

STOPPING THE DAM AT TIGER LEAPING GORGE

From 2004-2007, farmers and villagers in Dechen, Tibet and a traditionally Nakhi minority area in Yunnan, China, worked with environmental groups to protect Tiger Leaping Gorge, one of the world's deepest river canyons and a United Nations World Heritage site. After major organizing and publicity efforts, protest, and direct action, they succeeded.



Credit: Sy Smith

The Yunnan provincial government and a subsidiary of energy giant China Huaneng Group had plans to build eight dams along the Dri Chu (Jinsha) River—a project almost the size of the controversial Three Gorges Dam. The first was at Tiger Leaping Gorge and would displace more than 100,000 people—including Tibetans and people from the Nakhi, Bai, Yi, Miao, and Lisu minorities. It would also flood 32,947 acres of prime agricultural land and put 200 species of wildlife at risk. Faced with losing their homes, leaders from various villages emerged to oppose the dam's construction, and civil society organizations and local activists spread information to citizens in the region.

As work began, people mobilized to oppose the dam, sometimes taking dramatic direct action. In one instance, villagers abducted at least seven surveyors and more than 10,000 farmers gathered at a local government building, only disbanding when it was clear that the government was ready to make concessions. In 2007, the provincial government agreed to scrap the project and relocate the Tiger Leaping Gorge dam. This victory is considered one of the greatest achievements for environmentalists in China.

ISSUE

A planned dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge would displace 100,000+ local people, flood 32,947 acres of farmland, and threaten 200 species of wildlife

WHO

- Local farmers and village people
- Civil society organizations in China
- Journalists

WHERE

Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Lijiang Naxi (Nakhi) Autonomous County, Yunnan, China

Source: <http://www.thelandofsnows.com>



GOALS

- To stop the dam at Tiger Leaping Gorge
- The goal of some allies was to use this campaign to change the decision making process for dams across China to include real environmental and social consultation with affected communities

STRATEGY

To pressure company and government officials to abandon the project through mobilizing villagers and environmental organizations and securing media coverage

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The campaign was planned. Leaders from various villages emerged and began communicating with each other and organizing, spreading articles and information to the villagers. Xiao Liangzhong, an editor at a Beijing-based publishing house, was from the Tiger Leaping Gorge dam region. He arranged interviews between villagers and progressive Chinese media outlets which helped bring the story to national awareness in China. His sudden death of a heart attack sparked a major surge in activism. Environmental groups in China joined the campaign because of its environmental and social impacts and also the potential to influence future dam decision-making in the country.

ISSUE FRAMING

Organizers framed the issue in terms of the devastating human and environmental impact, as well as the illegality of company practice and lack of public consultation.

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Participants & Leaders:

- Villagers and farmers in the area, including leaders like farmer Ge Quanxiao
- Leading public opponent Xiao Liangzhong, who came from the area

Source: eng.greensoc.cn



Xiao Liangzhong

Allies:

- Concerned Chinese citizens, including environmentalists and tourism operators in the area
- Journalists from progressive Chinese news media like Southern Weekend
- Environmental organizations such as Green Watershed, Greenpeace, Global Earth Village, Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, and other groups in Beijing

Elites:

- Wen Jiabao, who temporarily suspended the project after a Southern Weekend article broke the story that work had started illegally on one dam and the 100,000 people who would be resettled had not even been informed
- National Development and Reform Commission, that began an investigation

TARGET

Hydroelectric company operators and local/provincial officials



OPPONENT(S)

Hydroelectric company operators and local/provincial officials

TACTICS

We don't know all the tactics that were used, but they included:

- Outreach and awareness-raising to local people, including a trip to another village where residents had been displaced by a different dam
- Petitioning authorities in Beijing
- Outreach to journalists
- Mass protests of thousands of people
- Kidnapping surveyors

Their tactics were often concentrated and often had a high level of risk, especially for leading organizers. However, many of the actions had a large number of people involved, lowering the level of risk.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

At first, the hydropower company and local officials pressed forward with the work. Sometimes arrests were made of local campaign leaders. Eventually, provincial officials agreed to scrap the project.

MEDIA & MESSAGING

Their message focused on the relocation of people and the illegality of the project. They contacted the media and the coverage was a key part of the story reaching national attention with the public and high-ranking officials. In particular, an article in Southern Weekly by Liu Jianqiang and another journalist reached Wen Jiabao, sparking an investigation of the dam.



OUTCOMES

The Tiger Leaping Gorge dam was cancelled in what was considered a great environmental achievement and a landmark for environmental organizing. However, reports indicated that the dam would be moved to another location further upstream. As of 2012, this hadn't occurred.

The Tiger Leaping Gorge campaign demonstrated several key factors for success:

1. Determination and strength from the local opposition
2. Local, dynamic leaders
3. Involvement of nongovernmental organizations
4. Press coverage
5. Attention of top government officials



Source: eng.tibet.cn