
[Dam in Vietnam hits Cambodians](#)

Vietnam's US \$1 billion Yali Falls 720-megawatt hydroelectric dam, under construction for the past seven years -- with funding from the governments of Russia and Ukraine-- drains into the Se San river which runs through Cambodia to the Mekong. Before the dam-building began, no study was done of its environmental effect on Cambodia. A study recently carried out by the Fisheries Office, Ratanakiri Province, in cooperation with the Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) Project, an NGO working in Ratanakiri Province, shows that the dam is bringing death, disease and environmental devastation to Cambodia even before it is fully working.

Earlier last year the first reports began to emerge from Ratanakkiri that problems had developed with the Se San river, and that the source of these problems was upstream at Vietnam's new Yali Falls dam.

Cambodians along the Se San river told of sudden surges of water drowning 32 people, mostly children. In the single worst case three teenage girls were drowned trying to cross the river. Villagers spoke of their fishing boats and nets being swept away, livestock being drowned and crops inundated.

In addition, locals reported 952 deaths from disease since they perceived a change in water quality over the past four years. Stock losses have been reported in the thousands as well as significant numbers of wild animals dying after drinking water from the river.

According to the study carried out by the Fisheries Office and the NTFP Project, the water quality has deteriorated greatly since 1996. Surges of water coming downstream are reddish in color, muddy and have the foul odour of stagnant water.

The report could not quantify the health effects of the water quality, but noted that people living along the river reported a rapid decline in health once the changes became apparent. Locals complain of intense itchiness, lumps and infections on their skin, and eye irritation. They have also reported other health problems that have coincided with the sudden rises in water levels. These included stomach aches, diarrhea, respiratory problems, throat and nose irritation, dizziness, vomiting and coughing. Many reported family members dying one to five days after becoming ill.

Ratanakkiri province has some of the richest areas of wildlife in Cambodia, but these animals too have been seriously affected by the hydrological changes in the Se San as well as suffering from the effects of the water quality changes.

In Virachey National Park, on the northern side of the Se San river in Ta Veng and Ven Say districts, reptiles, mammals and birds have died or become ill at a greater than usual rate. People from many communities along the Se San have reported finding dead wildlife near their villages over the past few years. Many villagers believe that the wild animals had gone down to the Se San river to drink and then died shortly afterwards.

The changing water quality is also believed to have harmed fish stocks and habitat. The number of fish has declined noticeably, with some villagers putting fish stocks down by as much as 30 percent.

Meanwhile four years of irregular flooding have caused major food shortages to people in the area. Dry season crops which are planted along the banks of the Se San have been swept away by the surges of water following discharges from the dam. Locals now rely on wild potatoes and other tubers to sustain them. In addition, about 14 types of river plants that villagers used to collect to eat have been in serious decline over the past few years.

A two-day workshop attended by representatives of ethnic minority groups living on the Tonle Se San, local and international NGOs, and provincial officials, was held at the end of May 2000 to discuss the effect of the dam. The call for changing the river back was far more dominant than any request for cash compensation.

"If they want to give us compensation will they be able to feed us all our lives? It seems impossible, and what about our children and grandchildren? How are they going to survive? We want the old Se San back so we can fish and do other activities the same as before", said Lamas Voen from Phi village.

Article based on information from: "Huge Viet dam devastates Se San valley and its people", by Bou Saroeun, Phnom Penh Post, June 9-22 2000; Kate Colvin and Dave Hubbel,"People of Se San River Suffer Dam-Induced Floods, Famine"; To see the study prepared by the Ratanakiri Provincial Fisheries Office and the NTFP Project,