

A PARABLE OF OUR TIME



The Simple Life of Mr. and Mrs. Fish or Laos (be) Dam(ned)

Preface

Allow me to suggest that the problem of dams is much more complicated, considering the ramifications of a huge intervention in the landscape, and it is far from being eco-romantic. It is a serious matter. Just to point out one “small” problem: imagine this argument for the dam: “Construction of a dam will enhance livelihood options.” Well, let’s say a good deal for the population who lives along the river in the four countries it flows through, who depend on fishing for their livelihoods. A dam will likely alter fish migration patterns, and most importantly increase the temperature in the river.

Many fish are cold loving creatures and will not be happy. Moreover, construction itself has an impact and is likely to destroy a portion of riparian buffer essential for a proper functioning of rivers. And these are just the small issues. In fact many countries are now realizing the shortsightedness of large environmental projects. I highly recommend two books, related to the subject: “The Founding Fish” (very sexy) and “The Control of Nature” both by John McPhee.

– *The author*



Chapter 1

One little day, Mr. and Mrs. Fish were swimming in their river world and they heard:

”boum boum boum.....”

“Ohh my god,” said Mr. Fish, “THEY are going to build a Dam.

Let us buy air-conditioning. It will be really hot in a few weeks.”

They went to the market and got an air-conditioner on sale.

They went back home,

drilled a hole in the wall,

put up the air-conditioner

and adapted their household

to the new climatic conditions.



Chapter 2

One day, Mr. Fish was at home enjoying himself, when suddenly the weather got unbearable hot. It turns out that he could not afford the increased electricity charges - after all, somebody had to pay for the dam construction and his electricity got shut down. Neither could he afford the monthly payments for his air conditioner after the interest increment, because, oh yeah, if electricity costs go up, everything must go up.

So what to do? He sold his house to pay all the money he owed, plus the interest on the default and, of course, processing fees.

With no electricity, no air conditioner and no home,

Mr. Fish went to squat

- guess where...

- by the Dam...



Chapter 3

So, there came these guys from MIT and Oxford who told Mr. Fish that they could not promise anything, but - perhaps....

Upgrade instead of moving?

- Turn it into an Eco-Village!

Start microenterprizes?

- Sell things to tourists who come to the new lake!

Help them move?

- Enjoy the moment!



Chapter 4

And then the NGOs continued the attack....

“We cannot promise anything,” they said, “but that view over the lake that you have from here,

Oh my, it is so nice...

You should start an eco-tourism project.”

To that Mr. Fish responded: “What for?

I want no lake!

I want no house!

All I want is an air-conditioner!”



Chapter 5

After many years of forgetting about Mr. and Mrs. Fish's existence, Mr. World Bank suddenly remembered about THEM one day.

"Oh, I got to go see how they are doing after the Dam, they should be very happy."

So he took his family of 10, all wearing eyeglasses and went to visit Mr. and Mrs. Fish and their community.

There he found THEM squatting by the Dam.....

HE WAS SHOCKED!!!

HE said: "This Dam is a First World object that we spent 3 years trying to achieve. How can you squat next to it like Third World people, with all this dirty cardboard? No, no, no... This is not good for our image...You got to move out of here!"

Mrs. Fish replied (she was of a very strong personality): "But Sir, we do not have houses any more....this is our home now. We are happy here."

Then, Mr. World Bank looked at her ridiculously and said, "Here, take the money. Go get yourself a house and guess what... you do not have to return the money until 25 years later. And here, some more to take the public buses to get there."

"Oh! You are so generous, Mr. World Bank!" Mrs. Fish started sobbing from happiness. And the community started dancing and celebrating for 3 continuous days. That night, all slept dreaming of a nice house.

Poor Mrs. Fish - she forgot about the interest rate...



Chapter 6

Enter the clever developers (the 'CDs') from Thailand and Malaysia: "A Perfect Site: view, waterfront, cheap land!" We finished the casino, and on to the next! And best of all, We could sell waterfront properties to the foreigners for a good price!!!"

And what about Mr. and Mrs. Fish whom Mr. World Bank is relocating?

The CDs exclaimed, "Stop Mr. Bank!" These poor unfortunates are our friends."

Turning to Mr. and Mrs. Fish, they said,

*"Lots of work cleaning toilets,
making beds,
and serving drinks."*

"Work available for the whole family -

*both of you, Mr. Fish and Mrs. Fish,
and also for your daughters...."*

You can now run your air-conditioner again!"

Stepping aside, the clever developers huddled together and whispered,

"We could sell them electricity.

*And best of all,
someone else gets to build their houses."*



Chapter 7

Meanwhile, back to the Eco-Gang, Inc...

“Silly fishes! Go back to tradition. You do not need air-conditioners

- We will design a green-house with natural ventilation:

- the sun will shine in again.

- the wind will blow in again,”

Proclaimed the Eco-gang, Inc.

Mrs. Fish interjects, “What about the rain?”

*“We will bring you back to your traditions -
re-experience the joys of grass huts!”*

Mrs. Fish asks, “What about the bugs?”

“No more worries about the electricity payments!”

(“Great, now they can pay the interest.”

Mr. World Bank gleefully thought.)

*“And you can dress-up as in the past
and sell things to tourists.”*

Mr. Disney bursts in, “Perfect! A Dam Disney Eco-World!”



Chapter 8

One day, Mr. and Mrs. Fish were having a romantic walk on the bank of the Mekong River. They were looking at that nice land on the other side, thinking, “There lies Thailand, the land of our dreams. Look at those huge buildings, those big malls....I hate my ugly country.”

Here, eyes of Mrs. Fish started to sparkle. “Honey, Let us go to Thailand”...we will definitely find ourselves decent jobs and then we come back here and build our own house and get the air-conditioner. C’mon, let us go”.

Mr. Fish who loves his wife SO much he could not say no. So he said, “Honey, I agree,” you go work there while I wait here with the children. I will work in the market meanwhile.”

Mrs. Fish could not sleep that night from excitement.

The next day she dressed up with her best skirt and shirt and went to the Thai embassy at 7:30am, blossoming with dreams of Thailand.

There she found that the embassy door another 100 women fully dressed up waiting before her to go to Thailand (blossoming with dreams of Thailand?).

[Authors note: Is this what is called a Shared Dream of a Nation?]

Chapter 9

*Mrs. Fish waits in the line,
gets her visa*

*and on her way she gets smashed by a boat
and dies...*

Oh oh....



*Mr. Fish, who loves her so much, decides to kill himself.
He could not live without her...*

so he drowns himself into the air....

Au revoir.....



An Epilogue?

“Something is fishy....”

or

“Must we become sharks?”

Background Notes

The **Nam Theun II Dam Project in Laos** is likely to get the World Bank risk guarantee approval no later than early next year, paving the way for the long delayed completion of Southeast Asia's biggest hydropower plant, an official at the project consortium said last week.

The Nation newspaper (Thailand) reports that World Bank representatives last week visited the project site on the Nakai plateau and decided the dam would not cause any major environmental or social problems, said Loy Chansavat, adviser to the Nam Theun II Electricity Consortium. "We have made it clear to them that we can control environmental impacts on forests and wildlife in the area," he said.

The World Bank is a key element in the project because the financiers need the bank's risk guarantee against a possible breach of contract by the government. However, World Bank spokesman Peter Stephens said in a statement "We are months away from any final decision on whether we can support the project or not." The Bank would like to be able to support the project, to benefit the people of (Laos) which is why we have been working on it for so long but we are moving ahead cautiously so that, as far as possible, the risks are managed," he added. Other bank officials said several studies on the project are still under way and that they would have to be finalized before any decision was made.

Some comments

"Can we control environmental impacts on forests and wildlife in the area?" How do you do it? At an environmental level, a dam is basically a huge lake that suddenly appears in the landscape, from scratch, changing the weather in a few hundreds of miles around, thus clearly changing the environment.

What is the problem if the environment gets modified? A new eco-system will probably appear around the dam....

We do not want to repeat the "colonial" action over the Middle Eastern city in the beginning of the century. They decided not to get electricity or any infrastructure to the Arab city because it is not "authentic" and appropriate to the *Medina*. In other words, refusing development was a way to keep control over the region by maintaining its poor underdeveloped nature hiding behind the fact that it is "traditional and authentic".



The World Bank project might have an "Imperial" way of implementation, but this is another story.....

