



Background on Epupa Falls

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Namibia's Kunene River valley is the ancestral home of 12,000 Himba people, a semi-nomadic people who have lived there for more than 500 years, tending their flocks and making their sacred fires (*okuruwo*). After surviving drought, war, genocide and other disasters, the most serious threat to their existence is the proposed Epupa Dam. The dam would flood their remote oasis; bring roads, construction camps and development into their midst; introduce diseases common to the still waters of reservoirs, and potentially end the Himba way of life forever. Evicted from the area, they will also lose touch with their clanspeople across the river in Angola. "The effect of resettlement would likely be far worse: resettlement would result not simply in a change of lifestyle but in their (Himbas) destruction," states a report jointly authored by Earthlife-Namibia and a German environmental organization, Urgewald.

The project will also seriously affect downstream environments in the arid climate, and could harm the rich offshore fisheries. Hundreds of species rely on the river - the only year-round water source in the vicinity - and could be harmed by changes in its flow. The spectacular Epupa Falls would be inundated by one proposed siting.

Epupa Dam is expected to produce 200 megawatts of power, although its output will likely be reduced some years by drought - a serious problem for southern African dams. The reservoir for the huge dam could inundate as much as 350 square kilometers of land, forcibly displace up to 1,000 people and affect a few thousand more. There are alternatives to the scheme, including a natural gas field currently being developed, and strong potential for solar and wind power, but the Epupa project continues to be considered.

A US\$7 million [feasibility study](#) on the Epupa scheme, funded by Norwegian and Swedish aid agencies, was completed in 1997; as expected, its purpose seemed primarily to make a case for the dam rather than thoroughly analyze its many drawbacks. Even before this flawed report was released, two senior Himba chiefs – Chief Paulus Tjavara, head of Himba traditional leaders in Okaoko, and headman Hikuminue Kapika – visited Europe to talk about the project and try to dissuade development banks and other investors from entering into the scheme. They also met with the director of the Norwegian agency writing the feasibility study, and asked them to stop funding the project "because you cannot imagine the serious consequences it will have."

"If you decide to fund the project, you will take part in destroying everything that belongs to the Himbas," Chief Kapika said.

As the release of the feasibility study neared, the government began to meet their resistance with force. In July 1997, police broke up a number of meetings between the Himba and their legal advisors in the capitol, Windhoek. Meanwhile, the Himba are facing the death of their culture and of their sacred fire. Asks Munjombara Katjira for his people, "Where will the Himbas be taken? What will happen to our grave sites? Will we still live as Himbas if we are taken from Epupa?"

-Lori Pottinger

Additional Information

- [Epupa Dam and the World Commission on Dams](#)
How does the proposed Epupa project hold up against the WCD report? (PDF)
- Read a [report](#) on the project's impacts by the Norwegian group FIVAS
- Download a 2-page [brochure](#) on the Himba and the dam by Survival International (PDF)