

Silenced Rivers Patrick McCully Zed S

Reviews

Silenced Rivers: the Ecology and Politics of Large Dams, Enlarged & Updated Edition, by McCully, Patrick. (2001), New York: Zed Books, +416 pages.

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Political Hydrology: the Damning of Nations

On March 13, 1982, approximately 25 police officers, paramilitary men and soldiers arrived in Rio Negro; a small riverside village nestled deep in a Guatemalan valley. Entering under the pretext of a regionally administered search for illicit guerrilla combatants, the soldiers commenced the beating, rape and torture anyone they could restrain. At the end of the bloody episode, 70 women and 107 children lay dead. Later that year in a near by village another 92 were gunned down, their bodies piled and burnt in a bonfire.

Subsequent inquiry found that the region was anything but a haven for guerrilla activity. Instead, the murdered were peasants who refused to leave their land to make way for the construction of a hydroelectric dam project destined to flood the valleys they had farmed for generations. The events described above are elaborated upon by Patrick McCully's book *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*. Just one of the many similar stories that accompany dam building schemes, this incident centers on the Guatemalan government's use of terror tactics in their attempt to expatriate the Maya Achi Indians from their ancestral lands. After receiving sizeable loans from the World Bank, the Inter American Development Bank, and the Italian government for the construction of the Chixoy dam, thousands of indigenous people were faced with forced resettlement or submergence under the rising reservoir waters. Those refusing to cooperate also faced the threat of murder.

Although the book is not what most academics would consider a political ecology, it is certainly one of the most thorough reviews and critical analysis of the environmental and political impacts of dams compiled to date. The hydroelectricity industry, the technical failures of large dams, the elusive benefits of hydro projects, large scale agriculture and irrigation, watershed policy, renewable electricity, the political economy of dams-- it's all here, neatly compacted between the covers of a single volume. Although portions of the work lapse in to journalistic prose, it is meticulously researched with almost every issue or technological argument made by dam advocates accounted for and strategically reproached. There exists no work more precise, thorough or devastating in its treatment of large hydroelectricity and large-scale irrigation projects. Take for example McCully's understanding of complex ecological issues: although hydroelectric projects are often envisioned as 'clean and green' alternatives to fossil fuels, McCully describes the myriad of reasons why dams are ruinous to the environment, reinforcing each of his arguments with carefully selected data.

A point of particular interest is hydroelectricity's contribution to global warming. By flooding lands behind dam walls,

"...The pattern of fluxes of CO₂ and CH₄ with the atmosphere is totally altered...plants and soils decompose when flooded and will eventually release almost all their stored carbon... hydropower reservoirs, especially in tropical forest areas can make a significant contribution to global warming, in some cases as much or even more than fossil fuel burning" (141-142).

Climate change is not the only problem tackled: river sedimentation, the alteration of water temperatures, invasive species, geological effects, and hydro's role in malaria exacerbation are all considered in explicit detail in relation to their detrimental ecological impacts. For example,

"...roughly estimated for a 1987 World Bank study...around 50 cubic kilometers of sediment--nearly 1 percent of global reservoir storage capacity-- is trapped behind the world's dams every year" [107].

The sediment load disrupts dam functioning and decreases dissolved oxygen availability that also increase water temperatures behind the dam wall. Hydrological processes are thus altered in

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25

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