



Mr. Kishore Rao
Director
World Heritage Centre
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June 18, 2012

Subject: Dam Construction Activities Continue to Threaten World Heritage Sites

Dear Mr. Rao,

Thank you for leading the World Heritage Centre in promoting strong protections for the world's cultural and natural heritage sites. We appreciate the efforts of the Centre last year to heighten awareness around the most endangered sites, including those that are threatened by current or future dam construction.

While the World Heritage Committee made a number of strong decisions last year, dam construction continues unabated at many of these sites,¹ causing grave threats to these World Heritage rivers and the local communities that depend on them. This is particularly true for five World Heritage properties: **the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas (China), the Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves/La Amistad National Park (Panama/Costa Rica), the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (Honduras), the Lake Turkana National Parks (Kenya) and the Lower Valley of the Omo (Ethiopia).**

In the Annex, please see a brief update on the current status of dam building at these sites and specific recommendations with regards to the recently published Draft Decisions.² Given the serious impacts that dams pose to the Outstanding Universal Value of these sites, we propose that the Centre recommend the following to the Committee during its 36th Session:

1. Include the following sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger: the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas (China), the Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves/La Amistad National Park (Panama/Costa Rica), the Lake Turkana National Parks (Kenya) and the Lower Valley of the Omo (Ethiopia). Urge host countries to increase and enforce protection measures for these sites.
2. Urge host countries to respect the World Heritage Convention by suspending all dam plans and construction activities and enforcing the decisions that will be adopted by the World Heritage Committee.
3. Conduct a comprehensive report on the threat of dams to all World Heritage Sites.

If you would like to request further information regarding any of these projects, please do not hesitate to contact us through katy@internationalrivers.org.

¹ To see a full list of dam-threatened World Heritage Sites and their current status, please visit:
<http://www.internationalrivers.org/list-of-dam-threatened-world-heritage-sites>

² <http://whc.unesco.org/en/sessions/36COM/documents>

We thank you for your attention to this matter and stand ready to support you in the protection of the above World Heritage Sites. We look forward to learning about your decision on this matter.

Sincerely,

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Director, Friends of Lake Turkana

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China Program Coordinator, International Rivers

Miriam Miranda
Director, Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH)

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H. E. Mrs. Zorica Tomic
South Africa
H. E. Ms. Dolana Msimang
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H. E. Mr. Rodolphe Imhoof
Thailand
H. E. Mr. Viraphand Vacharithit
United Arab Emirates
H. E. Mr. Abdullah Alneaimi

ANNEX

I. Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas - CHINA

Key Recommendations:

- We recommend that the World Heritage Committee urge the Chinese government to release the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for all dams under construction and site preparation surrounding the property and to conduct full SEAs for each basin, as requested under Draft Decisions #5-7 of 36 COM 7B.9.
- We recommend that a field visit be made to dam sites on the Nu, Jinsha and Lancang to ascertain the level of site preparation and construction related activities.
- We recommend that the Committee urge the government to nominate the site as a World Heritage Site in Danger.

Summary of Threats:

China's Three Parallel Rivers site in Yunnan is known as the epicenter of Chinese biodiversity. According to UNESCO, this impressive watershed supports more than 6,000 plant species and nearly a quarter of the world's animal species. The region is also prone to frequent and deadly landslides and earthquakes. This fragile and unique ecosystem, and the communities that depend on it for survival, is threatened by the recently revived proposal to build a 13-dam cascade along the main body of the Nu River in Yunnan Province, which flows through the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage Site (WHS). The Environmental Impact Assessments for the entire cascade have yet to be released. Dam construction on the three rivers would alter the sediment and water flow into the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage property and significantly change the scenic and ecological value of the site.

In 2011, civil society groups recommended to the World Heritage Committee that they urge the State Party to halt all dam construction activities around the World Heritage property until the full EIAs for these projects have been published. However, the full EIAs have not been made publicly available. China has maintained its commitment to develop dams on the Nu, Jinsha and Lancang rivers as part of its 12th Five Year Plan. In 2011, Huadian Corporation indicated that the company planned to proceed with the dams during the next five years.

Two trips by International Rivers and the Chinese NGO Green Watershed in 2011 indicate that the northern-most dam, Songta, just above the Three Parallel Rivers WHS, has started site preparation. Photos taken by kayakers in early 2012 show that site preparation also also begun at the Maji dam site. Photos taken by another observer in May 2012 shows that construction activities have continued at the site of the Wunonglong dam site on the Lancang River despite a temporary halt to the work due to a lack of official approval. In addition, a new dam, Upper Tiger Leaping Gorge, is being planned on the Jinsha, which would flood the first bend of the Jinsha River.

Resources:

Two senior geologists warn against dam building in the seismically-active Nu River region: "At Fault on the Nu," chinadialogue, 22 March 2011. <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4174>

"China's Huadian to build Nu River hydro plant by 2015: report," Reuters, 10 May 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/10/us-china-hydropower-idUSTRE7492NP20110510>

Further information: <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/355>

II. Lake Turkana National Parks – KENYA

Key Recommendations:

- We recommend that the Committee urge the government to nominate the site as a World Heritage Site in Danger.

Summary of Threats:

Lake Turkana – the world’s largest desert lake – makes life possible in parched northern Kenya. The lake is home to the world's largest population of Nile crocodiles, healthy populations of hippos, and hundreds of bird and fish species. More than a quarter-million indigenous peoples have become masters of wresting sustenance from this harsh landscape.

Lake Turkana was chosen as a World Heritage site because of its rich ecosystem, whose “diverse bird life and desert environment offers an exceptional laboratory for studies of plant and animal communities.” There is strong evidence that the Gibe III Dam, now under construction in Ethiopia, threatens the very characteristics for which Lake Turkana was chosen as a World Heritage Site. The dam will so change the watershed’s hydrological regime that the Lake could end up a shrunken, ecologically unsustainable relic, no longer able to support its current diversity of life (including human communities).

Numerous outside experts have described how the dam endangers the lake. For instance, an April 2010 draft study commissioned by the African Development Bank reveals numerous hydrological changes that will impact Lake Turkana. The study's author, Dr. Sean Avery, says that the Gibe III Dam "will inevitably cause flows to the lake to diminish ... Lake Turkana is dependent on the Omo River for almost 90% of its inflow. The river is the lake's umbilical cord. If the Omo River inflow is cut, the lake level will fall..."

In August 2011, the Kenyan parliament passed a resolution asking for the suspension of dam construction pending further studies. However, construction of the Gibe III Dam continues. The project will also likely receive funding from the World Bank for its transmission lines. On June 21, the World Bank is expected to submit to its Board of Directors a credit of US\$684 million for a 1,000-kilometer-long transmission line from Ethiopia to Kenya. Strong evidence links this transmission line to the Gibe III Dam. A monitoring mission to Kenya was conducted, but not to Ethiopia.

Resources:

“A Commentary on the Environmental, Socioeconomic and Human Rights Impacts of the Proposed Gibe III Hydrodam in the Lower Omo River Basin of Southwest Ethiopia,” Africa Resources Working Group, 2008. <http://www.arwg-gibe.org/>

“Gibe 3 Threatens World Heritage Sites,” Letter to the Secretariat of the World Heritage Centre (UNESCO), International Rivers, 9 August 2010. <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/5642>

“World Bank to Fund Gibe III Dam through the Backdoor?” International Rivers, 22 May 2012. <http://www.internationalrivers.org/node/7475>

III. Lower Valley of the Omo – ETHIOPIA

Key Recommendations:

- We recommend that the Committee urge the government to nominate the site as a World Heritage Site in Danger.
- We recommend that the Committee urge the Ethiopian government to uphold the World Heritage Convention and suspend the Gibe III Dam.

Summary of Threats:

The Omo River is a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of indigenous farmers, herders and fishermen who depend on its nourishing floods to sustain their most reliable sources of food. The national parks of the Lower Omo Valley in Southwest Ethiopia are among “the last unspoiled biodiversity hotspots in Africa” and constitute “resources of all people in the world” according to Ethiopian government officials.

The Gibe III Dam is putting this biodiversity, along with the livelihoods of thousands at risk. The dam will regulate and reduce the Omo River’s flow, increasing hunger and fueling conflict throughout the basin. Recent studies also show that The Gibe III Dam, will allow the creation of large sugar plantations and other cash-crop farms that are irrigated with water from the Omo River. The lands that have been designated as sugar plantations have been inhabited by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Some tribes, such as the Bodi, Mursi and Kwegu, have been told they will be forcibly resettled off these lands into camps where they will become dependent on food aid.

Tribal or indigenous peoples along the Omo Valley that would be affected by the dam include eight distinct indigenous communities: the Mursi, Bodi (Mekan), Muguji (Kwegu), Kara (Karo), Hamer, Bashada, Nyangatom and Daasanach. These groups rely on recessional cultivation of food along the riverbanks, as well as livestock herding and fishing, for survival. In Ethiopia, an estimated 200,000 people rely on the Omo River’s annual flood either directly for food cultivation or indirectly through food surpluses produced and sold within the isolated, local economy. The Gibe III Dam and the associated decrease in water levels and seasonality of flows in the Omo River threaten the survival of these indigenous peoples.

In August 2011, the Kenyan parliament passed a resolution asking for the suspension of dam construction pending further studies. However, construction of the Gibe III Dam continues. The project will also likely receive funding from the World Bank for its transmission lines. On June 21, the World Bank is expected to submit to its Board of Directors a credit of US\$684 million for a 1,000-kilometer-long transmission line from Ethiopia to Kenya. Strong evidence links this transmission line to the Gibe III Dam. A monitoring mission to Kenya was conducted, but not to Ethiopia.

Resources:

“A Commentary on the Environmental, Socioeconomic and Human Rights Impacts of the Proposed Gibe III Hydrodam in the Lower Omo River Basin of Southwest Ethiopia,” Africa Resources Working Group, 2008. <http://www.arwg-gibe.org/>

“Gibe 3 Threatens World Heritage Sites,” Letter to the Secretariat of the World Heritage Centre (UNESCO), International Rivers, 9 August 2010. <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/5642>

“World Bank to Fund Gibe III Dam through the Backdoor?” International Rivers, 22 May 2012. <http://www.internationalrivers.org/node/7475>

IV. Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves/La Amistad National Park - PANAMA/COSTA RICA

Key Recommendations:

- We recommend that the Committee urge the government to nominate the site as a World Heritage Site in Danger.
- We recommend that the Committee recognize that the construction of dams on rivers that drain the Site disrupt biological and evolutionary processes that are essential to maintain the biodiversity of the Site.
- We recommend that the Committee urge the government of Panama to honor its agreement with the Naso not to construct additional dams on main-stem of the Teribe River, which would directly threaten the La Amistad World Heritage Site. In addition, we recommend that the Committee urge Panama to issue an invitation for a monitoring mission and cooperate in its obligations to the World Heritage Convention as requested under Draft Decision #8 in 36 COM 7B.31.
- We recommend that the Committee urge the government of Costa Rica to release its dam plans and to assess their potential impacts on the biodiversity of the World Heritage Site.

Summary of Threats:

The density and diversity of the fauna and flora at La Amistad constitute a unique confluence of North and South American species. Rivers within and around La Amistad play a key role as altitudinal biological corridors for freshwater species within the watersheds of Panama and Costa Rica. However, all of the major watersheds within the World Heritage Site are currently threatened with multiple species extirpations and secondary effects as a result of proposed and existing dams. In Costa Rica, there may be as few as seven or as many as 17 proposed dams. In Panama, there are two existing dams (one completed, one near completion) and several that have been proposed. The resulting change in the river system due to either the cumulative effects of these dams or even one dam on any river below the park will alter the ecology of La Amistad by blocking aquatic organism passage, forcing multiple species extirpations, and creating large standing reservoirs. If all presently proposed dams are constructed, 67% of the total watershed area of the La Amistad World Heritage Site will become inaccessible to diadromous and other upstream/downstream migratory fauna.

Secondary effects will also be significant. Drawing on research from Puerto Rico (where rivers have a similar diadromous fish and shrimp fauna), the report suggests that the elimination of these organisms will impact the sediment flow, water and soil chemistry, diversity and structure of benthic communities, and a host of other biophysical characteristics. In addition, an indirect threat from dam construction on La Amistad is the pressure on terrestrial ecosystems by indigenous people displaced by the existing Chan 75 Dam. Displaced communities tend to relocate closer to the Site, thereby increasing hunting pressures and other uses that may affect the biodiversity of the region. Researchers from the Asociación ANAI have observed several cases of completely deforested land along the edge of the Site.

Four dams exist or are planned for two rivers (the Changuinola River and the Bonyic River) originating inside La Amistad: Chan 75 (already completed), Chan 140, Chan 220, and Bonyic. The 222 MW Chan 75 Dam was built in the La Amistad UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Buffer Zone in Panama. Both the Chan 75 and Bonyic dams are located within the Palo Seco protected forest reserve that borders La Amistad, in what the Ngobe (for Changuinola) and Naso (for the Teribe) consider their territories. Both dams have been the target of protests from the indigenous inhabitants of the area and national and international conservation organizations. None of the Environmental Impact Assessments deal seriously with diadromy and related biodiversity issues. The Naso recently reached an agreement to cease interfering with construction of the Bonyic Dam in turn for (among other things) an agreement to not construct additional

dams in the Teribe watershed/Naso territory. The proposed dam on the Teribe River, which would be built by a Colombian company, threatens the Naso/Teribe tribe and directly threatens the La Amistad World Heritage Site.

Resources:

McLarney, W.O., M. Mafla H., A. M. Arias y D. Bouchonnet. 2010. The Threat to Biodiversity and Ecosystem Function of Proposed Hydroelectric Dams in the La Amistad World Heritage Site, Panama and Costa Rica. Programa de Biomonitorio, Asociación ANAI. Report to UNESCO World Heritage Committee. Asociación ANAI. 123 (pp.)

McLarney, W.O., M. Mafla H., A.M. Arias M., M. Bonilla and H. Sanchez. 2011. Documentation of use rivers in the interior of the La Amistad World Heritage Site (PILA) by diadromous fish and shrimps; a collaborative effort by indigenous parataxonomists and the Asociacion ANAI Stream Biomonitoring Program. Report to UNESCO and the governments of Costa Rica and Panama. Asociacion ANAI. 26 pp

V. Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve - HONDURAS

Key Recommendations:

- We recommend that the Committee urge the Honduran government to conduct a full Cumulative Impact Assessment of the Patuca II, IIA and III dams, and ensure that the projects will not harm the environment nor threaten the well-being and cultural continuity of the Indigenous Peoples of the Moskitia.

Summary of Threats:

The Reserve stretches from the La Moskitia coast through lagoons and along the Río Plátano up into the mountains. There are plans to extend the buffer area to the Patuca River. On 17 January 2011, the Honduran National Congress approved a decree for the construction of the Patuca II, IIA and III dams on the Patuca River, which flows into the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve. The proposed development involves flooding 42 km of intact rain forest, all of which was on the legislative track to either become part of the Patuca National Park or the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve. In addition, there is a lack of information about the impact of the Patuca III Dam on migratory fish species, including the importance of fish habitat above the dam site to the viability of the species (approximately 50% of the watershed lies above the Patuca III Dam).

For more than a decade, the Indigenous peoples of the Tawahka, Pech, Miskito, and Garifuna tribes have steadfastly opposed dam construction on the Patuca River, and they continue to do so, fearing the impacts to their survival and to the river ecosystem within the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve. In addition, there are numerous archeological sites in the watershed, which have yet to be excavated including of the Mayan civilization and other unknown pre-Columbian culture. The government of Honduras has yet to comply with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Rights and ILO 169, which requires that it obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of the affected indigenous peoples.

Damming the Patuca River will exacerbate the impacts of global warming, threaten food security and the cultural survival of the Tawahka people, disrupt transportation and commerce for all the peoples of the Moskitia, alter a vital river ecosystem, and put at risk the invaluable biological diversity of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, along with the Patuca National Park and the Tawahka Asangni Biosphere Reserve. In a World Heritage site with high biodiversity values, the cumulative impacts of all three dams may be significant. In addition, there is a need for proper analysis of the secondary activity associated with the dam projects, including access roads for dam construction. In 1999, the plans for Patuca II were abandoned because of the concerns that the necessary access roads for dam construction would according to IUCN destroy natural resources, attract logging, land clearing for farms and open up undistributed tropical rainforest to illegal hunting.

In September 2010, Sinohydro and the Honduran government signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the construction of three hydroelectric projects on the Patuca River. Currently, Sinohydro is conducting pre-feasibility studies on Patuca II and IIA, and has started preparatory works on Patuca III. Neither piece of information was supplied to the World Heritage Centre (see WHC-12/36.COM/7A.Add).

Resources:

“Mega Dam Project on Patuca River Threatens Indigenous Communities,” iNewp Media Press, 5 March 2011. <http://inewp.com/?p=7178>

Further information: <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/take-action/honduras-dont-dam-patuca-river>