Malaysia: opposition to dam megaproject

A big campaign is being pushed ahead to stop a dam project in Selangor, Malaysia, which will not only destroy rainforest but also evict indigenous people from their ancestral homelands. The campaign is aimed at protecting 600 hectares of rainforest from being devastated by this project.

The Sungai Selangor Dam, which is being projected to meet the expected water demand in the States of Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan, will flood pristine forests, rubber plantations and orchards. It will also inundate lowland forest, two thriving Orang Asli villages, some private land, recreational and picnic spots along the Sungai Selangor, a section of the Kuala Kubu Baru-Fraser's Hill road, among other tracts of land. The area affected is the ancestral heartland of the Temuan indigenous people. Its loss means the disappearance of these people as a culture. According to a Temuan legend: “When the Orang Asli (Original People) are no longer visible, the world will end.”

The residents of Kuala Kubu Baru remember the tragedy that occurred over a century ago in 1883, when a much smaller dam across the Selangor River burst and destroyed the entire town. Selangor is an area where flash floods and landslides have increased dramatically in recent years, due to irresponsible logging upstream. Local residents will never again be able to sleep peacefully during the rainy season, and property prices will plunge.

Not only local people will lose with the projected dam. With pollution and stress levels rising in the Klang Valley, more and more people have been seeking relief every weekend in the idyllic green sanctuary of Pertak, Ulu Selangor. Once the dam is constructed, the area will no longer be useful in this regard. Even if tasteful landscaping turns the area surrounding the man-made lake into a scenic park, it will no longer have the powerful healing effect that only raw nature can provide. And since the Selangor Dam will only supply the water needs of the Klang Valley for three to six years at most, it cannot be regarded as a viable long-term solution.

The disastrous environmental impact of large dams has drawn heavy criticism worldwide. Experts now admit that damming up rivers is extremely destructive to our fragile ecosystemic equilibrium. Tampering with the natural flow and topology of rivers is a very dangerous business. The negative impact is far-reaching, unpredictable, and usually irreversible. In the case of the proposed Selangor Dam, it is quite possible that the wetlands and famous firefly colony near Kuala Selangor will be adversely affected. The negative impact of inundating nearly a thousand hectares in montane forest of Pertak cannot be adequately assessed or quantified.

The Selangor Dam will also have far reaching consequences on the geomorphology and the hydrology of the area. It will distort the geomagnetic field of the area, resulting in drastic long-term climatic and seismological changes --including the possibility of earth tremors in hitherto stable areas. Additionally the streams and tributaries feeding the Selangor River --already polluted by recent logging on the hillslopes-- will pour so much debris into the reservoir that it will need to be desilted every two or three years, adding to the enormous cost of maintaining the dam. Furthermore, constructing a 5 km (3 mile) stretch of new road through hilly forest reserves to replace the inundated stretch will cause further environmental degradation, apart from greatly increasing the enormous cost

of the dam project.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) has studied the Environmental Impact Assessment study [EIA] for the proposed development that was prepared by SMHB Sdn. Bhd for the project proponent, Konsortium TSWA-Gamuda-KDEB. According to CAP, there are serious questions that need to be addressed before one can accept the validity of the water demand projections, which is object to much criticism because of their fundamental assumptions and methodology. The project does not address at all the fundamental issue of long-term, integrated, sustainable water resources planning and management on a regional/national basis which has been identified as an urgent priority for the country already in the early 1980s. The EIA in particular has not addressed the capital issue of proposing alternatives to dam construction.

The NGO Magick River, responsible for the campaign, is not only strongly criticising the dam megaproject approach, but also putting forward sustainable alternative solutions to water supply. They are small scale, do not involve timber concessions or megaconstructions, and respect the environmental and cultural vision of the Temuan.

Sources: Magick River web site, Mary Maguire, 24/3/99.