
Ghana: A dam at the cost of forests

The government of Ghana and Sino Hydro, a Chinese construction company, have signed a memorandum of understanding and a 500 million-dollar agreement to undertake the construction of the Bui Dam. Two million dollars are earmarked for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) bound to prepare the ground for the take-off of the project, which has been on the drawing board for decades. Despite the environmental disaster wrought by the World Bank's Akosombo Dam in Ghana (used for below cost power to process bauxite mined in Jamaica) and its failure to live up to power generating expectations, the new dam project has been restarted with the intention of eluding the increasing cost of running thermal plants with crude oil.

The reservoir of the projected dam would flood a large area of the Bui National Park, flooding the last remaining habitats for hippos in Ghana, home to around 150 hippopotami and many globally endangered amphibians, butterflies, birds and various primates (see WRM Bulletin N° 46). "Contrary to widely held beliefs by the dam proponents that the hippos and the other endangered species in the park will be relocated when construction of the dam begins," argues an anonymous submission to the World Commission on Dams (WCD), "conservationists interviewed contend that the hippos in particular cannot survive anywhere outside the Bui national park due to its unique nature. Moreover the country's game and wildlife department is even too broke to afford the cost involved in rescuing the animals at Bui and sending them to the supposed 'safe havens'."

The Bui dam project would require the forced relocation of over 2,500 people and will also set in motion other serious environmental impacts, such as changing the flow regime of the river which will harm downstream habitats. A recent survey by the University of Aberdeen has revealed that the Black Volta river abounds with 46 species of fish from 17 families, all of economic importance. These native fish communities could be severely impacted by changes to water temperature, pollution and barriers that will block their migration along the Black Volta. Forests that serve as fish spawning grounds would also be destroyed. Waterborne disease could also occur should the dam proceed, say critics. Schistosomiasis in particular could become established in the reservoir, with severe health risks for local people.

The region is no stranger to displacement and epidemic. In 1965, 80,000 farmers were displaced due to the construction of the Akosombo dam, which at the time flooded more land than any other hydro project, approximately 8,500 square km. This led to outbreaks of malaria, bilharzias, and other water-borne diseases. Between 1978 and 1981, the Kpong dam displaced 6,000 people, causing resettlement conflicts allegedly worse than what was experienced previously.

The Bui park is situated in the centre-west of the country, against the international frontier with Côte d'Ivoire, and is bisected by the Black Volta river. The vegetation is predominantly savanna woodland, with areas of grassland and patches of riparian forest along the Black Volta river and other small rivers in the park. These riverine forests are the best-preserved such forests remaining along the Black Volta and, probably, the only such forest left in the entire Volta system.

Furthermore, there are also concerns about the practicalities of a hydro-electric dam on a river that is

said to be highly seasonal. It seems that Ghanaians may end up paying quite a high price for electricity!

Article based on information from: "Ghana: All Set For Bui Dam To Take Off", Graphic Ghana, disseminated by Pambazuka News 228, <http://www.pambazuka.org/index.php?id=30110>; "Dams Incorporated. The Record of Twelve European Dam Building Companies", Chris Lang, Nick Hildyard, Kate Geary and Matthew Grainger, published by Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=52008#index-01-03-00-00-fn019ref>