalm was read in Spanish by Pastor Rutillo de Jesus Ardon, of Iglesia de Dios of Seine Bight. Pastor Jim Mensie and his wife led the congregation in singing "Lord I lift your name on high" and "Amazing Grace", and Pastor Mensie read from the Old Testament and gave a brief address on the importance of stewardship of the earth.

Rt. Rev. Bishop Philip S Wright, Anglican Bishop of Belize gave the homily and the blessing. In his homily, the Bishop reminded the congregation that God is our creator, and that he created for need, not greed. God gave sufficient resources for all His children; mankind is the steward of the earth, and we should take care of the earth and share it with each other. He said that when we look out on to the Lagoon, we should be reminded of what God has given us.

As the bishop spoke, a beautiful flight of parrots passed overhead, reminding the congregation poignantly of the natural wonders of Belize.

After two Seine Bight Village children drew water from the Lagoon in a calabash, the Bishop added holy water and holy oil to the Lagoon water, and with the children, poured the blessed water back to mingle with the waters of the Lagoon. He reminded the congregation "Take what you need from the Lagoon, and then give back – do not be greedy."

Pastor Byron Boch of Seine Bight then led the congregation in prayer in Spanish. Miss Dora Williams and her women's group from Seine Bight sang the hymn "Abba" and gave some short Bible readings. Next, Rev. Hardie Gordon of Placencia read Psalm 150 in Kriol; with the final blessing bestowed by Bishop Philip Wright. Light refreshments donated by local businesses followed.

Co-Chairman of Peninsula Citizens for Sustainable Development, Mr. Vincent Lopez, commented "It was a wonderful day, and we are very grateful to everybody who took part and attended. There is so much development going on around the Lagoon that we are in danger of losing the very thing that people come to the Peninsula for – its beauty and tranquility because of the many serious issues of pollution and general degradation of the area confront us. We want a good future for our people, especially our children, but that doesn't mean just building whatever you think will make the most money."

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Rt. Rev. Philip Wright, Anglican Bishop of Belize, blessing The Placencia Lagoon.



Mrs. Dora Williams, Mrs. Rosita Palacio, Mrs. Dominica Augustine, Mrs. Barbara Ferguson, Mrs. Ionie Augustine, Mrs. Elojia Zuniga, Mrs. Henny Augustine, Ms. Anita Guzman, Ms. Corrine Olgaldez, Ms. Ophelia Moreira, Ms. Mercy Guzman, Ms. Madline Lopez, Ms. Sharon Thomas, Ms. Rojilia Estrada, Ms. Beverly Moreira, Rev. Lorna Sampson



Ebony Augustine (left) of Seine Bight enjoying the Blessing of the lagoon.

Many, many thanks to all those who donated and contributed to the Blessing including the Members of the Clergy, Mr. Rene Villanueva, Marion Carr, Ted Berry, Brigitte & Rick Bachman-Fairs, Paul Bulman, Albert Valerio, Bobby Sanchez and his group, Dora Williams and her group, Mary Smith, V&V Groceries, Everyday Supermarket, Wallen's Market, Valentino Vasquez, Bill Taylor, Elvis and Ivy Cho's Grocery, Radiance Ritchie, Nang Kee Grocery Store, Jay Crofton of Crystal Auto Rentals, Richard Ramos and crew, Ruth Cabral, St. Alphonsus RC Church, Rice Palacio and the guys who lifted the truck out of the mud.....

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Can someone please confirm if gill netting is legal or illegal? We, at Tarpon Caye Lodge, are extremely concerned and appalled at gill netting by commercial fishermen.

Does the Government or the authorities realize how destructive gill nets are to pretty much anything that lives in our sea? It is impossible to explain with words how destructive gill netting is; seeing the destruction up close and personal is the only way one can really understand.

Passing the law to protect the permit, bonefish and tarpon etc is all great, but most people have no idea the damage gill netting does to these species and all others; we witness this first hand all year round and if nothing is done about it, we can pass all the laws we want to protect all the species in our sea and it will make no difference if gill netting is still allowed.

It is a killer! Gill netting is not monitored at all in Belize the by-catch of non-target species is pretty much anything that is in the wrong place; we have seen dolphins, turtles, permits, tarpons, bonefish, sharks, rays, small fish, big fish you name it; dead or dying in these nets; my father does his best to destroy them; he has tried to advocate this concern many times; most of our cries have fallen on deaf ears. We beg that you please forward this concern to as much people as you can for we really need to put a stop to this disastrous behaviour called – Gill Netting!

Charles Leslie, Manager, Tarpon Caye Lodge

FOREST RESERVE UNDER ATTACK BY DEVELOPERS

On December 5, 2008, Prime Minister Dean Barrow and Mark Tippetts, President of Belize Hydroelectric Development (BHD) signed a concession agreement allowing BHD to "develop to its fullest potential, the hydroelectric resources of the Rio Grande River and its tributaries, including the Central River, all upstream from the Rio Grande hydroelectric project" in the Toledo District. Mr. Tippetts is neither a Belizean resident nor a citizen.

According to the agreement, GOB "has found it in the best interests of the Toledo District and for the entire country," for a foreign investor to build a dam in a pristine area within two protected areas: Bladen Nature Reserve and Columbia Forest Reserve.

But, is it really? BHD and the GOB kept details of this proposed dam a secret until someone leaked it to local residents, who were not consulted nor informed about the dam plans.

Earlier this year, after finally finding out about the dam, the Village Council of San Pedro Columbia appointed a committee of seven villagers, headed by Nicanor Requena, to uncover and spread the facts and truth about this project. On December 13, 2009, three hundred concerned people from southern Belize converged on San Pedro Columbia to hear what the committee had found out and to voice their concerns. (The Village Council invited Area Representative Juan Coy, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Forests to attend, as well as BHD. None of them showed up.)

Based on what the committee presented at this meeting, it is no wonder the government kept this project secret—it's highly favorable to the developer, with seriously adverse and permanent impacts on the environment and local communities.

For example, if approved, this fifteen year agreement (with ten year renewals):

- Gives BHD control of the Rio Grande River and all its tributaries, canals, and access roads in the area for the life of the contract;
- Obliges GOB to assist BHD in obtaining all licenses, permits, clearances and approvals needed for the venture;
- Allows the developer to import all equipment, machinery, office equipment, furniture and other supplies needed to build the dam duty free and tax free;
- Requires GOB to grant BHD's foreign employees and its contractors work permits, employment passes, and visas, as well as for their families.

But, this is truly the sweetest part of the deal for the developer: **GOB EXEMPTS TOTALLY THE DEVELOPER AND ITS FOREIGN CONTRACTORS FROM BUSINESS TAX FOR THE FIRST FIVE YEARS. WITH A PARTIAL EXEMPTION OF TAXES FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS!**

At Sunday's meeting, Nicanor Requena explained that many of his fears about serious impacts to the environment and the social well being of local communities stemmed from BHD's conduct during the preliminary feasibility study stage of the project. While the feasibility study is only the first stage of the project and nothing has yet been built, Requena and his committee report having already found serious violations to the protected environment of the Bladen and Columbia River Nature Reserves including:

- Opened roads, trails, and camps which have increased accessibility to this protected area by Guatemalan Xateros. (The committee actually found evidence that the Xateros and BHD personnel shared the same jungle camp and do not understand why BHD did not report the Xateros, who steal the Xate leaf to sell in Guatemala, to the local authorities).
- Massive erosion in the steep areas caused by horses and mules, even though domestic animals are prohibited in these protected areas
- Blocked creeks
- Areas cleared for equipment installation
- Large painted English graffiti defacing trees and rocks within the Reserves
- Expended cartridges, 150 bales of xate, parrot feathers and dead horses on a road inside the Bladen Nature Reserve.

Further, BHD used two sites within Bladen Nature Reserve for helicopter landings, even though Mr. Wilber Sabido, Chief Forestry Officer, explicitly stated in a letter to Mark Tippetts, dated 13 October 2009, that "Landing of a helicopter in the area cleared within the Bladen Nature Reserve is prohibited."



Standing room only at the hydro dam meeting at San Pedro Columbia School

In addition, the road for this project will go right through Maya ruins, and the area is rich in unique medicinal plants used regularly by residents in the area. This project is just in its beginning stage, and Mr. Requena has profound concerns about what happens next.

"What will we gain from this? Only in the beginning and briefly will there be a few jobs to chop the bush, and show the way to the waterfalls, or maybe even for construction. Pay will be low. Technical expertise will be imported into the country. Why must we have a hydro-dam here within two protected areas? We could end up losing our pristine national land and our water to a foreign company. Restrictions will be placed on us and prevent us from accessing and sharing in the beauty of this place. This project is a threat to our environment and to our very social well being. We must demand that the government of Belize re-

FAIR COMMENT.....from the Editor

No matter where we come from or live in this world, fundamentally, we are all the same human beings. We are equally born to certain rights: rights for happiness, for security, for freedom. The Belize Constitution lists these rights, and it also guarantees another right that all Belizeans have: "The people of Belize require policies of state which protect the environment." (Chapter 4, section e) So protecting the environment is a human right like any other.

We are born with rights to drink clean water.

We are born with the rights to breathe clean air.

We are born with rights to use our natural resources to provide us food and sustenance. We are entitled to a healthy, safe, productive, and culturally rich life in harmony with nature. The Belize Constitution guarantees this to us. Indeed, the government must protect the environment by constitutional decree.

These rights must be recognized, guaranteed, and defended by our community. These rights must never be suspended: they must be safeguarded. The very purpose of human rights is to insure that people can act in the face of power.

Unfortunately, however, in Belize and all over the world, people are experiencing the effects of ecosystem decline. The environment is being challenged sometimes by ignorance, but most frequently by greed. For the sake of personal financial gain for a few, the rights of the people are being violated. Man's power over nature turns out to be an exercise of power over the people. For the sake of development, mangroves and lagoon are removed and fish supplies diminish. Where once mangroves secured the earth during storms, their removal weakens the foundations of our homes. Rivers are dammed and wetlands destroyed. Our basic right to life is threatened.

Major encroachments in the natural arena have not only ecological but also social significance: they threaten the very survival of local communities and their rich cultures. In San Pedro Columbia, a proposed hydro dam in nearby Bladen Nature Reserve will destroy Maya ruins and wipe out precious and rare healing plants, not to mention the possibility of the river and reef being polluted. This is an injustice. Belief in consumerism as an end in itself must give way to an appreciation that we humans must conserve the earth's resources and work towards a balance of development and preservation of our natural gifts. We must take care of our environment as if we were taking care of our own home. The residents of San Pedro Columbia are exercising their right to free speech, and also their right to environmental protection.

Jamaican fishing boats off PG were a flagrant disrespect to the fishing economy, but also a threat to our delicate marine environment. The people understood both those issues and voiced their powerful opposition. The days of simply accepting "Whatever government want, government get," are over. We must stand up, shout out, fight, and press our government to ally itself with the people and protect the environment.

In the words of the immortal Bob Marley, we ALL must get up, stand up, stand up for our rights -- and we WON'T give up the fight.

The Mega Tourism Industry Threatens Garifuna Villages in Honduras

Over 100,000 Garifuna live on the beautiful north coast of Honduras, living from the land and the sea. Their property is held communally, and this arrangement was legalized by the Honduran government in 1992 after decades of struggle. But in 1994 the law was changed back to allow the privatisation of land.

The Garifuna culture is so unique and precious that UNESCO in 2001 declared the Garifuna culture one of 19 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

However where there is sunshine, sand and beauty, big business cannot resist. The Honduran government wants to turn the Garifuna land into another Cancun. Says Garifuna leader Alfredo Lopez. "All this privatisation is illegal, and if it continues, we are going to die as a people. To lose our land is to lose everything. We are in a struggle for our life, and we will do what it takes to defend ourselves."

Supporters of Garifuna rights have been victimised over the years, the fight with developers has been going on for over a decade. People became tired, and under pressure, sold their land. What followed was the multi million dollar Los Micos Beach and Golf Resort. The development affected not only the beach but also the land upon which the Garifuna depend for their livelihood. Ironically, the jobs promised to locals have not materialized, as companies instead bring in employees from outside the community. But resistance continues. In Tela Bay, one of the largest communities, roads are blocked and the construction of new hotels is being sabotaged. Mass marches are held in the capital of Tegucigalpa. Resistance is both collective and individual, like the single old lady who refuses to budge in the center of the development at Miami village, forcing developers to build their mega complex around her little hut.

Lopez has as a fearless voice denouncing injustice on his radio show on the local Garifuna Radio Faluma Bimetu. "The Tourism is using local people, setting up NGOs as fronts, paying them well, buying some, pressuring others." he says. "Our community assemblies are infiltrated by individuals working for The Tourism, they try to foment division." "The struggle here in Triunfo is so important. We are at the top of the list for Tourism. They want this land. If we hold out, so will the other communities." (Adapted from a report on www.garifuna.com)

This is what the late great Andy Palacio wrote when finding that the area near Miami, Honduras, is restricted territory:

Miami

I took a trip to the river near Miami

When I looked, I was surrounded by soldiers

They were asking me for my papers

Consul Feliz just drove me away

When I got to the river near Miami

I was searching for my comfort

I was looking for the neighbourhood

Even in Miami, I have no place

A special greeting to all my people here in Hopkins



EXPRESS YOUR VIEWS

(Continued from page 1 - more about the threat to our fishery)

You can hear Andre's powerful words and many others at the Toledo meeting at ww.placenciadocuments.info/pg_meeting.mp3

If you want to let the ministers know what you think, sign the petition that tells government to pass a law prohibiting granting of fishing licenses to foreign owned or controlled companies. Petitions are available in Punta Gorda, Placencia, Monkey River, Independence and San Pedro. If you can't find a petition to sign, contact us at info@saveourpeninsula.org, or call 610-4718. If you have Internet access, you can also sign a petition on-line at www.thepetitionsite.com/1/exploitation-of-belize-marine-resources-and-fishery. The petition says:

We, the undersigned, believe that the right to commercially fish in Belize waters belongs to Belizeans and should not in any way be sold or transferred to foreign owned or controlled companies or foreign individuals. Further, our fish stocks are already under stress, and will be depleted by the type of contracts represented by the Rio Grande Fishing Co-op/P.G. Fisheries Company Limited and Rainforest Seafoods, regardless of whether these companies are Belizean or foreign. We therefore demand that the Belize Government not approve these contracts, or, if already approved, that approval be declared null and void, and that legislation be enacted that will prevent Government from selling, giving away or otherwise transferring in any way the right to commercially fish in Belize waters to any foreign owned or controlled companies.

What would Belize be like without fish and our fisherfolk? It is almost inconceivable, isn't it? But, the inconceivable will become reality if we allow our government to jeopardize our fisheries by granting commercial licenses to companies from foreign countries that have no more fish, and now want ours. It's up to us to take a stand, and stop this now.

"WE ARE FAMILY, WE ARE OF ONE BLOOD"

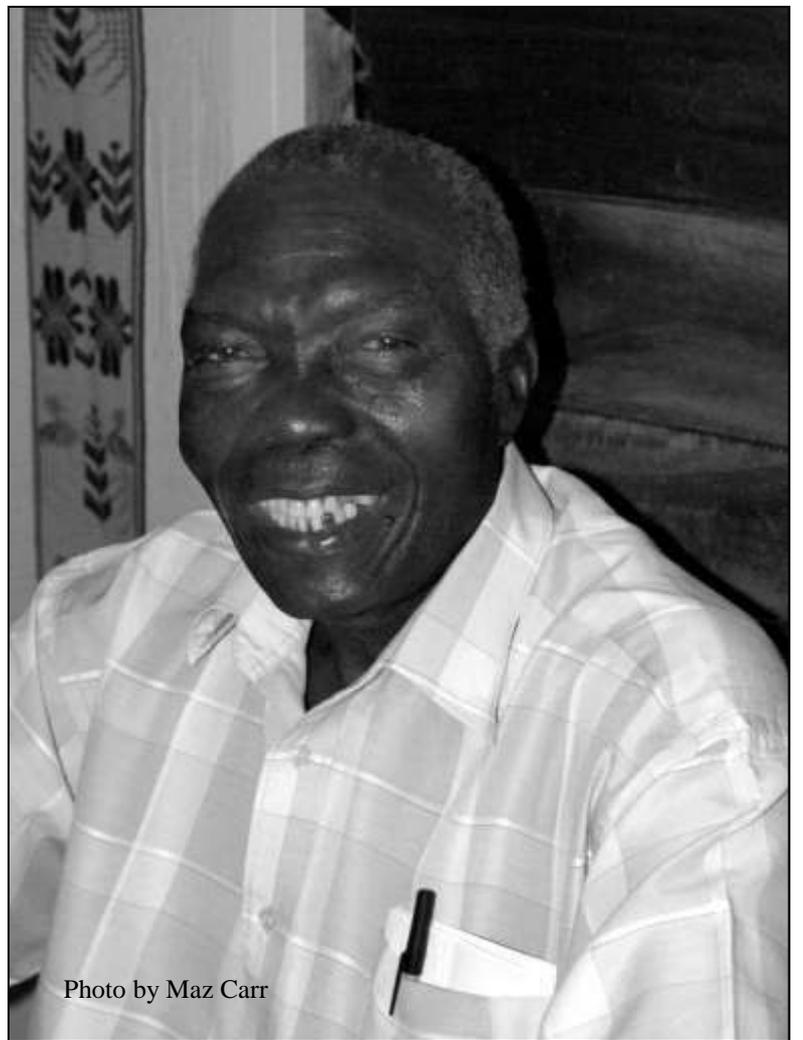


Photo by Maz Carr

Mr. Vincent Lopez pictured at his home in Seine Bight

Candy Powers of Roots and Reef interviewed Mr. Vincent Lopez, co-chairperson of the Peninsula Citizens for Sustainable Development. Mr. Lopez co-chairs along with Ms. Mary Toy.

Mr. Vincent was born to Ramunda Lopez Sabel and Incornatian Lopez in 1936 in Dangriga Town. He is one of 6 brothers and 3 sisters. He worked for many years with GOB as a technician for the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation program. He also worked for Ministry of Works from 1974 to 1980. Prior to his training by Mr. Calalisto Calez of Works, he was a fisherman, and he still goes out fishing, every chance he gets.

He moved to Seine Bight in 1986; he was 50 years old at the time, and he has lived in Seine Bight since. Seine Bight is his home and all of his friends call him Vee. Vee is a nickname his mother gave him along time ago, and, people still call him Mr. Vee.

He joined the PCSD, "Because it is the only organization on the peninsula that gives service and knowledge to the peoples and the school children in the environmental problems that we peoples face here on the peninsula, and, we are educated in these subjects of EIA's, ECP's, LLE's, and the sea and our lagoon.

"PCSD has been good to me, and I love being among the members of PCSD. They are respectful and they are there for you as a member and for the communities on the peninsula, with respect. Some organizations call us 'the Watchdogs of the Environment', and we continue to work and to see that the government departments 'do the right thing' with cooperation from them and the PCSD. We fight to get things done, we start with the EIA's, the ECP's, or the LLE's of the proposed development resorts, then we read them, we see the good in them and we see the bad in them."

Lopez' fearless voice denounces, "These developments promise us 'jobs' but we still do not have jobs. They keep lying to us about jobs, because they have no respect for us, the people of this peninsula. They have no respect for us at all. This new newsletter of ours, the R&R, will be informative, and it will help the peoples on the peninsula and throughout the whole country for them to learn."

"The PSCD is an organization that will help prepare the future for the youths, and our youths on this peninsula need to get more involved with this organization, for their benefit. We must protect our environment and our culture. We must start now."

"I love and enjoy working with Ms. Mary, my co-chair, and the whole group of members of PCSD, we are family and we are of one blood."