An Analysis of the Proposed Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project on Purakam Land

By: Elisabeth Kuras
Category: Science

My project is an analysis of the proposed Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project on the Indigenous land of Ban Purakam in which the villagers would be forcibly removed from their land due to intense flooding. Through my internship at the Indigenous Peoples’ Foundation (IPF) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I had the opportunity to visit Ban Purakam on a week-long field study, with the objectives of bringing media attention to the injustice inflicted against the villagers and preventing any further steps towards the project’s completion. Through this essay, I was able to provide IPF with a detailed account of the fieldwork in English, which they are now able to distribute among a broader range of constituents to support their efforts.

*This essay complies with the Kalamazoo College Honor System*
An Analysis of the Proposed Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project on Purakam Land

Category: Science

*This essay complies with the Kalamazoo College Honor System*
An Analysis of the Proposed Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project on Purakam Land

A decade ago, the Thai government proposed the Royal Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project on the Indigenous land of Ban Purakam. While the development of the project has grown slowly since then, recent advancements have distressed the villagers. Once the project is complete, the villagers will be forcibly removed a second time from their land due to intense flooding. Through my internship at the Indigenous Peoples’ Foundation (IPF) in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I had the opportunity to visit Ban Purakam on a week-long field study with the objective of bringing media attention to the injustice perpetrated against the villagers and hopefully prevent any further progress towards the project’s completion. This essay will first provide background context on Indigeneity in Thailand and will then follow with an overview of the history of Purakam land. Next, it will explain the Purakam reservoir project and its repercussions. Finally, it will summarize the community’s response to the project and to the government.

INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY IN THAILAND; A REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH:

The estimated Indigenous population in Thailand is approximately 5 million people, which accounts for just over 7% of the country’s total population. Among these groups are the Karen, Hmong, Lisu, Akha, Mien, Lua, Thin, and Khamu. They are primarily distributed across the northwestern border to Myanmar and in the southern peninsula and central flatlands. Although Thailand voted in favor of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, the country does not legally recognize Indigenous peoples in any State legislation to this day. Additionally, the government continues to use the derogatory term “hill-tribe” when referring to Indigenous peoples, even though it is known to be outdated.
Consequently, Indigenous peoples in Thailand struggle with access to citizenship, stigmatization, and rights to their land and cultural sovereignty.

As a result of being abandoned by the government and having the double standard to assimilate into Thai society, many Indigenous communities are advocating for complete sovereignty in legal, social, economic, and political spheres. Sovereignty has “varied meanings, ranging from formulation of rights to reverse continuing experiences of colonialism, as well as to carry local efforts at the redemption of ancestral lands, resources, self-governance, and preservation of cultural knowledge and practices” (Barker, 2005). Additionally, “it consists of spiritual ways, culture, language, social and legal systems, political structures, and inherent relationships with lands, waters, and all upon them. Indigenous sovereignty exists regardless of what the nation-state does or does not do. It continues as long as the People that are part of it continue” (Indigenous Environmental Network, 2020).

A huge barrier to Indigenous sovereignty in Thailand is through “Royal Development Projects” that focus on public health, career development, environment, agriculture, education, and water sources, to name a few. They first began in 1969 under the reign of King Rama IX to solve the problem of mass deforestation, poverty, and opium production by promoting the growth of alternative crops. Since then, there have been approximately 4,700 different development projects, and water source projects strikingly outnumber the rest. A vast majority of these development projects are placed on Indigenous ancestral land with no regard for their approval or cultural heritage. In her paper Land as Pedagogy, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states that “Indigenous peoples are not seen as worthy recipients of consent, informed or otherwise, and part of being colonized is having to engage in all kinds of processes on a daily basis that, given a choice, we likely wouldn’t consent to” (Simpson, 2014).
Indigenous communities throughout Thailand have challenged the government in favor of their land rights and autonomous decision-making. Despite continuous opposition to government projects, this movement is making significant ground in terms of social change, with more attention placed on information sources that accurately explain the social, political, and cultural contexts of Indigenous peoples.

**CONTEXT ON BAN PURAKAM:**

Although there are steps toward recognition and the advancement of rights, ideas of autonomy are still disregarded by the Thai government: in particular, the Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project. Ban Purakam is a small Karen village located due west of Bangkok near the Myanmar border. It sits in a valley with the Phachi River running through it, surrounded by mountains. The word “Purakam” comes from the large ragam fruit tree forest situated near the village.

According to an elder of the village, Purakam is over 200 years old and was originally inhabited by the Lerwaw and Kwapo families, who came from the Jai Paendin village. In 1977, Med Kembing from the Thungfaek community relocated to Purakam in accordance with official policy to consolidate the residents of the larger area into a single community facilitated by government control. By 1981, most families had moved to the new area, although some went to Upper and Central Bang Kloi. In 1991, officials arrived to promote new occupations under the “Little Houses in the Big Forest” program of the Sri Surawong military camp, which followed with replacement land allotments for 42 households – the first time Purakam residents were ordered to move.

Present-day Purakam is surrounded by the Phachi River Wildlife Sanctuary and the Kaeng Krachan Forest World Heritage Site. There are 87 families who primarily farm durian,
long bean, pepper, lettuce, eggplant, cabbage, rice, and fiddlehead fern. Their land is desirable because of the soil quality and the existence of local water sources that provide the villagers with both food security and the ability to irrigate crops. These families have been able to make a considerable income selling their produce at the Sri Muang Market, which is the largest market in Ratchaburi. After the previous forced removal, they have finally adapted to the new land and established a community economy that supports the families; if they move, all income generated by the farmers would be lost.

**CONTEXT ON BAN PURAKAM DAM PROJECT:**

Around a decade ago, the Royal Irrigation Department proposed the Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project, intending it to be built in the middle of Ban Purakam land at the Phachi River. The purpose of the project is to help prevent drought and control potential flooding during the rainy season. Although not explicitly stated, villagers suspect the real reason for the reservoir is to provide a stable water source to a resort in the area and to manage the water channels to existing business facilities. However, this project has terrible implications for the Purakam villagers; the dam is expected to submerge 2,000 rai (791 acres) of forest area within the Phachi River Wildlife Sanctuary, which would engulf the entirety of the Ban Purakam village. While the project has been slow-moving, requiring an Environmental Impact Assessment among other data, the threat of construction continues to worry the villagers. In September 2017, the project was approved by the Committee on Environment and Development. However, in 2019, a higher-ranked committee abandoned the approval to continue to research the project.
REPERCUSSIONS TO THE VILLAGERS:

As a result of the project, Purakam villagers would be forced to relocate to a different land, which as of now, has not been identified. They are adamant that they do not want to leave their home after finally adapting due to the previous forced relocation in the late 1970s. Pele Kaupu, one of the villagers, asserted that “We have a good life here. The soil is fertile and there is plenty of water from the river for farming. We don't want to leave. This is our home.” He also pointed out that “we didn’t have a say in the matter at all” (Kaupu, 2020).

Sombaht Warittikornkul, the former Village Head of Purakam, expressed considerable concern over the project and its impacts to Purakam traditional culture and Indigenous ways of life, as well as to the surrounding environment. He compared the situation to the fate of fish in the river. “Our lives are like fish; if we move up we are caught in traps. If we move down we are trapped by a dam. Going up we suffer from the law. If we go down we are imprisoned. Whichever way we go, we are confined and controlled” (Warittikornkul, 2022).

Questions that arise are: Where would the villagers relocate to? How would they be compensated? Although there would be land for the people, would they have to change their crops or livelihood as farmers? What readjustments to their traditional practices would they have to make? Because they do not have answers to these questions, the Purakam villagers are in complete opposition to the project. Wut Boonlert, one of the villagers said, “The Purakam villagers will gain no benefit from this project. Meanwhile, their territory will be demolished by the project” (Boonlert, 2022).

REPERCUSSIONS TO THE FOREST AND WILDLIFE:

Not only would the project result in repercussions to the villagers, their land, which they have been co-habiting with the forest and the wildlife, would also be affected. One of the first
steps of any Royal project is to complete an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to inquire about the repercussions to the flora and fauna. The EIA report for the proposed Nong Ta Dang Reservoir discovered that the project would have serious implications, and that “forest fragmentation and habitat loss will also lead to significant degradation of forest ecosystems and the extinction of many species” (Rujivanaron, 2022). Additionally, “The area is also home to Malayan tapir and serows, while rare fishes and amphibians which cannot be found anywhere else but are found in the [Phachi] river” (Kaewkate, 2022).

Furthermore, the location of the proposed reservoir, on the Phachi River Wildlife Sanctuary territory and the Kaeng Krachan Forest World Heritage Site, brings up other concerns. World Heritage Sites are so declared because they are facing certain dangers or potential threats that would have a negative impact on their continued existence. The risk for Phachi is that it would lose its status as a World Heritage Site. As such, these “sites have very fragile ecosystems [as] areas which are crucial to international efforts to conserve endangered flora and fauna” (Sangkamarn, 2022).

**PREVIOUS COOPERATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT:**
According to the villagers, this is not the first time they have had conversations with the government. Many years ago, there was a notice from the Thai government stating that wildlife populations were decreasing and the villagers needed to stop their traditional hunting practices. They complied, and wildlife numbers began to increase again. One villager, Pele Kuapu, said, “We stopped going to the forest to hunt, we did not trespass the forest, and we switched to planting trees. I have always tried to be a good person of the State. I have worked with the forest, helped extinguish forest fires, made fire break lines, and participated in all [State] activities. When there is a Royal project, we cooperate every time. We adapt to farming and growing
vegetables for sale. We have a stable income. We have a better life. We definitely don't want to start over” (Kuapu, 2022).

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE PROJECT AND TO THE GOVERNMENT:

Purakam villagers have rallied behind their leaders to unite in opposition to the Nong Ta Dang Reservoir Project. The villagers have “submitted a letter to the Prime Minister and various agencies many times, but there is still no answer. We want to know at what stage the project is already. We insist that we do not want to be evacuated. I hope the government will sympathize with us and cancel this project” (Sombat, 2022). There is only so much that Purakam villagers can do if the government continues to ignore them. As a result, the community leaders invited journalists from major news networks across Thailand to try to control the narrative and bring attention to the injustices of the project. The intention was to prevent any further steps to the completion of the project. Luckily, I had the opportunity to join these efforts as well.

SUMMARIZING EXPERIENCE AT BAN PURAKAM:

As previously mentioned, Purakam villagers invited approximately 20 journalists from networks such as Bangkok Post, Channel 3 News, and Green News to report about their current situation. The Indigenous Peoples’ Foundation (IPF) was invited to help organize and manage the field study. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit Ban Purakam for a week as an intern with IPF. From Chiang Mai, where IPF is based, it was a 10-hour drive.

On the first full day, I sat in on a press briefing with all the journalists and heard local villagers and officials provide a contextual overview of the project. The following morning, I sat in on a press conference with three officials from the Phachi River Wildlife Sanctuary. Reporters asked questions about the villagers’ cooperation with the Sanctuary’s efforts, the official
boundaries of the Natural World Heritage Site, and how the dam would be expected to affect ecosystems. Although the officials were limited in what they were allowed to say because of their work within the government agency developing the project, they emphasized how cooperative the Purakam villagers had previously been with the government’s directives. Additionally, they suggested that their practices would cause no harm to the environment or endangered wildlife populations.

After the press conference, we drove with the journalists to the village until the paved road ended and then moved to off-roading trucks. We pulled off at important stops on the road to explain certain signs or reserved areas of the forest. One spot, in particular, explained a PTT Gas Station reforestation project. Through a Corporate Social Responsibility program, PTT Gas Station planted over 200 acres of trees in 2003 and dedicated the forest to the previous King Rama IX. However, The Purakam villagers said that this area was already a healthy forest with high biodiversity. The Environmental Impact Assessment confirmed that this forest would be completely flooded with the reservoir project, yet PTT felt no social obligation to protect the forest from the immediate threat of destruction.

Our next stop on the way was to view the entirety of the village from a higher viewpoint. The villagers leading the tour described the beginning point of the reservoir and where the dam would be built, which was placed in the middle of the village. They explained that upon completion of the reservoir, it would be slow to flood for the first few weeks but then completely flood the valley up to 50 meters. It was eye-opening to see the village in its entirety in this way.

We had lunch in the village that was cooked completely with their own produce. We devoured huge helpings of fish, papaya salad, raw vegetables, and stir-fried meats and shrimp with rice. It was absolutely delicious and incredibly fresh, further demonstrating the value of this land to the villagers. After lunch, we took a slow-moving tour around the village to visit its local
stores and food bank. We walked through the river and observed a pulley system that goes from one side to the other when it floods and is too deep to cross. We visited the nearby farms for a couple of hours and observed the land and crops, interviewed the villagers, and took photos and videos for the articles. One of the most interesting things I saw was a villager’s rice bank to store the season’s harvest. It was approximately the size of an industrial refrigerator but entirely filled with rice. He explained the celebratory tradition that takes place before the harvest where there is a lot of dancing and drinking. He expressed his sadness to potentially have to move out of his home and give up his rice storage facility.

We eventually took the vehicles back through Purakam and to the main road where we had a quick briefing session before all the other journalists went back to Bangkok. Although I’m sure we all had a different experience traveling to Purakam, I believe we all now understand first-hand the value of the land and cultural sovereignty to the Purakam villagers. Forcibly removing them from their land would be devastating. As I’ve reflected further on this project in the month since I returned from Thailand, I wonder what, if any, compensation the Thai government would provide the villagers for their relocation, and the ethical ramifications of that decision, as well as what other methods might be employed to prevent the construction of the dam.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:


