
Laos: Dams, Conservation and People

To the oil and mining companies, repressive governments and banks we list among the world's exploiters, we must add another sector -conservationists. Unaccountable, opaque and pursuing a model of protection that is both repressive and outmoded, some of the world's biggest conservation organisations are becoming indistinguishable from other neo-colonial corsairs. Unwilling to contemplate the wider consequences of their actions, they have ensured that conservation is now one of the greatest threats to the global environment.

This month, the World Bank will decide whether or not to support the construction of the Nam Theun 2 dam in Laos. One of the most destructive hydroelectric schemes on earth, it will drown 470 square kilometres of the remarkable forests and grasslands of the Nakai Plateau. Several rare animal species will disappear. The fisheries which help feed the catchment's thousands of indigenous people will be wiped out: mysteriously, this doesn't feature in the dam's environmental assessment.

On the face of it there is nothing astonishing about this project: the World Bank, institutionally corrupt and apparently incapable of genuine reform, has been funding devastating dams for years. What is surprising is that two of the most active supporters of the dam, who have done more than any others to lend it credibility, are major conservation groups.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) recognise the destructive potential of Nam Theun 2. But it is, they argue, the only means by which sufficient money will be released by international donors to finance their plans for the remainder of the Nakai Plateau.

Both organisations claim that the forests and wildlife of the plateau are being gradually degraded by the shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering of the region's indigenous people. The WCS appears to want local people to leave the Nakai-Nam Theun Conservation Area altogether. The IUCN will let them stay, but wants them to stop their traditional farming and adopt the "alternative livelihoods" it prescribes. The dam project will give these organisations the money they need for "proper management" - the IUCN has asked the Bank for \$65 million. Moreover, by increasing state involvement in the region the dam will ensure that local people's activities are properly policed.

Moreover, neither the IUCN nor the WCS has demonstrated satisfactorily that local people are a substantial threat to the ecosystem. Indeed it is arguable that conservation groups are only interested in the area because indigenous people have looked after it so well. Experience elsewhere in the world suggests that a strengthening, rather than a reduction, of local people's land rights is the only sustainable means of managing an ecosystem: they are the ones with a long-term interest in the health of their environment.

Excluding people from their own resources while forcing them - as the IUCN advocates - to grow cash crops, could scarcely do more to set them against wildlife.

But neither human rights nor wider environmental impacts seem to matter much to organisations like

the Wildlife Conservation Society. Alongside the equally prestigious Smithsonian Institute, the WCS is also working with the Burmese regime. Earlier this year, the government forcibly relocated 30,000 people from an area it wanted for a nature reserve. Two thousand of them were murdered. Survival International has shown how the Worldwide Fund for Nature's intervention in the Philippines has helped reduce indigenous people to dependency and destitution. In East Africa, tens of thousands of nomads who have been excluded by conservationists from their best grazing lands now find themselves forced to over-exploit the rest of the savannah.

The problem is as old as the conservation movement itself. Professor Grzimek, Hitler's curator of Frankfurt Zoo and the champion of the Serengeti National Park, claimed: "A National Park must remain a primordial wilderness to be effective. No men, not even native ones, should live inside its borders." Yet, beyond Antarctica, wilderness does not exist on earth: all land is affected by and reflective of human activities. Grzimek's preservationist model was never either a humane or realistic means of conservation. Yet the policy has become both too lucrative and too politically convenient to be changed. Big conservation groups, like anyone else attempting the sequestration of resources, align themselves with power against the powerless.

Conservation organisations like the IUCN and the WCS are not the friends but the enemies of the environment. We must fight them as we fight the governments and corporations with which they so gleefully collaborate.

Source: "Conservationists who are enemies of the earth", The Guardian. Wednesday August 6 1997, by George Monbiot