

Timeline of Rio Dulce Bridge Activity

Editor's Note: I've been on vacation! Back on track, and we've got lots of interesting new articles lined up for you. To start, Daphne Becker presents a timeline of activity surrounding our Rio Dulce Bridge, from construction in 1974 to present day concerns. A long-time resident and owner of Tortugal River Lodge and Marina, Daphne has been a vigilant participant in the community, with special interest in protecting our beloved sweet river, the Rio Dulce. May 8, 2017 by Daphne Becker

Have you noticed things slowing down on the Rio Dulce Bridge? Not so much noise, not so many trucks? Well, there is quite a story here and maybe you can take part.

1974. A bridge over the National Park of the Rio Dulce is constructed. It is engineered to sustain weight loads of up to 30 or maybe 32 tons in any one place.

1977. Rio Dulce experiences a strong earthquake. The epicenter is about 25 km. in the ocean, just outside of Puerto Barrios. The shock is felt in Antigua where water jumps out of the swimming pool at the Ramada Inn and the crowd leaves meals on the table as they run outside. The Rio Dulce Bridge is damaged, closed. Ferries begin to operate.

2003. From Rio Dulce to Buenos Aires, the land and forest have been cleared to plant locally named Dollar Bill Trees. Wood pulp is now being barged downriver to freighters. A local environmental group is formed. Rules for the Rio Dulce National Park and river are created, prohibiting industrial use of the river or park. This stops the barging of wood used for pulp. The nickel plant can no longer barge but it does not matter as that plant has been shut down for years.

2007. The nickel plant is sold. A Resolution is drawn up between nickel plant operators and the Guatemala Ministry of Environment. Mining operators (there are many mining operations now in the El Estor area, we do not know how many mining operations are in place or what is being taken out) can transport materia prima (prime matter or prime material, in English) overland IF loads do not exceed 36 tons (note: this is a higher load limit than the bridge is engineered to carry) and have 72 or less passages in a 24-hour period up to 315 days a year.

2013. Dump trucks carrying materia prima appear in Fronteras. A new sound like artillery fire amplified by the Rio Dulce River permeates the air from the turn off to El Estor through Fronteras. The sound ends as the truck descends the bridge and the engine braking system is relieved. The noise is heard up to 300 times, day and night, as trucks go back and forth to Puerto Barrios. Potholes appear in all surrounding roads. People are run over, legs amputated.

2016. November. A detailed complaint is outlined and filed with every conceivable local ministry and authority. Hundreds of signatures are collected. All this work is done by leaders and authorities of native communities.

2017. Early Spring. A meeting is held with local government officials, supposedly representing Rio Dulce, who unanimously declare nothing can be done about the problems the trucks are creating.

April. A representative of the department of communications and roads says the bridge is just fine. Further inspection brings forth a meeting and slide show, showing the bridge not looking just fine, followed by Transit Police supervising traffic in Fronteras and on the bridge. A plastic banner forbidding stopping on the bridge is hung on the El Relleno side of the bridge (you will have to look for it as it is slightly hidden by trees). Two or more transports are not allowed on the bridge at the same time.

Now. Mining loads carried in gondolas are believed to average 40 tons. Requirements and limits of the 2007 Resolution have never been met. Weight loads cannot be measured because there is no weighing station in Fronteras. However, there was a weighing station in Fronteras. That weighing station was removed when the by-pass road was created. Why was the by-pass road created? And the weighing station removed just when the mining trucks began coming through Fronteras?

This area is called the Rio Dulce National Park. The National Park includes San Felipe, El Relleno, Castillo San Felipe and many other small communities up to the Golfete. This area is not considered a township or municipality. Livingston is THE municipality. Elected officials cozily headquarter in Livingston or elsewhere, well away from the problems we live with in Rio Dulce. Fortunately, like-minded folks have made it their concern to protect the National Park. They protected the Rio Dulce from barging, prevented an electrical grid being strung over the river, stopped 2.5 kilometers of cages with tilapia in them being put into the river for private benefit. We are going to do our best to return Rio Dulce to the folks who live and work here and stop further abuse by industry. We can use help. If you would like to join in, please contact Daphne Becker, at daphnerbg@gmail.com.