Waterfalls Hydropower Development: impacts to aesthetics generally and to "holy places" particularly

Evaluating and ameliorating visual impacts of waterfalls hydropower on holy sites

There is no sharp line between “natural scenery” and “cultural heritage” and community sites or objects of primarily natural provenance may come to be ascribed with religious significance. Great contrasts—and sometimes even modest sized waterfalls—are often considered as holy places and frequently are the venues for erecting shrines and temples.

Under the original concept, the Upper Kotmale Hydroelectric Project (UKHP) in the tea country near Talawakelle, Sri Lanka was expected to terminate five waterfalls, at which at least two were located minor shrines and the third the setting of a highly revered—amongst the “Plantation Tamil” community—miracle temple. Initially, both the Japanese funders and the national project proponents were resistant to the concept of “aesthetic destruction,” and the decision to terminate the sacred and spiritual character of waterfalls otherwise being sacrificed to energy development, but which would have had seemingly minimal significant “opportunity costs” i.e., forgone revenues for unimproved and unused power.

The controversy over UKHP, largely on the waterfalls issue, delayed its construction for fifteen years, but it was eventually approved and quite recently completed, and the project as-implemented included consideration of aesthetics and cultural sensitivities. We will be presenting the original image archive produced in 1991 for the required environmental documentation, but also new interactive digital media from our December, 2013 post-facto evaluation of the UKHP’s actual visual impacts.