

Putting dams in their proper place

Are dams against the order of nature, imposing more costs than they do benefits? Views differ across the spectrum. But some are willing to accede to the usefulness of smaller dams being built to meet localised demands.
SARAH SABARATNAM reports.

*Winds blowing, rivers flowing,
Birds chirping, animals slurping
From the river, big gulps
Quench their thirst.
The water glistens in the sun.*

*Twigs breaking, people raking
Leaves falling, dams stalling.
A wall is there, stopping
And holding
The river from flowing
And going to its home.*

— Rachel Priety, age 16,
Harry S. Truman High School, Michigan.
(Source: World River's Review)

FROM India's Sardar Sarovar project to China's Three Gorges Dam, large barriers built to hold back water are, over the years, drawing more and more protests.

"There was a time when Big Dams moved men to poetry. Not any longer," writes Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy, in her essay *For the Common Good* in the Indian-based *Frontline* magazine.

Discussing the Sardar Sarovar dam which she visited, Roy contends, "The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big Dams are obsolete. They're uncool. They're undemocratic..."

It seems people are now more concerned about the value and complexity of our river systems and how they are disrupted by a dam and its reservoir, than its (the dam's) benefits.

Further, many believe that there are more sustainable alternatives to large dams (a large dam is usually defined as being at least 15 metres tall).

"More and more people are opposing dams," says Patrick McCully, campaigns director for the International Rivers Network, "because they have realised that viable alternatives exist."

Before we look into those alternatives, however, let us look at why dams ever evolved in the first place.

Why do we need dams?

Although Malaysia is blessed with abundant rainfall, and 97 per cent of our drinking water is sourced from rivers, we still need dams, say proponents, because our rain is seasonal.

Director for the water supply division of the Public Works Department, Low Chee Par, says, "Our rainfall is uneven in time and space. If there is no dam, when it rains heavily, the water runs off to the sea and is wast-

ed or may cause flooding. When there is a drought, there is not enough water."

As such, he says, we need dams to collect excess water during the rainy season to release water for supply and irrigation during dry spells, and to control flooding.

In Malaysia we have 63 dams (see table) for various uses: water supply, irrigation, silt retention, flood mitigation and for generating hydropower.

Selangor Waterworks Department deputy director V. Subramaniam says dams help meet the increasing demand for water.

"It is something you cannot do away with. A developing country will have a high demand for water. We have to cater for that demand."

If adequate water supply is not ensured, he says, especially in rapidly developing areas like the Klang Valley, disruption could occur.

"In a developed area, if there is no continuous supply of water, life can be miserable. It's close to a nightmare, going by the last water crisis. We want to make sure there is no shortage in the future."

Also, dam proponents see it as a quick-fix solution to an impending problem.

"When you build a dam," says Datuk Syed Muhammad Shahabudin, president of the National Water Association, "you get the results in five years. You have the solution right away. Whereas cutting down on wastage and replacing pipes — miles and miles of them — cannot happen overnight. It will take 10 to 15 years. It needs proper planning and an educated public. It augurs well for the future, but it is expensive and it takes time."

Down with dams? Dam opponents however believe that large dams do more harm than good and that there are better and cheaper ways of supplying water.

One of the biggest concerns of the international movement against large dams is that they displace large communities.

In Brazil, at least a quarter of a million people have been displaced by dams. In Guatemala in 1982, 369 Mayan Indians, mainly women and children, were tortured, shot, stabbed and bludgeoned to death in punishment for their community demanding proper compensation for the loss of their homes to the Chuxoy dam (source: International Rivers Network).

In Malaysia, Colin Nicholas from the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns affirms that none of the Orang Asli communities displaced by dams in seven areas in the country

Save Forests,
Save Rivers,
Safe Water



BOON OR BANE? ... The Langat Dam in Hulu Klang

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