
Thailand: free the Moon River!

Pak Moon dam in the Ubon Ratchathani Province of North-East Thailand has been strongly resisted by local villagers, who are suffering its negative effects of drinking water shortage, reduction in the number of available fish, health hazards, flooding of their lands and compulsory relocation (see WRM Bulletin 22).

In spite of the powerful adversaries they have to face, and that already ten years have passed since the year when the dam was set up, their struggle continues. Now the Pak Moon dam villagers are employing local traditions and customs to make their voices heard.

At the beginning of April, more than 3,000 people gathered in their boats at the Pak Moon dam to perform the Sueb Chata Maenam, and to lobby authorities to let the Moon River run free again. Sueb Chata Maenam means "extending a river's life", and it is a modern adaptation of an old ceremony which pays homage to rivers, which are considered the life blood of Thai traditional society. Banners were unfurled reading "We Want to Return Freedom to our River," and "Rivers are life, not death". During the gathering, environmentalists and academics expressed their solidarity to the displaced people and pointed out the adverse effects of the so called development projects on local populations in Thailand. A petition will be submitted to the Electricity Generating Authority next month to halt operations and open the gates to let the river run free. Villagers expect that once the obstruction to fish migration is eliminated fish would return to the Moon River.

Globalization advances as a powerful driving force eroding biological and cultural diversity worldwide. Dam megaprojects are but one token of this voracious development. Every expression of cultural resistance -as this one by the Moon river's villagers- constitute a step towards an alternative, more humane and sustainable world.

Article based on information from: "Rituals and rivers. Protest: Activists float together calling for their river to be set free during a traditional ceremony" by Prasittiporn Kan-Onsri, Bangkok Post, April 4 2000, sent by: Aviva Imhof, International Rivers Network, "Open the gates and the fish will return" by Sanitsuda Ekachai, Bangkok Post, April 21 2000, sent by Southeast Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN),