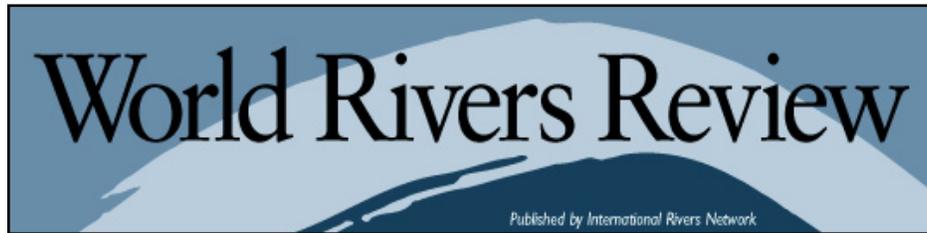


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*International Rivers Network*

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# World Rivers Review

Published by International Rivers Network

Volume 13, Number 1 / February 1998

## **Yacyreta Inspection Panel Claim Undermined**

*by Glenn Switkes*

The World Bank's Board of Directors voted in early December to pursue an "action plan" prepared by Bank staff to remedy serious ongoing problems at the Bank-funded Yacyretá Dam, rather than to implement a more rigorous plan based on findings made by the Bank's own Inspection Panel. At a meeting on December 9, 1997, Board members from the Bank's borrowing countries reportedly were joined by the Japanese and French Executive Directors in the vote to pursue the Action Plan, which the Inspection Panel found to be lacking.

Choosing the action plan option gives Bank staff a six-month window to proceed, and absolves them from taking urgent measures recommended by the Inspection Panel. The Panel's findings were intended to improve the critical situation faced by populations relocated as a result of the dam, and also those remaining in the area who face health risks caused by mismanagement of the dam's reservoir.

Yacyretá, one of Latin America's most controversial dam projects, received nearly US\$1 billion each from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) over a period of nearly two decades. In 1994, the banks permitted the binational electric company, Entidad Binacional Yacyretá (Argentina and Paraguay), to close the dam's floodgates and fill the reservoir to its initial level despite the fact that a detailed environmental and social mitigation plan was not yet in place. In 1996, the Paraguayan environmental and human rights NGO, Sobrevivencia - Amigos de la Tierra Paraguay and a group of citizens affected by Yacyretá, filed a request for an investigation by the Bank Inspection Panel and a parallel unit at the IDB.

The Inspection Panel is the body of last resort for people affected by World Bank projects. The Panel was established by the World Bank in 1993 in the face of criticism concerning widespread negative impacts of Bank-funded projects. Populations directly affected by projects which receive World Bank loans may bring a complaint before the Panel and, if an investigation is approved by the Bank's Directors, the Panel carries out an independent inquiry of the project to determine whether Bank policies have been violated and if those violations have caused harm to affected people.

## **Most Claims Dropped**

Since 1994, the Panel, which has three members serving rotating three-year terms, has received 10 requests for investigation of Bank-financed projects. Of the 10 claims received, the Panel has recommended that the Board authorize complete investigations of five of them. But the Board, which is increasingly hostile to having its projects scrutinized, has only authorized the investigation of one claim - the Arun Dam in Nepal, which was the first claim to be brought to the Panel. Of the 10 claims filed, four have been related to large-scale hydroelectric dam projects. In the case of Yacyretá, the Panel was given a mandate to "review and assess" the problems with the dam project and the Bank's Action Plan, but was not authorized to investigate violations of Bank policy nor assign responsibility for those violations.

The Inspection Panel's report on Yacyretá - which, like the Action Plan, have still not been made public - appear to confirm the claimants' contentions that the dam has caused serious social and environmental problems. In the report, the Panel notes that "...while (civil and electro-mechanical works) are 99.8% complete, less than a third of environmental and resettlement plans have been completed." The Panel noted a pattern of "delays and non-compliance tolerated by the Bank", and found that the Bank had violated some of its own policies and procedures in its handling of the Yacyretá loan.

Addressing the Bank's Action Plan for Yacyretá, the Inspection Panel said that "critical studies ... essential to assess the adequacy of these Plans, have either not been carried out or were incomplete." The Panel noted that populations affected by the project have yet to be consulted to design a plan which can be truly effective.

Among lingering problems caused by the dam, which the Inspection Panel confirmed in its investigation, are "unsanitary conditions ... in many of the stagnant bays created by the reservoir (which) pose health risks to poor people living in low-lying urban areas." Among the major continuing problems are high levels of fecal coliform caused by untreated discharge from the municipal slaughterhouse in the city of Encarnación which the Panel says mean "risks of serious health hazards."

The Panel also found that thousands of residents of the area, including fishermen and brick makers, have lost their jobs as a result of the dam and have not received compensation. To date, less than 25 percent of the people who would be affected by the dam when it fully filled have been resettled, or 13,000 of the more than 50,000 eventual oustees.

Significantly, the Inspection Panel found that costs of effective mitigation of impacts caused by the dam have been seriously underestimated, and that as much as \$2 billion will still be required if the reservoir is raised to its final design level of 83 meters above sea level. The Panel stated, "one has to question seriously whether (Yacyretá's) debt would ever be repaid at 83 masl [meters above sea level, the final height of the dam] once the full costs are taken into account."

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**For More Information:**

- Two new publications are available that shed light on the Inspection Panel process and its role at the World Bank. "The World Bank Inspection Panel: A Three Year Review" by Lori Udall (formerly with IRN) and published by the Bank Information Center (October 1997), gives a history and analysis of the 10 claims brought before the panel, and makes recommendations for improvements in the process. For ordering information, contact Kay Treakle at BIC, 2025 I Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20006. Phone: 202.776.0628, fax: 202.466.8189, e-mail: [bicusa@igc.apc.org](mailto:bicusa@igc.apc.org)
- "A Citizen's Guide to the World Bank Inspection Panel" by Dana Clark and Mike Hsu, published by the Center for International Environmental Law (November 1997), is a step by step manual for citizens interested in filing claims with the Panel. For ordering information, contact Mike Hsu at CIEL, 1367 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20036. Phone: 202.785.8700; fax 202.785.8701, e-mail: [cielmh@igc.apc.org](mailto:cielmh@igc.apc.org), Internet: [www.igc.apc.org/ciel/](http://www.igc.apc.org/ciel/)



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# World Rivers Review

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## Justice Denied

*by Dana Clark and Kay Treakle*

The recent decision by the World Bank's Board of Directors to deny a full investigation of the Yacyretá Inspection Panel claim (see cover story of this issue) reflects the continuing decline of the independence of the Inspection Panel. The Board of Directors has become increasingly resistant to the Panel's efforts to promote accountability and to evaluate the impacts of World Bank policy violations on local communities and their environment. As a result, the Panel's ability to function effectively has been seriously undermined, and the Bank is avoiding taking responsibility for project failures.

The Inspection Panel process forces the Bank to confront the enormous social and environmental consequences of its policy failures. It also provides an opportunity for the Bank to address critical questions of accountability and the continuing failures by the Bank to achieve compliance with environmental and social policies. The Panel was created by the World Bank's Board of Directors, which represents member countries, to address the recognized need for "a reliable source of independent judgment" about problems related to implementation of policies in Bank-financed projects. The panel provides an impartial forum to which locally affected people can turn in cases where they believed that they have been, or are likely to be, harmed by a Bank project. Guarantees of independence, such as the provision that no member of the Panel can ever work at the World Bank after their tenure expires, were given to ensure that the Inspection Panel could operate free from internal pressure.

In the three years that the Panel has been in operation, it has been presented with ten claims brought by citizens in seven countries. Of those ten, the Panel has recommended to the Board that five be thoroughly investigated. The Board, which has final say, has only authorized a full investigation of one project - the Arun dam in Nepal, the first claim the Panel received. Over time, the Bank's Board has consistently subverted the Inspection Panel process, limiting the Panel's independence and undermining claimants' quest for justice and accountability.

Several recent claims have revealed the unwillingness of the Bank's Board and Management to allow independent scrutiny of its most controversial projects. In three cases - the Itaparica dam in Brazil, the Yacyretá dam in Argentina and Paraguay, and the Singrauli energy project in India - the Board has

refused to authorize the Panel to conduct a full investigation, despite the Panel's findings of serious policy violations causing harm to affected communities. Instead, the Board has adopted "action plans" developed by Bank management or the borrowing country, without participation of the Inspection Panel or the claimants. As a result, the original vision of the Panel process, which was to be claimant-driven and responsive to the concerns of locally affected people, has been hijacked by political wrangling and indecisiveness at the Board level.

In part, this political difficulty reflects the fact that claims have been brought against the Bank's most powerful borrowers. At one point last year, the Panel was busy with claims involving Argentina, Brazil and India. Borrowing-country governments have banded together in opposition to inspections, resentful of the perception that management has tried to shift both the blame for problems in the project and the costs of remedying them to the borrowing government.

The political dynamic also reflects a long-standing problem that the Inspection Panel was designed, in part, to remedy. The Bank has been unwilling to closely monitor or supervise the loans they make to powerful borrowing countries. This problem has been repeatedly highlighted in the claims. In fact, a claim cannot be brought until such time as the claimants have tried to raise their concerns with Bank management and have received an unsatisfactory response. In many of these cases, such as Yacyretá and Singrauli, the projects have been problematic for decades. In both cases, the Bank has known of the ongoing problems, but has refused to pressure its borrower to resolve them.

Despite the significant obstacles it has faced, the Inspection Panel has had a positive impact on several projects that it has been able to review. Claimants have found the Panel to be largely responsive to their concerns, and have in some cases seen visible progress in problem-solving on the ground once the Panel has been involved. The challenge now is to reverse the trend of avoiding accountability, and improve the functioning of the institution. The Board is currently reviewing its experience with the Panel; the outcome of this review is uncertain. It is time for the Board to support and strengthen the Inspection Panel, and overcome its reluctance to bring claims to the full light of day. The unacceptable alternative is that the Board will slowly destroy the Panel's effectiveness through a death of a thousand cuts.



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Volume 13, Number 1 / February 1998

## **Thousands Occupy Maheshwar Dam Site, Halt Construction**

Approximately 25,000 villagers occupied the site of the Maheshwar Dam in India's Narmada Valley in the early morning hours of January 11, bringing all work on the controversial project to a halt.

"The siege will continue until our demands are met," said Medha Patkar, celebrated leader of the Save the Narmada Movement (NBA).

A January 13 article in London newspaper *The Guardian* described the scene as the protestors descended upon the site in the early dawn: "Within minutes they had surprised the few guards and cut radio communications between the construction camp and the outside world. By 6:30 am, one of the largest peaceful sit-ins in Indian history had begun."

In anticipation of the protest, police had sealed the main roads leading to the site, but the people evaded the cordon by walking to the site on local footpaths in the dead of night. The authorities had threatened to use force to keep work going at the dam site but, finding themselves outnumbered and outwitted, instead declared a "temporary" suspension of construction.

The majority of the protesters are women. Most left as planned at the end of the day, but a core group of 3,000-4,000 protestors will remain in occupation until the authorities agree to their demand for a review of the project.

The 400-MW Maheshwar hydropower project is part of the Narmada Valley Development Project, an ambitious government development scheme that proposes 30 major dams and thousands of small- and medium-sized dams on the Narmada River. Maheshwar is upstream from the Sardar Sarovar Project, the most notorious of the massive scheme's large dams.

Maheshwar is the first privatized hydroelectric dam in the Narmada Valley. The project would submerge 61 villages and thousands of acres of fertile farmland. The contract has been assigned to a well-known Indian textile company, S. Kumars, which is seeking collaboration with multinationals including Siemens and Asea Brown Boveri (ABB).

Project opponents say the dam's benefits have not been publicly established, leading many to doubt its viability. The expected project cost has risen four-fold in the last ten years and S. Kumar, which appears

to have been granted an extremely generous contract to build the project, has no experience in hydro development.

The NBA helped organize a massive rally of 10,000 local villagers and people from other dam sites in the valley in early October 1997. The protestors at that time called for a stoppage of work and a full review of the project - including the cost benefit analysis, financial terms, resettlement and rehabilitation plans, and environmental impacts - in consultation with affected people. The group got no response from project authorities or the government, and so decided to occupy the site until its demands were met.

Protestors have set up tents and a makeshift stage and a huge kitchen has been erected in a pit excavated for the dam foundations. "As the blue flags of the NBA flutter in the wind, small shopkeepers have moved in and set up stalls selling teas and snacks," says Dharmadikary. "The atmosphere is festive".

As a result of the occupation, the Madhya Pradesh state government has invited the NBA to a special meeting of its Maheshwar monitoring committee on January 15, to be chaired by the state's Chief Minister. "This is a clear indication that the government wants a dialogue, although it does not mean that we will lessen our pressure," says Dharmadikary.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Please write letters and faxes supporting the Maheshwar protestors' demands for a halt to construction and a full review of the project to Digvijay Singh, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Indore, India; +91-755-540 501; Goran Lindahl, CEO; ABB, Goran Lindahl, CEO & President, Asea Brown Boveri, PO Box 8131, (Affolternstasse 11), CH-8050 Zurich, Switzerland; Fax : +41-1-311-4983.

- [IRN Press Release of February 3, 1998](#): "Protesters Celebrate Victory at Maheshwar Dam: State Government Agrees to Halt Construction, Review Project".
- [IRN Press Release of October 10, 1997](#): "10,000 People Protest Maheshwar Dam on India's Narmada River; Protestors Demand Complete Halt to Construction".
- The [Narmada Campaign](#) Page.



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## Dissent Grows Over Senegal River Valley Dams

by Lori Pottinger

This past September, an official think-tank called Le Groupe de Réflexion Stratégique (Strategic Planning Group) publicly released a report critical of the large dam projects in the Senegal River Valley. The group's report prompted a local farmers' group to demand the re-establishment of natural river flooding upon which their agricultural systems depend and which the dams had effectively ended.

As described in a story in the [October 1997](#) issue of *World Rivers Review*, the Manantali and Diama Dams have done serious harm to local fishing and farming communities by stopping the natural flood regime and introducing water-borne diseases. The government, with help from the World Bank, is now adapting the Manantali Dam to produce power - a plan that will bring little relief to those harmed by the cessation of natural flooding. The river's flooding has for centuries supported a thriving small-scale agricultural society, which now lies in tatters.

The Strategic Planning Group, which was commissioned by the Senegal Ministry of Agriculture and the World Bank to rethink Senegal's agricultural policy, released its highly critical report and action plan at a public hearing. The result was great consternation in government circles associated with the project. A local newspaper reported that the Government "deplored the group's conclusions," saying it did not adequately or objectively look at the government's planning of agricultural systems. But critics say the dams have failed to bring promised results in irrigated agriculture, and that the addition of the power supply to Manantali could even make things worse by reducing the amount of water available for artificial flooding.

The group's study was conducted by Adrian Adams, who has lived and worked in Senegal for the past 20 years. Adams' report described the effects of irrigation schemes on farming communities both before and after the dams were built, highlighted by case studies of three villages. The report recommended that the dams be operated to promote flood-recession farming and renewal of the river's fish stocks as well as irrigated farming and electricity. In response to the report's recommendations, a Valley-wide farmer's union called Mouvement des Acteurs de la Vallée (MAV) drafted its own statement to be presented at the September public hearing. MAV says its "Document Paysan" describes the concerns of a majority of the Valley's farmers and herders who have been adversely affected by the dam projects.

At the public hearing, according to the newspaper *Sud Quotidien* (Oct. 1, 1997), "farmers aggressively questioned the development project and dams built in the Senegal Valley which have led to their current distress." The newspaper said the farmers questioned the validity of the water projects and "asked if these costly dams should be destroyed or at least the agricultural policies be changed."

MAV's demands, presented at the public hearing, include the following:

- The re-establishment of regular floods favoring agriculture, herding and fishing;
- The reorganization of irrigated agriculture to be more accessible to more farmers;
- Establishment of adequate health regulations to address pollution and diseases brought on by the dams and their associated developments;
- Participation of local populations in all future decisions about development, especially those which concern the use of the river's water, the politics of development, and changes in national law on issues such as land tenure and land redistribution. This participation should be not only at the rural community level but also at regional and national levels.

Other groups voiced concerns and questions about the project at regional stakeholder meetings held in the region in mid-November, sponsored by Organisation Pour La Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Senegal (OMVS), the tri-nation parastatal with overall responsibility for the dam. At those meetings, representatives from a coalition of five nongovernmental organizations proposed seven measures to solve some of the project's biggest problems, including adopting an ecosystem approach to water management, implementing measures to ensure respect for the rights of existing and vulnerable users, and adopting health goals as part of the water management plan.

### **Water Management Being Studied**

The project has been criticized for allowing power production plans to proceed before a water-management plan is in place. Among other things, good water management practices can help control the serious health problems brought on by the dam. ORSTOM, a French consulting firm, is expected to develop a further analysis of water management issues in early 1998, while the World Bank is slated to develop an analysis of costs and benefits of water management options.

The Bank's analysis will certainly bear close watching. Extensive studies have documented the greater productivity of traditional flood recession farming cycles compared to large-scale irrigation. Bank documents prepared for Board review of the project found that the value of the annual flood - measured in terms of traditional production and associated social and environmental benefits - exceeded the value of electric production as well. Notwithstanding these findings, the rationale for the dam - and water management - continues to be framed in terms of electricity production, irrigation and navigation. Goals such as solving health problems and restoring traditional agriculture have been relegated to "mitigation goals" to be achieved "as much as possible."

The adaptation of Manantali Dam to produce power is expected to cost US\$445 million. The project garnered a \$38 million loan from the World Bank in 1997, and is expected to be presented to the Board of the African Development Bank (AfDB) for review in early 1998. AfDB is considering loaning \$25.9 million for the project. Despite the progress with funding the project, fundamental questions remain, including the extent of historic and future flood recession agriculture in the valley, and the basis for project documents' optimistic assumptions about regional rainfall. The Bank's analysis of the Manantali project is predicated on a rainfall data series (1950-1993) that knowledgeable experts consider

unrepresentative of the region and unduly optimistic, wholly apart from the effects of global climate change. Lower rainfall volumes since 1970 are considered more representative.

The World Bank's use of optimistic assumptions to justify projects has been criticized in numerous internal and external analyses, yet the problem persists. In the case of Manantali, the consequences for farmers could be disastrous. For example, if the dam were operated mainly for power and if drier conditions prevailed, only 11,000 hectares (ha) could be farmed, compared to a Bank estimate of 64,000 ha based on an assumption that wetter conditions would prevail. While the Bank analysis factored the "risk" of lower rainfall into its economic analysis for the power operator, it did not use the more realistic data as the basis of its economic or social and environmental mitigation analyses.

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## **Double Jeopardy for Laos: Logging Interests and Hydro Developers Join Forces to Dam Mekong Tributary**

*by Andrew Nette*

A Malaysian logging company, Idris Hydraulic, will be an important partner in a proposed hydroelectric dam in southern Laos, Xekaman 1. The dam will, if built, flood approximately 230 square kilometers of land, evict over 1,000 mainly indigenous people and seriously damage local fisheries. The project is still in the planning stages, although more detailed information about its status is hard to come by.

The 468-megawatt Xekaman 1 Dam is one of nearly a dozen large-scale hydropower projects in various stages of planning or construction in Laos, all of which have the stated intention of selling power to Thailand. Idris' involvement in Xekaman, however, appears to be motivated by the prospect of lucrative returns from logging the dam's reservoir, which includes some of the last intact areas of lowland tropical forest remaining in mainland Southeast Asia.

Idris' involvement is particularly disturbing given that the dam will flood an unknown area of the adjoining Dong Ampham National Biodiversity Conservation Area, one of 17 areas declared protected by the Lao government. Although the developers claim that much of the area in the proposed reservoir has already been destroyed by several generations of illegal logging and slash-and-burn agriculture, reports by the Lao government and the IUCN/The World Conservation Union claim that approximately 80 percent remains pristine forest.

Xekaman 1 was originally part of a US\$1 billion agreement for a number of projects signed in early 1994 between the Lao government and Australia's Hydro-Electric Commission Enterprises Corporation (HECEC). Xekaman will be a 187-meter concrete faced rockfill dam, one of the highest of its type in the world. The dam site is in the remote southern Lao province of Attapeu, on the Xekaman River - one of six tributaries flowing into the Sekong River, which is in turn one of the largest tributaries of the Mekong.

## **Logging: The Big Draw**

Through its participation in the Xekaman 1 dam, Idris joins a long list of foreign logging companies presently involved in Laos, including a growing number of Malaysian interests who are expanding their activities as domestic timber reserves run out. Idris has major logging operations in Malaysia and Burma, and reportedly has timber concessions of around 1.25 million hectares in Zaire and Gabon.

According to one unofficial estimate in late 1996, approximately one million cubic meters of wood will have to be cleared to make way for Xekaman 1's reservoir.

A Vientiane-based dam contractor told a researcher in 1995 that there "are individuals associated with [the then] HECEC who are very interested in logging the area, and who are more interested in the timber than in building the dam, and the only way they'll get the timber is if there's a dam, which will inundate the area - it's just an excuse to get the timber."

As part of reforms to the forestry sector in Laos, while foreign logging companies retain the right to process timber, they must do so in cooperation with one of three military-backed companies which control the timber trade in the north, south and central parts of the country. Despite this, Idris are reportedly negotiating with the southern military company to log the reservoir area themselves.

The poor track record of logging companies in confining their activities to their concession area means that Idris' participation in Xekaman 1 greatly increases the danger posed to the surrounding forest by the dam. This is of particular concern as the dam will flood an unknown area of the Dong Ampham protected

## **Details: The Xekaman 1 Dam**

The Xekaman 1 hydropower project is one of three "priority projects" envisaged in a master plan study of the Sekong River Basin, completed by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 1993. It is planned to be a "Build-Own-Transfer" (BOT) scheme with a 20- to 25-year concession period. Construction by John Holland Pty Ltd, which helped build the "Friendship Bridge" over the Mekong River, and the Brazilian company Companhia Brasileira de Projectos e Obras (CBPO), which was involved in the construction and engineering work for the controversial (and recently cancelled) Bakun dam in Sarawak, Malaysia. The project's environmental impact assessment is to be carried out by the Tasmanian-based consulting firm Gutteridge, Haskins and Davey Pty Ltd (GHD).

- Size of dam: 187-meter concrete-faced rockfill dam
- Installed capacity: 468 MW\*
- Most recent cost estimate: US\$450-500 million.
- Reservoir size: approximately 230 square kilometres
- Resettlement: Will result in eviction of nine villages (812 people)

\* One megawatt can power 1,000 average US houses for a year.

### ***For More Information***

*A more detailed and fully referenced briefing paper on this project, entitled "The Xekaman 1 Hydroelectric Dam," is available for US\$10 from TERRA. Contact information: 09 Soi Rohitsook, Pracharaj-*

area.

Investigations carried out in 1995 by the Protected Area's Division of the Department of Forestry in Laos reported that Dong Ampham is home to many globally threatened large mammal species, including tigers and other large cats, elephants, deer, otters, wild boar and various primate species.

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### **Weak Economics**

In addition to the impact on the forests of southern Laos, a myriad of other problems are associated with Xekaman 1.

The official price tag of the Xekaman 1 dam is between US\$450-500 million, a cost many independent observers believe is severely underestimated. In the absence of multilateral funding from the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, which have thus far have shown no interest in the project, the Lao Government will have to borrow their share of the equity from private banks.

Concerns have been expressed over the lack of hydrological data upon which the Xekaman's economic projections are based. Villagers in the area have reported that the Xekaman River has become increasingly shallow over the last 10 to 20 years, an undocumented trend which could seriously undermine the dam's economics.

Most seriously, Xekaman 1 has lacked a buyer for its electricity since late February when the project was dropped from the list of power projects in Laos from which Thailand had committed 3,000 MW by the year 2006.

Preecha Chungwatana, former governor general of EGAT, Thailand's state-owned electricity monopoly, was quoted in February as saying that Xekaman 1 had been cut from EGAT's plans because the Lao government had not yet given a concession agreement to an investor for the project.

Despite claims by the developers in late 1996 that the Xekaman 1 was "on track" to complete a power-purchasing agreement (PPA) with EGAT, no agreement has yet been signed and it is unclear whether talks with EGAT on the matter have been started. The recent economic crisis in Thailand, and the resulting decline in electricity demand further reduces the likelihood of EGAT buying power from Xekaman 1.

### **Social and Environmental Impacts**

Despite pledges by the dam's backers to complete "a comprehensive environmental and social impact assessment" before starting any construction work on the Xekaman 1, little up-to-date information about the dam is publicly available and the dam's developers have yet to produce an environmental impact assessment.

According to the dam's developers, seven villages (home to more than 1,000 people) will have to be moved. Another 187 families or 957 individuals, would be "essentially cut off from their natural communication pathways", although other sources maintain that closer to 2,220 people, including villagers from the Xekaman's watershed, will be moved.

Villagers in the area interviewed for a 1995 Department of Forestry study said that they did not want to be moved. The reports stated: "The Xekaman River basin was heavily bombed during the Indochina war, and the people in the area suffered years of difficult conditions during the war years ... Many villagers expressed dismay about only finally being able to put their lives back together, only to find that they will be uprooted by the Xekaman 1 dam."

The dam will also have a massive impact on fisheries, which form an important part of the local economy and make up an estimated 70 to 90 per cent of protein consumed by people living along the Xekaman River.

The dam will block fish migration routes along the Xekaman, and destroy large areas of seasonally flooded forest used as spawning grounds for fish. According to the Department of Forestry report: "Together, these downstream fisheries impacts are likely to be severe."

"Many fish populations are likely to be heavily reduced, and some species may disappear from the river entirely ... In addition, reductions in fish stocks in the Xekaman may have a significant impact on fisheries in the Sekong and even the Mekong Rivers, as many fish that presumably feed and spawn in the Xekaman River are believed to migrate between the Xekaman and the Sekong and Mekong Rivers."

A recent report by the Wildlife Conservation Society reveals that the region is quite rich in biodiversity, despite project developers' allegations to the contrary. The group's report, "A Wildlife and Habitat Survey of Dong Ampham NBCA and Phou Kathong Proposed NBCA, Attapu Province, Lao PDR," describes the project's serious impacts on the region's ecosystems: "In biodiversity conservation terms, the dam will have serious impacts of the Xe Kaman river itself, both upstream and downstream of the dam site, its fish diversity, and numerous riverine specialist mammal, bird and reptile species (e.g., Siamese Crocodile, Masked Finfoot, River Lapwing, Lesser Fish Eagle and otters)." The report says that the area of greatest concern are important wetlands in the region, the Xe Kaman Lowlands, which has "extensive tracts of old-growth evergreen and semi-evergreen forest" that will be harmed by the dam. There will also be serious impacts on important populations of Key Species such as Buff-cheeked Gibbon, Siamese Fireback, Bar-bellied and Blue-rumped Pittas, Red-collared Woodpecker, and Asian Elephant (one of the few remaining populations in southeastern Laos).

### **HCEC: The Australia Connection**

Although construction of Xekaman 1 was originally supposed to commence by November 1995 and be completed by the year 2000, progress on the dam has been slow, in part owing to changes in HCEC's ownership structure.

HECEC was established in 1987 as the commercial arm of the state-owned Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC), a semi-autonomous government authority charged with handling all aspects of power generation and supply in the Australian island state of Tasmania. An influential proponent of large-scale dam construction for nearly 60 years, HEC came to international prominence in the late seventies over its plans to dam Tasmania's Franklin River. Public opposition to that project was particularly pronounced over its intention to flood a 35-kilometer stretch of wilderness along the river, leading to a decision by the Australian High Court to halt the dam's construction in July 1983.

Faced with the virtual exhaustion of opportunities to build dams in Tasmania and a corresponding lack of employment opportunities for its staff, HEC formed HECEC to bid on hydropower projects overseas, mainly targeting Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

In 1996, HECEC underwent an unusual privatization process, through which the Corporation and its assets were sold to a number of senior HECEC executives. Two companies emerged from the buy-out, one of which, Austral Lao Power (ALP), now has the rights to the Xekaman 1, and is pushing ahead with the dam in collaboration with Idris Hydraulic. Idris is providing start-up financing to prepare the project for construction.

Once construction starts, the concession agreement will be signed over to a new company, Austral Lao Power Private Limited Company (ALP PLC). ALP will reportedly retain a five per cent share in the project. The new company will bring together Idris with a consortium of three Thai-based companies, and the Lao government, which will have 25 per cent equity share in the dam.

Despite claims by the developers that the project now has no links to Australia or the dam's former parent company HEC, a number of Australian interests remain actively involved in Xekaman 1. The Xekaman 1 dam has enjoyed considerable official and unofficial support from the Australian government since its inception. This was part of a wider policy of picking high profile, big budget projects to showcase the capabilities of Australia's corporate sector in Asia.

The original 1994 agreement covering the project was signed in the presence of Australia's then-Prime Minister Paul Keating, one day after he had presided over the opening of the "Friendship Bridge" over the Mekong River between Laos and Thailand.

HECEC's original purpose was to provide employment opportunities for HEC staff in the face of dwindling opportunities to build dams in Tasmania. ALP continues to have the same access to HEC's services and skills base. Many of ALP's key executives have a long-standing institutional affiliation with HECEC and HEC.

A leading Australian company, John Holland Pty Ltd, will reportedly carry out construction of the dam in a joint venture with Brazilian company Companhia Brasileira de Projectos e Obras, involved in the recently postponed Bakun dam in Malaysia.

*The author is a Bangkok-based journalist.*

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- Visit the [Mekong Campaign Page](#) for more information.



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# World Rivers Review

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## Sanmenxia: A Cautionary Tale

by Doris Shen

*China's history of dam-building is full of tragedies, many of which center around resettling people. According to a 1990 report by China's Ministry of Water Resources, 30-40 percent of the 10 million people relocated for the nation's hydroelectric dams since the late 1950s are still impoverished and lack adequate food, clothing, and shelter. The following is a cautionary tale from China's past which may foretell of things to come for the millions who will be moved for the massive Three Gorges project.*

The Three Gate Gorge (Sanmenxia) Dam, located on the Yellow River in Henan Province, was intended to defend the area against a 1,000 year flood and provide other benefits such as electricity generation and irrigation. Built forty years ago with Soviet assistance, the dam inundated vast amounts of fertile land on the central plain of Shaanxi province, one of China's traditional granaries. It also proved disastrous from the start.

Construction began in April 1957 and by 1960, the reservoir began to store water. Although the from the start the project had its detractors, dissension was not allowed. Professor Huang Wanli of the Hydraulic Engineering Department of Beijing's Qinghua University, said in an interview years after project was finished: "During those days, the Sanmenxia project was used as a criterion for judging one's political stand. Those who supported the project were for the Party, while those who had different opinions were against the Party."

Within two years, sediment accumulation on the river bed behind the dam became very serious. At the confluence of the Wei and Yellow rivers, the build-up of sedimentation blocked the normal flow of Wei waters into the Yellow River causing the Wei to overrun its banks and threatening the city of Xi'an with serious flooding. The increased elevation of the river bed also made the underground water table rise, which caused increased salinization and alkalization of agricultural lands. These lands soon became useless for growing food.

In 1962, engineers began to try to solve the sedimentation problem by building tunnels into the dam wall to flush out sediment. Despite their efforts, however, in the summer of 1969 the city of Xi'an suffered

another flood. As a result its redesign, the Sanmenxia Dam, which was designed to generate 120 MW, now became a run-of-river power station generating just 25 MW.

As the years passed, the sedimentation problem grew worse. By June 1991, the river bed at Tongguan pass had risen 4.6 meters. The Wei River was now higher than the surrounding lands, held in only by earthen dikes. The level of underground water in the Wei and Yellow river delta had also risen 2-3 meters, causing vast areas of land to be destroyed by salinization. Sedimentation also severely changed the shape of the riverbed, which caused 23,000 acres of land to be lost to landslides.

By the time the project was complete, more than 403,000 people from three provinces had been resettled - more than four times original estimates. The increase was due in large part to the floods caused by sedimentation. For years afterward, these people who had prospered on the river valley's rich alluvial soil struggled to overcome the poverty of resettlement.

### **Early Optimism**

In the beginning, though, resettlers were convinced that sacrificing their lands would lead to a greater good. Slogans such as "relocate one household to rescue ten thousand households" and promises of an even better life in the resettlement areas helped sway these farmers to give their all to help "modernize" China. And the government was full of heady promises: Vice Premier Deng Zihui announced at a National People's Congress meeting in July 1955: "The government shall guarantee relocatees suitable conditions for production and daily life in the resettlement areas ... Relocatees will not suffer any loss during the relocation and [the government] will help them acquire a stable and happy life as quickly as possible in their new homes." The Yellow River Planning Commission declared, "Residents from reservoir areas should not, after their relocations, experience any reduction in annual agricultural yields and indeed they should see some improvements." And a 1956 government resettlement plan echoed these promises: "The principle to be followed must guarantee that the living standard of relocatees does not decline."

In reality, most resettlers were forced to move to the dry and barren areas of Gansu and Ningxia provinces and to marginal lands in Shaanxi with little if any monetary compensation. Those who were relocated to Ningxia described their new environment as "a gust of wind blowing all year round." As a result of the poor conditions, they were forced to move three or four more times, each time enduring hunger as the infertile lands they were moved to refused to yield adequate food. Pervasive starvation destroyed the fabric of family and community life. Violence broke out as the hungry ventured to steal corn from neighboring farms. Sons and daughters were sent away to work in construction corps and the Zushan coal mines of Inner Mongolia.

As their suffering mounted, sedimentation continued at the dam, forcing its operators to keep the water level low enough to leave open vast areas of their former farmlands. Since the original owners were gone, members of nearby communes seized and plowed the land, sowed their crops, and claimed housing materials.

Responding to Mao Zedong's disastrous slogan "Engage in Agriculture on a Grand Scale," people from government organizations, schools, military units, and factories set up 209 separate farms in the reservoir drawdown area. The land had been made public, and these state-owned enterprises were the

new owners.

### **Military Moves In**

In 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out through China. The army took control of the land around the reservoir, establishing three large-scale, 20 small-scale military farms, and four military firing ranges. And so it was that one million acres of land was transferred from peasants to the government without economic compensation.

Back in Ningxia, the resettlers heard that their former lands were being farmed, and made a formal accusation against the military: "The state allows you to reclaim this open land. How is it that you can come and reclaim lands that our ancestors have been living on for generations?... You are supposed to be the people's soldiers and we the people provide you with food and clothes. Why are you now involved in the plowing of fields?" Other groups wrote similar petition letters to relevant sectors of the government. No response was ever received.

Finally, in 1985, after a government review, 300,000 acres (out of the original one million taken) was transferred back to resettlers. But two-thirds of this land is annually threatened by floods and most of which is damaged by alkalization and salinization.

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- Visit the [Three Gorges Campaign Page](#) for more information.



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# World Rivers Review

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## **Rare Birds Threatened by Petrochemical Project**

*by Marcia McNally*

One of the rarest birds in the world, the black-faced spoonbill, spends its winter in the coastal wetlands of the Tsengwen River in Taiwan. Although more than half of the remaining 550 birds migrate to this area, the Taiwanese national government is poised to approve plans for a petrochemical complex and related development that will destroy one-third of the spoonbill's habitat - a move that will likely send this bird into an extinction vortex.

The 7,000 acre Bin-nan industrial complex would be built on Chi-gu Lagoon, which is the center of the 35-kilometer habitat radius required by the spoonbill. The industrial complex would include an oil refinery, a naphtha cracker (used in the processing of petrochemicals), a steel mill, and an industrial port. The project is strongly supported by Taiwan President Lee Tung Hui.

Besides ringing a death-knell for a rare species, the project has other serious environmental impacts which have not been addressed in the environmental impact assessment (EIA). University of California Berkeley hydrologist Dr. G. Mathias Kondolf has projected that the petrochemical plant and steel mill will use approximately 117 million cubic meters of water per year, twice the capacity of existing reservoirs in the region and equal to that consumed by all industrial users in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. Three new dams have been proposed to service the industrial complex. The dams will flood two aboriginal villages upstream and alter flow regimes of the Kaoping, Yailiao, Laonung, Meinung, Chisan, and Tsengwen rivers. Dr. Kondolf says that the EIA for the project "contains no assessment of the potential effects of such a massive [interbasin water] transfer." He further notes that although Taiwan has one of the highest erosion rates in the world, the project EIA does not address sediment issues, which has been a problem for many reservoirs in Taiwan.

Increased pollution, water salinity and changes to water temperature from the project would significantly damage the Chi-gu fishery, which currently generates US\$136 million annually and employs 16,000 people. The project would also make it difficult for Taiwan to meet internationally agreed-upon CO2 emission levels. Bin-nan alone is expected to equal 31 percent of Taiwan's 1990 CO2 emissions, according to The China Times (Dec. 21 1997). Taiwan is currently the 24th largest producer of CO2 in the world.

Over the past year faculty and students from the University of California at Berkeley's College of Environmental Design and National Taiwan University's Building and Planning Research Foundation have been working with Chi-gu fishermen, Taiwan environmental groups, and national legislator Su Huann-Chi to raise awareness among the Taiwanese people of the project's serious impacts. The coalition, called SAVE (Spoonbill Action Voluntary Echo), is campaigning to bring public pressure on the Taiwanese government and get the project denied.

The last hurdle faced by the Tuntex Consortium, the Bin-nan project's developer, is approval of the EIA, which is expected some time this spring. Approval would be in violation of the biodiversity protection principle of Agenda 21, the Rio Earth Summit's blueprint for sustainable development, to which Taiwan has committed. Denying the project will not necessarily be the end of the struggle, however - another group is in the wings with a back-up proposal for an airport and highway for the same area.

### **What You Can Do**

Write letters opposing the Bin-nan project to the President of Taiwan and the head of the Environmental Protection Administration: President Lee Tung-Hui, No. 122, Sec. 1, Chung-chin S. Road, Taipei, Taiwan R.O.C.; Dr. Hsung-Hsiung Tsai, Environmental Protection Administration Director, No. 41, Sec. 1, Chung-Hwa Road, Taipei, Taiwan, R. O.C.

You can also help the efforts by joining SAVE. For more information, contact Matthew Smeltzer, SAVE Coordinator, at UC Berkeley, Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, 202 Wurster Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720; phone: 510.528.8283 fax: 510.549.9431, or e-mail: [msmeltze@ced.berkeley.edu](mailto:msmeltze@ced.berkeley.edu). Up-to-date information may be obtained on SAVE's website: [http://www4.ced.berkeley.edu:8004/student\\_org/save](http://www4.ced.berkeley.edu:8004/student_org/save).



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## US Government Orders Maine Dam Removed

The Kennebec River in Maine has been given a new lease on life by the US federal government: in coming years, it will be free-flowing for the first time in 160 years. The Kennebec's freedom was granted by a precedent-setting US government ruling which ordered the destruction of the Edwards Dam - the first time the government has ordered the removal of a dam its owner wanted to continue operating.

In November 1997, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), the national agency responsible for licensing dams, ordered Edwards Dam removed from the Kennebec River in Maine in order to restore the habitat of sea-run fish, some of which are endangered. The commission ruled that the dam's electricity "can be easily replaced" and that removing the dam will help restore fisheries. "There will be no environmental or social drawbacks," said FERC, which also required the company that owns the dam to pay for its removal. The dam's owner has a year to file dam-removal plan with FERC.

"The Edwards decision reflects a change in the way the federal government looks at dams," said Margaret Bowman, director of [Hydropower Reform Coalition](#), a project of the Washington, D.C.-based [American Rivers](#). "FERC has recognized that, just like all other things, dams have a finite life cycle."

The dam industry is obviously not so enthusiastic about the Edwards decision. "This has serious implications for the financing of upgrades [to existing dams] and new projects," said Linda Church-Ciocci, executive director of the National Hydropower Association (NHA). "If people feel the licenses may be pulled, we may not be able to get funding."

So concerned is the NHA, in fact, that it joined a half-dozen other groups in filing a petition to have the FERC order reversed. In late December, NHA, along with the American Public Power Association, the American Forest and Paper Association and other industry groups, filed a petition to have get "intervention" status on the Edwards Dam ruling and seeking another hearing on the issue. At press time, FERC had not yet responded to the petition.

The dam was an easy mark for local and national dam-removal activists. Its turbines produce just one-tenth of one percent of Maine's power needs, and its power is sold at three times the going rate for electricity in the state. And the dam halts upstream passage for nine species of migrating fish. Even

Marc Isaacson, a vice president of the company that owns Edwards, told *The Washington Post* that "it is hard to make a public-policy argument in favor of this dam."

Despite the order to remove the dam, there is likely to be a protracted legal battle ahead. Edwards Manufacturing, which receives 97 percent of the dam's revenue and employs just four people, plans to appeal the ruling. Steve Rafle, a spokesman for Trout Unlimited, said, "It will be a while before the plunger goes down on the dynamite." Edwards Manufacturing Company maintains that FERC's decision to deny it a new license and to hold the owners responsible for dam removal is an unconstitutional "taking" of its property without just compensation.

But river activists have a different view. Steve Brooke of the environmental group Kennebec Coalition said, "The river should be returned to the people the way it was before the dam was built. It's as simple as that." (See opposite for an editorial on this issue.)

### **Growth Industry**

Dam decommissioning is an increasingly common option for communities across the US. Hundreds of the 30- to 50-year licenses issued by FERC to about 2,000 privately owned hydroelectric dams are coming up for renewal. Since 1986, FERC has been reviewing dam license renewals in light of a rigorous standard of environmental accountability. By law, the agency must now weigh a dam's impacts against the value of the electricity it produces, a standard which was not required at the time of licensing.

When most private dams were first granted licenses, their effects on fisheries were largely ignored. Economic realities have changed too as energy markets have been deregulated. In the Pacific Northwest, for instance, privately owned gas-fired turbines sell electricity at roughly the same price as dams operated by the federally subsidized Bonneville Power Administration. As for Edwards Dam, it benefited for 14 years from a particularly favorable contract with Central Maine Power. The contract allowed the dam to gross \$2.5 million last year by selling power at triple the cost of electricity now available on the spot market.

Many big dams on western rivers are owned and operated by the federal government and are not subject to FERC licensing, which covers dams owned by individuals, utilities or local governments. But pressure to decommission federal dams are mounting too, with the most significant battle shaping up over Glen Canyon Dam in Utah. There is also a recommendation to breach four large dams on the lower Snake River in Washington State. These dams, which are marginal contributors to the hydropower grid in the Northwest but are essential for barge navigation on the Snake and Columbia, are blamed by biologists for all but wiping out several species of salmon that spawn in Idaho.

The call to remove these dams is coming from some surprising sources. A few months ago, the conservative newspaper *The Idaho Statesman* (Boise) published a cost-benefit analysis that showed removing the four dams on the Lower Snake River would provide a net benefit to society of \$183 million annually. "We're not looking for dams to blow up. But when you pencil it out, it starts to make enormous sense," says Susan Whaley, editorial writer for the newspaper. After calculating the four

dams' costs to society, in terms of direct operating costs and indirect costs from lost fishing revenue, the newspaper ran a surprising series of editorials recommending that the Army Corps of Engineers breach all four dams. "We looked at it simply as any taxpayer or electricity rate payer would," said Whaley.

Breaching the dams could mean removing only part of the structure, leaving much of the concrete dam wall standing. "It may not be pretty, but for the fish traveling downstream it will be a river," said Bowman of American Rivers. "We are realizing that dam removal is often less expensive than leaving a dam in place and building a fish passage through it." Edwards Dam is a good example. FERC determined it would cost \$10 million to build a fish passage into the dam, which it estimated was about 1.7 times the cost of simply tearing the structure down.

The federal order on Edwards and the anti-dam sentiments coming out of Idaho will undoubtedly fuel the burgeoning US movement to decommission more outdated or destructive dams. Says Bowman of American Rivers, "For decades, we were the world's leader in building dams. I hope we are the leader in dam removal in the next few years."

*This article is based on stories that ran in the Washington Post (Nov. 26, 1997); The Financial Times (Nov. 27, 1997); National Public Radio and other media.*

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- Visit the [Dam Decommissioning Page](#) for more information.



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Volume 13, Number 1 / February 1998

## Who Should Pay For Dam Removal?

*by Charles F. Gauvin*

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) broke new ground late last year. Reversing decades of unabashed boosterism for hydroelectric development on our nation's rivers, FERC denied a new license for the Edwards Dam on Maine's Kennebec River and ordered the dam's owners to develop a plan for removing the 160-year-old structure at their own expense. Much has been said about the decision's repercussions for other obsolete dams, and it seems clear that FERC's decision could open the way to restoring several other rivers now harnessed for hydropower.

Yet the real controversy in the Edwards case, and in a host of other dam relicensing decisions pending at FERC, is not whether hydropower is the best use of our rivers (in cases like Edwards Dam it clearly isn't), but whether the government must compensate the owners of privately owned hydropower dams it chooses not to relicense.

Even Edwards' owners concede that it is hard to argue that their dam still serves the public interest. Edwards generates a minuscule amount of energy, while obstructing the upstream migration of several fish species (striped bass, shad, Atlantic salmon, and sturgeon), whose full recovery promises to provide a much needed boost to Maine's economy.

Nevertheless, Edwards Manufacturing Company maintains that FERC's decision to deny it a new license and to hold the owners responsible for dam removal is an unconstitutional "taking" of its property without just compensation. Across the nation, the owners of other economically marginal hydropower projects are toeing the same line: If the federal government wants to deny them a license, they say, the taxpayers must purchase their dams and turbines and pay the costs of demolition.

That argument just doesn't hold water. In denying Edwards a new license, FERC ruled that the dam's continued operation does not meet the Federal Power Act's standards because it "is not best adapted to the comprehensive development of the Kennebec River for beneficial public uses." That ruling underscores the fact that a license to run a hydropower dam is a permit to use a public resource - a river - for private gain.

In the case of the non-federal hydropower projects, a FERC license involves not merely the permission to construct or maintain the physical assets needed to generate power, but also the privilege to divert and exploit a publicly owned resource - one of our nation's navigable rivers - for the duration of the license, in return for the public benefit of generating power and contributing to commerce. A delicensed hydropower project cannot continue to obstruct a navigable waterway, but must return the river to the public domain.

The river is no more the "property" of the dam owner than a road is my "property" because I hold a driver's license. Nor does the license constitute a property right that can be "taken." After all, does a tenant get paid for leaving the apartment clean when his lease expires? In this case, the American public is the landlord, and we have every right to ask that the Kennebec be returned to us in good condition.

The FERC decision also corrects the common impression that hydropower is environmentally benign. Fishermen and boaters have long known that hydropower dams fundamentally alter the ecological balance of our river systems. Dams disrupt the upstream and downstream migration of fish. They wreak havoc with the natural flow of water in river channels and can alter water temperatures. Until recently, dam owners have been able to reap financial benefits without regard to costs to the environment or the communities that once derived their livelihoods from free-flowing rivers.

It is worth recalling that some dam owners have received federal tax breaks that enabled them to clear otherwise insurmountable financial hurdles in re-powering old dams that had fallen into disuse and disrepair. A 1978 federal law required public utilities to purchase power generated at certain dams at preferential prices that involved ratepayer subsidy of private enterprise. In light of the public subsidies that have lined the pockets of many hydropower project owners, holding them financially responsible for dam decommissioning makes legal and ethical sense. As taxpayers and people who value natural resources, all Americans should applaud FERC's initial step toward ending corporate welfare for the owners of obsolete hydropower dams.

Allowing the dam owner to walk away from a project does nothing to remedy the damage to natural resources and the human environment that will continue until the dam is decommissioned and removed. That decommissioning and removing a dam is an expensive undertaking doesn't alter one basic fact: once a dam's useful life has expired, taxpayers shouldn't have to pay to get their river back.

*The author is President and CEO of Trout Unlimited.*

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## **Dam Pushes Tribal People to Brink of Suicide**

*by Nhial Bol*

Members of the Nubian Alliance, which includes the Wadi Halfa, Dongola and Marowe communities in Sudan's Northern State, are threatening mass suicide to protest the taking of their land for the proposed Kajbar Dam, proposed for the Nile River in Nubia, near Merowe.

"We are preparing to commit suicide if our land is taken from us," said Suad Ibrahim Ahmed, the leader of the Alliance which was formed to campaign against the building of the dam.

"Allowing our land to be taken means the extinction of our distinct language and culture forever. Our intention is that we must die before our culture and our language," she says. "Where can we go if our area is taken?"

Ahmed, who is a respected woman leader within the communities fighting against the dam project, said that the people are not opposed to development which protects their culture. "We told the government that we want development. We say 'yes to development, but no to the dam'. Any development that displaces us, destroys our language and our culture is rejected, and we prefer to live without development if that is the case," she says.

Sudan's government however, seems determined to go ahead with the hydroelectric project and has sent a Chinese Company to survey the area. Colonel Mohammed Saliheen, the Engineering Affairs Minister in the Northern State, confirmed last December that the building of the dam will start soon. The state and federal governments are determined to implement the project to boost the power supply to people in the area, Saliheen adds.

The minister, who comes from the Wadi Halfa area, told the official Sudanese News Agency (SUNA) that the government will resettle communities affected by the dam, and that the people will be compensated.

"We are going to resettle citizens who are affected by the establishment of Kajbar Dam," Minister

Saliheen said. A committee, chaired by the first Vice-President General Al Zubair Mohammed Salih, has been set up to oversee the resettlement and compensation plan.

But Ahmed said that the people had refused to accept any compensation and they did not want to be resettled in new places. In the first week of January, the Nubian Alliance issued an urgent appeal to the media and human rights groups calling on them to put pressure on the government to stop the dam project.

"We are a group of Sudanese Nubians from the District of Wadi Halfa, the area that has suffered from an inundation of dams four consecutive times this century, and is about to become extinct by the fifth," the appeal says.

"Our concern emanates from a real fear that our ancient culture and language are being deliberately undermined through government policies at present which are unappreciative of the cultural diversity of the Sudan, and only tolerate the dominant Arab-Islamic culture," the two-page appeal continues.

"Some of us feel that the real aim of this dam is to obliterate out of existence - not just our culture and heritage, but also the very existence of the Nubian people themselves," says the appeal, written in English and Arabic.

Since the early 1900s, the Nubian people in Northern Sudan have repeatedly and forcibly been removed from their ancient land by the building of dams. The Nubians have already been moved four times in this century - 1902, 1911, 1933 and 1963.

The Kajbar Dam will be built in the middle of the only substantial population center where most of the remaining Nubians live.

Wadi Halfa, Dongola and Marowe are the three main towns where 17,914 Nubians now live in the north. The majority of them were relocated to eastern Sudan, on the border with Eritrea and Ethiopia, in 1963.

According to some people from the Wadi Halfa area interviewed by this reporter, the government has allegedly resorted to strong-arm tactics to force people to move. The port at Wadi Halfa was closed which resulted in food shortages in the Wadi Halfa area. The people are selling their belongings, and are reported to be moving to Khartoum, the capital.

Ahmed wrote a letter on behalf of the Nubian Alliance to the Sudanese President General Omar Hassan al Bashir urging him to intervene.

"Considering the overall policies implemented in the area, including the plan to build Kajbar in the face of numerous technical, economic, environmental and social objections, make us feel that we are discriminated against in this country, Mr. President," the letter states. "Objectively, Mr. President, there

are no reasonable justifications or plausible explanations for policies that destroy a fragile economy, scatter the only remaining Nubian communities away from their ancestral lands and as a result, obliterate their distinct language, rich antiquities, ancient culture and way of life forever."

On October 1, 1997, the publication "Sudan Update" reported that the government had just announced the signing of a preliminary agreement with a Chinese company to build the dam. In that news release, Ahmed said the project had not yet been studied for its environmental or social impacts. "There is no comprehensive feasibility study for the project, just a meagre booklet comprising only 11 double-spaced pages and six pages of calculations," she said.

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