
Panama: The Naso people threatened by a dam project

The Naso (also known as Teribe) are one of the first groups that settled in the Panamanian territory. After several European armed expeditions, the number of Naso had decreased drastically to the point that by the nineteenth century there were less than two thousand individuals remaining. At present there are approximately 4,000 Naso on both sides of the Costa Rican and Panamanian border, generally living in poor conditions. In Panama, they inhabit the province of Bocas del Toro, in the northwestern forests bordering the Teribe River, a larger tributary of the Changuinola River.

Today the Naso culture is greatly threatened and on the verge of being destroyed by an increase over the last twenty years of westernization and the pressure to incorporate into a global market economy. Now, there is another threat to the survival of the Naso's cultural identity.

Since the early 1970s several feasibility studies were authorized by the government in order to gather information about the potential of the Teribe River and its tributaries to produce hydroelectric power. The result was a proposal to start the construction of two hydroelectric projects, one on the upper part of the Teribe River, and the other on one of its tributaries, the Bonyic River.

Apparently, the government decided to postpone the project. But almost three decades later, a small group of investors restarted the process by requesting an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and the water concession they needed to develop the project. In 1998, the National Environmental Authority approved the EIA as well as a water concession for 50 years. The group also obtained from the Regulatory Agency for Public Services a concession to generate energy, also for 50 years. However, at that time the Panamanian environmental legislation was not as strict as it is now. The new environmental legal framework requires that every project with significant impacts on the environment needs a citizenship participation process, something that had not occurred.

The community was poorly informed about the project, and there were a lot of doubts among the Naso people on the way their traditional authorities (the king and his council) were conducting the negotiation process. So much that in 1998 the community forced them to quit and elected a new king and council. After recent negotiations between the company, Naso representatives, and some Panamanian NGOs, the company agreed to conduct a new EIA along the lines of the current law.

The "Central Hidroeléctrica Bonyic" is currently owned by a partnership called Hidro Ecológica del Teribe S.A. and its major partner is a Colombian company known as Empresas Públicas de Medellín. They expect to start the operation phase during the second half of 2006 and the overall cost of the project will be approximately US\$ 50 million, for a reservoir with 800,000 cubic meters, and a dam 30 meters high by 135 meters wide.

The impacts of previous hydroelectric dams have shown how destructive these projects are, both for the environment and especially for the local people. That has been the case of a hydroelectric dam in the Bayano area of eastern Panama, which inundated thousands of acres of fertile land inhabited by indigenous communities.

If the projected dam is built the environment and the culture that exist in the Naso territory will change drastically. The new highway to be built connecting the village of Changuinola to the dam will encourage Naso emigration and an infiltration of settlers, as well as an increase in deforestation. The deforestation caused will lead to the destruction of the rich and pristine land that the Naso people have inhabited for centuries. The loss of habitat as well as the decrease in water and air quality as well as in animal populations will cause severe consequences in the life style and health of the Naso. It will also create a great threat to the adjacent International Biosphere Reserve "La Amistad". The re-emergence of diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, dengue, etc, not to mention the appearance of unknown diseases, is another risk that has not been taken into account by the project's promoters.

If this project takes place, it could mean the beginning of the end of the Naso culture.

It is clear that the Naso people need much more information about the process. That is why the Panamanian NGO "Alianza Para la Conservación y el Desarrollo" (Alliance for Conservation and Development) is trying to reach all of the Naso communities before a new EIA -in line with the current law- is carried out, to inform the people about the potential negative impacts of the dam on the environment and their culture before it is too late.

Several concerned people are also trying to spread the knowledge and raise as much public awareness about this project as possible. They say, "It is important that another indigenous group does not get taken advantage of in the shadows of lack of public knowledge. We urge people and organizations to join us in this new struggle we are facing to save the land, the environment, the lives, and especially the rights of these people."

For more information or ways to get involved please contact Rachel Cohn: rcohn@oberlin.edu or Ruben Gonzalez: Ruben.Gonzalez@worldlearning.org

Article based on information from: "The Naso People and their Struggle", sent by Rachel Cohn.