

# The International Experience



Internationally, grassroots campaigns are calling for dam removal to restore rivers and promote the rights of affected communities. Activists are targeting dams that continue to have significant negative social and environmental impacts and fail to live up to economic promises.

## France

Inspired in part by decommissioning efforts on the Elwha River in the US, the SOS Loire Vivante (Living Loire) network is working to remove old dams and restore France's only remaining river that supports native salmon. In 1998, two dams on tributaries of the Upper Loire were demolished to help protect the last Loire salmon. First, the 12-meter-high Saint-Etienne-du-Vigan Dam on the Upper Allier was removed, marking the first case in which France's state-owned electricity utility destroyed a dam to restore salmon habitat. The Vienne River, the second largest Loire tributary, also flows freely now after demolition of the 4-meter-high Maisons-Rouges Dam. A dam in Kernansquillec on the Leguer River was also dismantled, in 1996, after rapid sedimentation had reduced the reservoir capacity by 50%. Dam removal in France and the Loire River management plan reflect growing awareness across Europe, where concessions for thousands of dams built before 1950 are to be reviewed in the next decade.

## Canada

In Canada, there is also growing interest in decommissioning and river restoration. Canada's regulatory regime differs from the US system, especially in that dam licenses are issued in perpetuity. Of the 2,000 dams in British Columbia, 400 have either outlived their usefulness, provide only marginal benefits, or severely harm coastal fisheries. With the removal of nearly two-dozen small dams in the province, support is growing for more ambitious decommissioning proposals.

On British Columbia's Theodosia River, a plan to revitalize lucrative commercial- and sport-salmon fisheries in the Georgia Straits is the basis for a plan to decommission a 35-year-old water diversion dam. If removed, the 8-meter-high, 125-meter-long, Theodosia Dam would be the largest dam ever dismantled in Canada. "No dam was meant to last forever—they do age and, eventually, outlive their usefulness. When that occurs, I believe we have to look at the decommissioning or dismantling option in an effort to restore habitat," stated Mark Angelo, Chair of the 140,000-member-strong Save the Theodosia Coalition, which helped secure government approval for decommissioning. Rather than dismantle the entire dam right away, stakeholders are pursuing other decommissioning options, including water diversion reductions. "It's a cautious, risk-averse approach to dam decommissioning and will do much to repair one of Georgia Strait's great salmon rivers," asserts Angelo.

## Czech Republic

Since 1991, local NGOs and concerned citizens have campaigned to remove three small dams that flooded 1,300 acres of riparian and woodlands habitat along the Morava and Dyje rivers. The Ramsar Convention, which lists the affected area as a wetlands of international importance, obliges the Czech Government to maintain the ecological character of the site. While conservation groups succeeded in securing a degree of restoration through partial draining of two reservoirs in 1995, the Czech Ministry of Agriculture may not support the ongoing restoration efforts. Czech conservation groups such as the Ecological Institute Veronica continue to demand decommissioning of the Nove Mlyny dams and further restoration efforts in the area.

## Thailand

In Thailand, decommissioning campaigns have arisen as a result of social and ecological disruptions caused by dam construction on the Mun River, the largest tributary of the Mekong. The 135-MW Pak Mun Dam was funded by the World Bank and completed in 1994. As a direct result of the dam, more than 20,000 people have been affected by drastic reductions in fish populations upstream of the dam site, and other changes to their livelihoods. Villagers occupied the dam site and are demanding that dam gates be permanently opened to allow fish migration.

The Rasi Salai Dam, the first project to be completed in a massive scheme to build 13 irrigation dams on the Chi and Mun rivers, is currently useless and likely to remain so. The reservoir overlays a geological salt dome that now makes the water too salty for irrigation. It also inundates the largest freshwater swamp forest in the Mun River basin, a source of food and traditional medicine for local villagers. More than 15,000 people lost farmland due to the reservoir, 60% of whom remain uncompensated.

After months of occupying the Rasi Salai Dam site to protest the dam and demand decommissioning, local activists finally got results. In July 2000, Science Minister Arthit Urirat ordered the gates of Rasi Salai Dam to be opened for two years to restore the land and undertake proper environmental impact assessments. In response, villagers agreed to vacate their protest site on top of the dam. The Thai government has yet to give in to protesters' demands for decommissioning Pak Mun.



Protesters demand decommissioning of Rasi Salai Dam.

## Colombia

The 340-MW Urrá I Dam, completed in 1997, has decimated downstream fisheries, affecting 60,000 fishers. The dam directly displaced 12,000 people on the Sinu River. In April 2000, the dam-building company, Colombian officials, and representatives from the indigenous Embera-Katio people who lived in the Urrá reservoir area agreed to compensatory measures featuring a clause stating the Embera's right to have a say in decommissioning the dam. The agreement may represent one of the first cases in which dam-affected indigenous peoples in a developing country have been assured official recognition in future decommissioning negotiations.

Juan José López Negrete, a member of a group representing affected people downstream of the dam, told representatives of the Swedish company Skanska, which constructed the dam: "We didn't come here to pose moral questions to your company because you built Urrá. We came here to let you know that the construction of Urrá signifies the slow death of our culture. What we are asking is that you learn from the experience of Urrá and reform your environmental policies so you don't make the same mistakes in other parts of the world. Even though you think Urrá is history, we are counting on your support for the decommissioning of the dam, given your technical knowledge."

*"We were promised a better way of life but instead our fisheries were decimated and our communities destroyed. Over the past ten years we have learnt that compensation will not solve our problems and will only cause new problems. We believe the only way forward is dam decommissioning and the river restored."*

Letter from villagers affected by Pak Mun Dam and Assembly of the Poor to World Bank President James Wolfensohn.