

## **Yusufeli dam and the river Çoruh: an indefinable asset (1200 words)**

“Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else, knew it well enough to insist that at all costs it should endure.” Thus David Brower, founder of Friends of the Earth, looking back on the damming of the Colorado River’s Glen Canyon in the USA in 1963.

If the Colorado River was not well enough known, what chance does the Çoruh in north-eastern Turkey stand? Two dams are already operational; another twenty-seven are planned. The biggest and most environmentally destructive will be close to the little town of Yusufeli. Does it matter? Turkey needs more power.

First, the area is one of outstanding natural beauty: “one of those existing but perhaps indefinable assets” that Turkey has been all too ready to destroy in its gallop to match European standards of living, as Brian Sewell puts it in his Turkish travelogue, *South from Ephesus*. The Çoruh marks the southern limit of the Kaçkar mountains that drop into the Black Sea behind the legendary town of Trebizond. Its gorges form a little corridor of Mediterranean warmth that makes possible even the growing of olives. Downstream from Yusufeli the gorges are rocky and narrow. Upstream the alluvial banks support rice paddies and stands of poplars, the emblematic tree of central Asia. And high on the slopes of these valleys, where the forest gives way to flower-strewn meadows, are tiny villages of stone and wooden chalets, whose inhabitants, some permanent, some seasonal, live in semi-self-sufficiency from their cows, fruit trees, honey and vegetable gardens – and, to a growing extent, from the slowly burgeoning, eco-friendly and sustainable tourism of walkers, nature-lovers and white-water rafters who come for the Çoruh rapids.

But Turkey has a history – one might almost say an obsession – with dams. Beating up nature is of course a tempting demonstration of virility for governments in emerging economies and with such huge sums of money involved it also provides plenty of opportunity for lining pockets. And is it perhaps no accident that three of Turkey’s recent presidents or premiers have been water engineers by training? Though that would not explain the extraordinary ruthlessness of Turkish dam-building: in particular, scant regard for the wishes or sufferings of the people displaced or the importance of the landscapes and history destroyed, witness the controversial dams on the Euphrates and Tigris, the latter just given a boost by the signing of a funding agreement with a consortium of Swiss, Spanish and German banks, contrary of course to the principles of good practice to which their governments have all signed up.

The prospects for Yusufeli and the Çoruh do not look any better. The Çoruh reaches the Black Sea in Georgia. The dam already constructed at Borçka gives Turkey control over that – without any trans-boundary water rights

agreement, such as is required under international law. As a candidate for accession to the European Union Turkey is obliged to implement the full *acquis communautaires*, which in the case of these dams means a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) for the displaced people. But in the eyes of Friends of the Earth, the Berne Declaration and other NGOs the only EIA carried out falls woefully short of the norms set, for example, by the EU, World Bank, OECD and World Commission on Dams, even though the affected area is known for the presence of numerous species of rare and endemic plants, butterflies and animals as well as unique habitats and historical monuments. There has been little consultation; campaigners against the project, led by Yusufeli lawyer Recep Akyurek, only got sight of the EIA when they took the matter to court, only to have the court rule that an EIA was not necessary since the project antedated the law requiring EIAs! The whiff of potential scandal, however, was enough to make the two biggest foreign construction companies, the UK's AMEC and the French Spie, pull out of the project. Their role has been taken up by Dogus, one of Turkey's biggest and most influential companies and rather less susceptible to green lobbying. The French and Swiss Export Credit agencies, however, are still supporting the involvement of Alstom's turbines and Barclays is involved. Why, when the project clearly violates the Equator Principles to which it is a signatory?

Yusufeli is the hub of this region. School, health care, lawyers, transport, barbers, tools, seeds, local bureaucracy, everything happens in Yusufeli. Drown Yusufeli – and with it seventeen riverside villages and the only arable land in the area – and all this will be affected. Communications with the outside world will be disrupted for years as the entire road network has to be reconstructed. Some 800 small businesses and drivers will be affected and intricate networks of trust and inter-dependence that cannot be re-created in a new place destroyed. As for the peasant farmers, they simply will not be able to grow their crops on the arid ground higher up. All in all some thirty thousand people, spread over forty-two communities, many of them simply not used to a cash economy, will be thrown on the labour market without any marketable qualifications. The RAP has not managed to come up with an acceptable alternative place for them to live. The financial compensation on offer is equivalent to giving the owner of a five-storey building the value of one floor, as Recep Akyurek put it to me.

The economics of the project make little sense to an outsider. The opponents of the dam – and their figures tally with those produced by Istanbul Technical University, Turkey's MIT – estimate the cost of construction over fifteen years at \$6 billion US and the cost of servicing the debt at ten times the value of the electricity produced. Yet the highest court in Turkey has ruled that the government does not need to consider alternative schemes, as required in an EIA, even though a run-of-river hydro-electric plant, for example, would be cheaper and quicker to build as well as less environmentally damaging, and would be profitable producing electricity at 4.5 cents US per

Kw compared to the 70 cents per Kw required to make the dam profitable. Inevitably there are rumours of corruption.

At the moment the Yusufeli campaigners are waiting for the Appeal Court's rejection of their case, before going to the European Court of Human Rights, their last recourse. The danger now, as one of the Colorado Glen Canyon campaigners put it, is that the momentum grows and grows "and then it became necessary to build the dam."

It seems more than ever profligate to go on destroying such "indefinable assets" in this unpredictable time of global warming, when, for example, the dams that feed Turkey's capital, Ankara, have been operating at 3% of capacity this summer. We should remember the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' lament for Binsey poplars:

"O if we but knew what we do

When we delve or hew...

After-comers cannot guess the beauty been."