

People and wildlife living along the Parana-Paraguay prosper with the river system as it is, not as it might be transformed.

SOUTH OF THE Amazon, southwest of Rio and Brasilia, the second largest river system on the continent of South America flows from its headwaters in Brazil toward Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and ultimately to the Atlantic. This is the Parana-Paraguay watershed. It is about to receive a visit from a multinational version of Roto-Rooter.

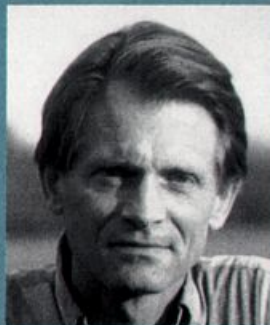
At least, that is what the Interamerican Development Bank would propose. The bank is evaluating whether to go ahead with a plan to channel, dredge, and develop port facilities along the Parana-Paraguay, a project called *Hidrovia*. Some Interamerican Development Bank analysts think it's a good idea, that it would facilitate transportation and thus give a jump-start to the economy of interior southern South America.

A sober look at its real impacts, however, suggests that while the transportation benefits are likely, *Hidrovia* would be devastating for many people living along the river—and that it wouldn't even be all that beneficial for the economy as a whole. Indeed, the calculations run by a consulting firm to assess the economic benefits of *Hidrovia* contain simple arithmetic errors that make it appear to be a better investment than it truly is.

Birds would not benefit, either. The Parana-Paraguay has its roots in the Pantanal, the world's largest continuous wetland. If Little Rock is the epicenter of Friends of Bill, then the

J. P. Myers

**FACTS,
INFERENCES
AND SHAMELESS
SPECULATIONS**



**River
Roto-
Rooter**

Pantanal is the great mud patch in the south for Jabiru, Snail Kites, and Southern Screammers.

This river system is also of immense importance to migratory shorebirds from both North and South America. Pectoral Sandpipers, yellowlegs of both sizes, White-rumped Sandpipers and South American Painted Snipes all abound along the wetlands of the Parana-Paraguay between Brazil and the Rio de la Plata.

Degrade these wetlands and the ecological impact would resonate from the Bahia de Samboronbon, Argentina, to Atkasuk, Alaska. *Hidrovia* is a bad idea whose time will never come. The scary thing is that it might be built anyway.

So why is it bad, and what illogic might let the rooters rout nonetheless? The answers to both stem from classic obstructions to sustainable develop-

ment: incomplete economics and hubris mixed with greed, respectively.

The economics are incomplete because, as usual, the cost-benefit calculations, strained through spreadsheet and computer model, fail to consider both the economic benefits of natural ecosystem services and the economic costs of losing them. People and wildlife living along the Parana-Paraguay prosper with the river system as it is, not as it might be transformed.

The idea of ecosystem services is not all that challenging. People capable of managing complex budgets, infrastructure development, and multinational diplomacy—daily bread



for the Interamerican Development Bank—ought to eat this for breakfast, or at least get it past the duodenum. But somehow, putting ecosystem services into the balance sheet of bank project analyses invariably makes those folks gag—not just for *Hidrovia*, but throughout the bank's activities. Interamerican Development Bank, I should note, is hardly the only delinquent among its multilateral bank brethren.

The case against *Hidrovia* is simple. To make it even simpler, for sake of argument, ignore all but the most anthropocentric values of biodiversity. Consider only two ecosystem services the Parana-Paraguay provides people living along the watershed: People eat fish. People drown in floods. *Hidrovia* will diminish, if not destroy, the fisheries. It will increase flooding.

The roots of both of these impacts lie in the river system's natural hydrology, and especially in the role

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that the Pantanal and other wetlands play in the watershed. The river's ecosystem supports an enormous

fresh-water fishery, upon which many people depend for nutrition and a livelihood. The wetlands and river side-channels, placed at risk by *Hidrovia*, provide the habitats essential for fish reproduction. No reproduction, no fish.

The wetlands now also decrease flooding. Remember that this is the tropics and subtropics. The rainy season is intense. When the rainy season hits, the Pantanal sops up the rainfall, holds back its movement into the river and spreads the downstream flow out over time. As a result, downstream peak floods are decreased. Louse up the Pantanal's hydrology, as *Hidrovia* will, and the Pantanal loses its ability to protect downstream villages, towns, and cities from flooding.

As to hubris and greed, there are two fundamental problems. One is the top-down nature of much development planning, driven by a conviction that local needs will be met by grand visions of economic growth. No one is asking the local people living along the river what their priorities might be. The subsistence fisherman, the villager along the river course, and the consumer needing a source of protein, all get lost in the process. Big visions mean dramatic, sweeping arrows cast across maps of entire continents. They often obliterate inconvenient, disenfranchised communities in the way.

The second problem is who stands to benefit directly. It will be the sophisticates whose companies sell the concrete, move the dirt, suck the mud, engineer the port facilities, and pocket the money. These large visions of development sometimes benefit a populace. They always benefit a few.

Hidrovia is of the latter type. A few will prosper. These beneficiaries, given the scale of their benefits, know how to make the system work to their advantage. In contrast, many will suffer. Not just among the people, but across the panoply of life that exists in the Parana-Paraguay river system.

It is tempting to point to two related United States failures, the Kissimmee River and the Mississippi River delta. Both are examples of where we erred grotesquely and are now paying the costs. Ecosystem services were ignored. Grand plans were implemented. Local people suffered, and continue to do so. But simply pointing at past errors in the States is at least insufficient, if not counterproductive.

I wish I could be optimistic that the Interamerican Development Bank's analysts would approach this project with complete information, objectively, that logic would prevail and that *Hidrovia* would recede in developers' fantasies. There is faint hope. Multilateral banks like Interamerican Development Bank are showing sporadic signs of environmental sensitivity. But, for the most part, they remain in the thralls of old economics and old politics. Thus left to their own vices, *Hidrovia* will probably be implemented. The river will be rooted.



Snail Kite

Then someone will have to start coping with the human dislocations caused by *Hidrovia*'s environmental impacts. I would suggest they talk to the Interamerican Development Bank for, perhaps, a loan for flood

protection, or to experiment with fisheries using introduced species. ▶

—J.P. Myers is Director of the W. Alton Jones Foundation.

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