

Cloud of industry shrouds natural wonder
Globe and Mail, November 20, 2004
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Proposed hydro dam could devastate fabled Chinese gorge and force indigenous people to relocate

TIGER LEAPING GORGE, CHINA _ The tourists are stirred by the poetic scene in the majestic mountain gorge. "How beautiful," one woman exclaims. "The mist is rising around the mountain." A few moments later, they discover the truth. It is not a gentle mist that is wafting though the fabled hills of Tiger Leaping Gorge. It is a wreath of smoke and dust from a massive rock-blasting operation for a hydro dam.

Soon the guards are urging the tourists to stand back. Four huge explosions rip through the calm autumn morning in quick succession, and the air is filled with a thick cloud of smoke and the noise of falling rocks.

Tiger Leaping Gorge, one of China's most spectacular natural wonders, is facing a potential death sentence.

Construction workers, blasting tunnels to analyze geology for a possible hydro dam in the gorge, have said they expect construction of the dam to begin by 2008.

The gorge, almost four kilometres deep, is among the world's most dramatic, often described as China's version of the Grand Canyon. Its name derives from an ancient legend that a tiger jumped across the gorge at its narrowest point.

Now it is slated to become a victim of the massive hydro project, which would flood the gorge and force 100,000 people to abandon their homes.

With its economy booming and power shortages emerging, China intends to build dozens of hydro dams in the ecologically sensitive hills and mountains of its western provinces, including Yunnan province, the site of Tiger Leaping Gorge.

Among the project's backers is a power company headed by the influential son of Li Peng, the former prime minister who pushed through the contentious and gigantic Three Gorges Dam that went into operation last year.

The latest plan is already provoking a wave of angry protests by farmers and environmentalists that could soon dwarf the Three Gorges controversy.

As China's media become more free and its citizens become bolder, the latest hydro schemes are triggering intense scrutiny and debate. Violent demonstrations against one of the hydro projects have already erupted in western Sichuan province, where tens of thousands of farmers took to the streets in late October and early November to protest against the planned flooding of their farmland and the lack of proper compensation.

The protests surrounding the project at Tiger Leaping Gorge have not yet reached the point of violence, but the implications are potentially devastating for an ecologically unique region and the indigenous minorities who live there.

The planned series of eight dams would have a severe impact on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, known here as the Jinsha River, one of three parallel rivers that are partly protected by a new UNESCO World Heritage Site because of their unique botanical and animal life.

When the heritage site was proclaimed last year, however, China made certain that Tiger Leaping Gorge was not included in the area -- apparently to avoid any embarrassment over its planned hydro dams.

For thousands of people along the Jinsha River, the dams would have a disastrous effect, forcing them to move uphill to new homes where farmland would be much worse. Nobody, at any level of government, has bothered to consult the people who would be most severely affected by the dam project, they say.

"Most of us already live in poverty," said Qiu Guiyang, a 29-year-old resident of the town of Qiaotou, at one end of the gorge.

"If we have to move, we will suffer more losses. It will have a huge impact on us. It will make us poorer and poorer. This is our homeland and we don't want to move. The dams won't benefit us, even though the local officials will get money from it."

Many residents allege that local officials are deliberately buying land and building houses on the dam site in corrupt schemes to reap inflated benefits from compensation funds.

Others are worried about the ecological effect of the dam project. "It will destroy the environment and the stability of our society," said Ge Quanzhao, a farmer on the Jinsha River.

"Our village will be relocated upward and backward. Trees will be cut down, the earth will be flattened with bulldozers, but the soil in the new location isn't good enough for farming.

If there's a flood, there will be a landslide. The average temperature will increase by five degrees, the snow on the mountains will melt, and there will be soil and water losses. The government's planning is like the stuff of a three-year-old child."

The ancient town of Shigu, where the Red Army crossed the river during the Long March in 1936, is among several towns that would be completely flooded by the dams.

"To save money, they want us to move into the high mountains," said a 67-year-old resident of Shigu, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They don't care about the lives of the common people. They don't care whether we can live on the mountain or not. It would be like putting us into a prison camp."

The tourism industry would also suffer. Tiger Leaping Gorge, a long-time favourite of backpackers and hikers, would lose most of its phenomenal beauty if the dam project is built.