

Hope for the Tigris River? – Status of the Ilisu Dam Project in Turkey

By Anna Bachmann



A decision was to be made earlier in the winter as to whether Austria, Germany and Switzerland would finance the building of Turkey's Ilisu Dam Project on the Tigris River in Eastern Turkey. The Dam is part of a wider project called the Southeastern Anatolia Project, or GAP, with the stated aim of bringing development to the Southeastern Turkey. As the largest of a series of dams it would flood a region that includes more than 83 archaeological sites including the ancient town of Hasankeyf. In addition, 50,000 to 80,000 people would be forced to relocate. The flooding caused by the controversial Dam would also affect many vulnerable species that call the area home such as the endangered Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* and vulnerable Great Bustard *Otis tarda*, as well as many mammals and other wildlife.

In November of 2008, protesters from Doğa Derneği (Nature Iraq's BirdLife partner in Turkey) unfurled a banner over a prominent building in Istanbul to bring attention to Dam project. The banner, showed views of ancient Hasankeyf displayed a message of 'Hasankeyf today, tomorrow, forever.' It was hung by demonstrators wearing the flags of Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

Doğa Derneği argues that the Turkish Government show stop the Ilisu Dam project and to save Hasankeyf from destruction.



The Tigris River from Hasankeyf, Turkey, photo by Anna Bachmann

In an article on the BirdLife International website after the protest Erkut Erturk, the campaign coordinator of Doğa Derneği said that "It is time for a positive decision. Prime Minister Erdogan should honour his commitment to our heritage and save Hasankeyf forever by registering this culturally and biologically diverse region on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list".

Iraq also has an important stake in this issue. The building of the Ilisu Dam would decrease the amount of water reaching Iraq, particularly as the dam is filled, and, if the extensive irrigation projects planned in Turkey go forward, the water quality in the Tigris as it enters Iraq would also decline.

A recent article on the Hurriyet Daily News website stated that the original credit agreement required that Turkey abide by over 150 criteria including measures to protect social and environmental life in the area, many of which, by beginning construction and nationalizing the land near the building site, Turkey appears to have violated.

Doğa Derneği obtained photographs in the fall showing a heavy construction vehicle along with dam-related building and construction material seen in the riverbed of the Ilisu region, which were not present at the site in summer.

Germany, Austria and Switzerland sent a warning letter in October that advised Turkey to fulfill the necessary criteria before they would release the credit. Turkey was supposed to conduct a study of the historical and cultural assets that would be affected by the Dam but earlier in the year Turkey was criticized for having taken few efforts in this regard.

As a result by the end of 2008, it was announced that the German government, as well as Austria and Switzerland, had suspended credit guarantees to the project. This may be a temporary blow to the project for the moment but Turkey will still continue to pursue dam construction. Iraq needs to engage more actively in an issue that could have many far-reaching and adverse affects.

For more information, see:

http://www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/12/turkey_protest.html

<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10624093.asp>