
Cameroon: Dam on the River Lom will flood the Pangar-Djerem Wildlife Reserve

A project to build a hydroelectric dam on the River Lom, a few kilometres downstream of its confluence with River Pangar, presented 13 years ago and suspended in 1999, has been resumed in October last year. The Cameroonian government decided to go ahead with the plans of the Lom-Pangar hydroelectric project, which includes a 50 meter high barrage flooding an area of 610 sq.km and a hydroelectric plant of approximately 50 MW. The first step in the process is a new environmental impact study.

A so-called "panel of the independent experts" charged with controlling and evaluating the environmental studies carried out, and to deliver its opinions on the measures, had its first visit to the area to be affected by the dam.

The dam would impact on rivers that are tributaries to Cameroon's River Sanaga, a river basin contributing with over 90 percent of the country's hydroelectric energy, and also would inevitably flood parts of the Pangar-Djerem Wildlife Reserve. The area, which still awaits formal protection by the Cameroonian parliament, would become Cameroon's largest reserve in the bordering area between rainforests in the south and savannah in the north.

The Pangar-Djerem Reserve has already been affected by the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline, which runs for 54 kilometres through the proposed reserve. Parts of the reserve had also been impacted heavily by the opening of a rail line running between Belabo and Ngaoundal in 1970, which allowed for encroachment on the area by intruders.

In addition to the physical damage on the landscape and the plant and animal life (chimpanzees, elephants, gorillas, black rhinos, etc.) of one of the world's most undisturbed areas, the dam will affect the societies living in the area, including indigenous people like the Baka and Bakola (commonly called Pygmies) of Cameroon, who will see their life-styles disrupted.

On March 14, 2004, the 7th annual International Day of Action Against Dams and For Rivers, Water and Life was held all over the world, denouncing that "millions of people worldwide are facing serious threats to their livelihoods and cultures due to the construction of large dams. Intended to boost development, these projects have led instead to further impoverishment, degraded environments and human rights violations. An estimated 40-80 million people have been forcibly evicted from their lands to make way for dams. Evidence shows that these people have often been left economically, culturally and psychologically devastated."

The Lom-Pangar hydroelectric project would have many of those effects and none of the problems it would create can be solved with environmental impact studies, which usually serve the purpose of providing destructive projects with "scientific" backing. Existing experience on large dams is more than sufficient to show that this dam should simply not be built.

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