

## Dam may affect Unesco heritage listing

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Sarawak's plan to build a hydroelectric dam threatens the World Heritage status of the Mulu National Park, environmentalists warned today. MCPX

Parts of Mulu National Park in Sarawak would be flooded if the proposed 220 megawatt hydropower plant on the Tutoh river went ahead, said Swiss-based group the Bruno Manser Fund (BMF).

Activists warned the damage would change the boundary of the park, which could see its World Heritage status revoked under the regulations of the UN cultural body Unesco.

The sensitive 52,864 hectare park contains some 3,500 species of plants with 109 species of palms, according to the Unesco website.

The park is dominated by Gunung Mulu, a 2,377 metre high sandstone pinnacle containing at least 295km of explored caves that are home to millions of cave swiftlets and bats, it said.

"One of the requirements under the heritage site listing is that no boundary changes should be done in the area without prior consent from Unesco," said Gurmit Singh, chairman of the Centre for Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia.

"It has asked the Malaysian government to clarify this but they have not received a reply so far and it has been a month," he said.

"If there is a change without consent... then Unesco can revoke the heritage site listing for the park."

Deputy Energy, Water and Communications Minister Joseph Salang Gandum said the proposed Tutoh dam by state energy firm Sarawak Energy Berhad was "necessary to meet energy demands in the state", according to the Star daily.

But BMF said ethnic groups who live in the national park would have to be relocated if the project went ahead.

"If these plans were to be realised, several thousand natives would lose their traditional lands in the Bornean rainforest and would have to be relocated," it said in a statement.

12 new dams

The Tutoh dam is part of plans for 12 new hydroelectric projects in Sarawak and with the 2,400 megawatt Bakun Dam project, will increase the state's total power generating capacity by 600 percent in 2020.

Currently, the state's power production of 933 megawatts is enough to meet its daily needs, but the government plans to expand the aluminium smelting industry which will need more power, the paper reported.

Power from the 12 new hydroelectric projects will meet this increased demand, with excess output transferred to peninsular Malaysia to help meet the rest of the country's energy needs.

However, environmentalists disagree with the government's forecast.

"The projects... are not sustainable. The current Bakun Dam would be enough for the aluminium smelter the state has planned to build right now," Gurmit said.

"Even if they could generate that much (excess) power, it would be very costly to bring the electricity to peninsular Malaysia via undersea cables."

The actual beneficiaries

At a press conference held this afternoon, reports Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, Gurmit said it was apparent that the actual beneficiaries targeted by the huge dam project were the aluminium producers and other "energy-guzzling" industries and not the local communities or end-users on the peninsula.

"The people of Sarawak do not need this much energy. The energy-guzzling industries do," he said.

The issue reflected the "short-sightedness and gaps in the nation's energy and environmental policies" in the absence of a comprehensive and integrated energy policy, he added.

"It illustrates an energy-planning strategy that is supply-driven and inconsistent with the principles of sustainable development. Malaysia has committed to the Rio Declaration to undertake sustainable development, but there are very little signs of that.

"At the same time, it fails to adequately factor in impending environmental threats such as climate change, which is projected to cause water scarcity and eco-system disruptions.

"It makes little sense to build 12 additional dams since Bakun dam has the capacity to generate three times the amount of energy that is currently consumed by Sarawakians," he added.

Environmental group Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) policy research officer Azrul Zabidi, meanwhile, said rather than 'subsidising' the aluminium and other industries, the government could better benefit the people through the funding of transportation and education projects.

Workers' advocacy group Tenaganita added that other than the impending displacement of local communities, the latter's "food security and sovereignty" would also be under threat.

"It is very unjust that indigenous peoples are facing deprivation of what international treaties and covenants have identified and acknowledged as their right to their land," its program officer Steven Ng told malaysiakini.

Malaysia already faces fierce criticism over the environmental impact of the Bakun dam project in Sarawak, which involves flooding an area the size of Singapore island.

Some 10,000 residents have had to evacuate the project site, including the indigenous Penan tribe, a nomadic people who live off the forests in Borneo. The plight of the Penan was made famous in the 1990s by environmental activist Bruno Manser, who campaigned to protect their way of life and fend off the loggers. He vanished in 2000, a suspected victim of foul play.