

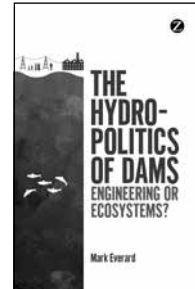
Review

The Hydro-politics of Dams: Engineering or Ecosystems?

Mark Everard

2013, Zed Books, London, 310pp, £21.99 paperback

£70.00 hardback, ISBN 978-1-78032-540-8



A dangerous and controversial discipline: politics unsurprisingly now comes to us in the guise of a book about dams. Actually, I was somewhat relieved when I finished reading this neat little text because it has little of the paperback polemic that is so often the route taken with anything to do with water or water resources.

That being the case, Mark Everard is to be commended for taking on a complicated topic and not shying away from complexity. For although the West largely got out of the habit of large dam building well before most of us were born, in developing countries environmentally active individuals, from writers such as Arundhati Roy to a plethora of NGO workers (to say nothing of voluntary environmental activists), have plenty of scorn to pour on India, China (for the Three Gorges Dam), Turkey, Brazil and many more for continuing the practice.

There is no easy answer to simple questions like ‘where would we all be without dams then?’ The title implies this. Whatever the detractors may say, they have been around for a long time (many for over 100 years) and are here to stay. They do represent changes to ecosystems and do affect stream hydrology. Many of the promised benefits have proven dubious. This book does provide the academic and practitioner community with a variety of examples from a range of continents, economies and natural environments. In this respect alone it is superbly researched.

So what are the answers? These lie not (for a change) in only developing ghastly neo-liberal ideas further. The message is perhaps that, like the water itself, the politics and economics require taming and merging in new policies and procedures. There is an informed attempt at this (chapter 17). There is a useful rejoinder that it is *appropriate process that is needed*. We should embrace a range of modern ideas about adaptive strategies, public participation, and the development of markets while accepting the need for good old-fashioned regulation.

Successful projects involving public participation are given, and there are well-informed accounts of such useful concepts as ‘blue water’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘virtual water’. Public engagement in the identification of water needs is helpfully illustrated from South Africa, where the Thukela Water Project (Chapters 6 and 7) used public engagement prior to diverting the flows of the river of that name; a sample of households were interviewed and asked about apparently economically marginal issues such as non-recreational fishing, vegetation, waste assimilation and dilution, cultivated floodplain agricultural land, and recreation. Furthermore, ‘ecosystem services’ targeted by the study, ‘ecological disservices’, and largely preventative

treatment of waterborne disease, were also included. From these and other data, total economic value could be computed prior to the engineered changes.

The book is to be commended. With a university teacher's mortar board on, one might identify its utility to students of development and natural resource management, and probably at degree level or above. Furthermore, one might suggest that it is a 'must' for relevant disciplines within the NGO and development community.

The author has to touch on many concepts within the hackneyed conceptual area of 'sustainable development', but the book would have been improved if he had taken time to define certain key concepts. These include 'wicked problems' (those requiring solutions to complex technical and societal problems); I would also have liked to see a better in-depth discussion of the ethical dimension of the 'polluter pays' principle *vs.* the notion of payment for ecosystem services, as well as an unpacking of the arcane terminology of 'governance' and 'civil society'. A more generalized discussion of 'ecosystem services' would help the reader, or at least a relative beginner or someone from another discipline.

A commendable work, but please, Mark, I have to take the mention of 'Water in a *postmodern* world' (title of Part 2) with a pinch of salt. We have enough clichés in this line of business.

Hadrian Cook is Senior Lecturer in Sustainable Development at Kingston University, London.