

Karina Schumacher is from Germany and is in South Korea doing ecological ministry. She was visiting a small rural village being impacted by “development”. Here is the story she tells: it is a common story.

“Landscape development for cultural tourism”

It's early in the morning. The pale sunlight seems to be still sleepy in the cloudless sky and is reflected golden in the crystal clear waters of my beloved Naeseong. I am standing on a narrow S-shaped log bridge that crosses the river near the small Museum Village and enjoy the dawning day with all its promising premonitions. It will probably be one of the first warm days of this year. We are going on a bike tour through the beautiful landscapes along the vividly meandering river. KIM Yong-gi, a friend who lives in Museum Village, prepares the bikes. He checks the brakes, and inflates the tires. It is still before 7 am when we set off.



I enjoy the fragrant morning air and the fresh wind that caresses my face. My romantic notions of pretty little paths along the river are, however, disappointed already in the first meters. Our way leads along little country roads – that fortunately are not very busy with traffic. We pass by the famous Yeongju apple trees that are decorated in full bloom of pale pink blossoms in this time of the year. Our way leads to the Yeongju Dam, one of eight dams that are built along the Nakdong River in the course of the Four Rivers project. The river, like the other three major rivers of the country, is dammed for power generation and flood prevention. The Naeseong as a tributary of the Nakdong River is, of course, directly affected by this. Above the dam an artificial reservoir is created, the river below – on the other hand – is deprived of its water. As we approach the dam, the road rises steeply. We get off our bikes and push them uphill, which gives me the opportunity to take one or two photos.

As we arrive at the dam, we tie our bikes to a road sign and continue walking. However, we do not get far before we are gently but firmly rebuked that there is no way for visitors. We consider briefly whether a contradiction might be worth trying, but eventually drop the idea and just return to our bikes.



The road now leads downhill and we can let the wheels roll. We have an unobstructed view of the relentlessly advancing construction work that, according to official media reports, has already been completed since 2012. The dam in Yeongju was the last of 16 dams and thus the last phase of the 13.5 billion-euro 4-Rivers project, by which Lee Myung-bak, the previous President of South Korea, wanted to erect an enduring monument to himself.

Our way leads to Geumgwang, a small village like Museum (not a traditional village with hanok houses, but likewise a rural habitat at the riverside of the Naeseong).

Here as well, the apple trees are in most beautiful full bloom. Under a large sign that all farming activity is prohibited, farmers grow - like everywhere in Korea - chili, cabbage, spring onions and lots of vegetables that I do not know. In front of the Community Service Centre, a traditional Korean bell tower is located, colorfully decorated like a Buddhist temple. Next to it a scuffed red

sofa that invites one to linger. A village like any other. With one crucial difference: it seems completely deserted.

We walked along the empty streets, passed abandoned houses of the ghost town in the warm spring sun. Eventually we meet a farmer in his field. "We are tourists." Yong-gi tries to start a conversation, "We have heard this village will soon disappear under the waters of the dammed Nakdong and wanted to see it once before." The farmer remains closemouthed and just nods briefly.

As we walked through the village, we come to an open space that looks like a historical archaeological site. "Here was the temple of the village," Yong-gi says. "The building was taken down and is being rebuilt at another location, which is at a higher elevation and hence will not be submerged in the resulting reservoir after damming the Nakdong River." I nod sadly.

When we come to the construction site of the new temple, we are received in quite an unfriendly manner. One of the construction workers approaches us in suspicion. "We are tourists ..." Yong-gi tries again. The worker looks at us full of mistrust. "Did you take pictures?" We deny it. He does not really seem to believe us. "That's forbidden, you know. If you upload them somewhere, we get a lotta stress here." I questioningly look at Yong-gi. He just shakes his head.

On the way back we pass a former railway station, which remained lonely and abandoned in the middle of nowhere. We walk over decaying wood and broken glass to take a break. At the sight of the ruins I become even more aware of the whole paradox of the Four Rivers Project. The ambitious plan of one individual person is destroying the habitat of humans and wildlife, areas that had grown culturally, structures that had developed over the centuries. All this just to give way to a water reservoir, which is neither necessary nor useful.

"Landscape development for cultural tourism" is written on a banner. Yong-gi laughs bitterly. "Cultural tourism. As if our grown culture counts for nothing and only a newly created cultural landscape would be worth seeing. This whole idea of revitalization, as the Four Rivers Project is officially known, has nothing to do with returning to a life-like state. It is solely a new creation of artificial cultural areas. Kinda funny, isn't it?" he said and smiled sadly.

Deep in thoughts, we pedal back to Museum which is fortunately located below the dam and therefore not in danger of being flooded. Yong-gi contradicts me. "Fortunately?" he asks, frowning over the edge of his glass of refreshing iced coffee at the end of the tour. "Well, perhaps in some way. But you know, we are living from cultural tourism. When the dam withholds the water of our Naeseong River, then it is only a matter of time before our village loses its attractiveness to tourism, and therefore its main source of income. Who would come all this way to see a dead trickle?"