Political scientist Andrew Mertha thinks dams damaged in the Wenchuan earthquake might shake up China’s plans to triple its hydro-electric production by 2020. Host Bruce Gellerman talks with Mertha, author of the recent book “China’s Water Warriors,” about China’s hydropower ambitions and the growing grassroots opposition to large-scale dam projects in the country.

TRANSCRIPT

GELLERMAN: It's Living on Earth – I’m Bruce Gellerman. The earthquake that struck central China killed tens of thousands of people, left millions homeless, and caused billions in destruction. Among the structures damaged are nearly 400 dams in Sichuan province. Soldiers have been patching cracks in the dam walls and engineers releasing reservoirs of water to prevent catastrophic collapse. Half the world's large dams are in China, and the country's banking on hydropower to fuel its energy future: there are plans to triple generating capacity in the next 12 years.

But in light of the earthquake, one expert says China's likely to rethink those plans as opposition to hydropower dams grows. Andrew Mertha is an assistant professor of political science at Washington University in St. Louis, and author of the book, "China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change."

MERTHA: I think the opposition to these hydropower projects will have a lot more ammunition by simply invoking the Wenchuan earthquake. There are a
number of groups in China who would prefer to see a network of smaller dams rather than one big one in a given locale, and that includes local officials, it includes environmental activists, it includes the people living in a given region who are loathe to relocate. So what we may see is a shift towards more of that type of hydropower generation.

GELLERMAN: Why would a political scientist be interested in Chinese dams?

MERTHA: Because dams are an insight into how the political system operates, both in terms of territories, local governments, as well as various functional bureaucracies – they tend to fight over the construction of these dams. So in order to get anything built, politics are at the center of it. And China, as you know, has been able to get by so far with its impressive coal reserves. But because of pollution hindering economic development, and because of competition with the United States and other countries, they really need to focus on renewable sources of energy that can be produced within China itself.

GELLERMAN: Sichuan Province, where there was this terrible earthquake, seems to be the focal point of a lot of the hydropower in China, am I right?

MERTHA: That's right. One of the reasons has to do with a larger program of developing the western part of China, because it has been consistently lagging behind the coastal areas in terms of economic development. But the second has to do with the topography. Sichuan has a basin in the middle, the Chengdu Plain, but it is surrounded by mountains, and one of the things that you need for hydropower is sudden drops, which that type of mountainous area has in abundance.

GELLERMAN: Mao Zedong figures in one of the three case studies in your book. He wants to swim in an area, and he's told he can't. That leads the leadership of China to want to build a dam there.
MERTHA: Yea. Mao was an avid swimmer – and maybe swimming is not the right word. He liked to float on his back a lot. And he would take swims at significant times to underscore a political message. In this case, it seems that he just wanted to go for a dip in the Min River when he was visiting Sichuan in the late '50's, and because the river itself was somewhat difficult to navigate, he was told finally that he was unable to do so.

GELLERMAN: And then the bureaucrats turn around and say, well we gotta let the Chairman swim the river, so let's build a dam!

MERTHA: Well the provincial boss was an ardent leftist, and so he felt that Mao should have his little swimming reservoir, but those plans largely were overtaken by events and quietly and deliberately forgotten by those people who were charged with carrying it out. This was a, kind of a forerunner of a dam that, within the space between February and August of 2003, had gone from being a fait accompli kept secret from the public, to an embarrassing reversal of policy as a result of bottom-up opposition.

GELLERMAN: So that was the key? That it was a grassroots opposition in China?

MERTHA: It's difficult to believe. But in China there are anywhere up to two million non-governmental organizations.

GELLERMAN: We in the West tend to look at China politically as a monolith.

MERTHA: Well, it's anything but. When the opposition is successful, they're successful because they're able to frame the issue in a certain way. In the case of Dujiangyan in Sichuan, along the Min River, they're successful because Dujiangyan is also the home of a more than 2000 year-old irrigation project that is still functioning, still in place, and is something that resonates with Chinese historical identity. So they were able to change the focus of debate from economic development to the preservation of cultural heritage.

GELLERMAN: Has the fear of earthquakes played a role in the opposition to dams in China?

Around 100,000 people turned out in 2004 to protest construction of the Pubugou Dam in Sichuan Province. The Chinese government delayed construction for a year and now expects to finish the 3,330 MW dam by 2010. (Courtesy of Andrew Mertha)
MERTHA: Well, the fear is always there because hydropower stations are best built in areas that are also earthquake-prone. And of course the water filling up the reservoir provides weight on the earth that contributes to instability. But these are things that were discussed for sure, but they were not really useful to the opposition as ammunition in the discourse over whether or not to build these stations.

GELLERMAN: Hydropower is really going to be one of the primary sources of energy for China of the future. What happens if the protest movement against these dams is successful and they don't have the energy to fuel their future?

MERTHA: Well, in the short to medium term, what that would mean is increased reliance on traditional sources of energy: coal, for example, non-renewable fossil fuels, for example, and in the latter case that would mean competition with the United States, with the EU, with Japan, and the increase of oil prices even more.

GELLERMAN: Well, Professor Mertha, thank you very much.

MERTHA: It's been my pleasure.

GELLERMAN: Political scientist Andrew Mertha's book is "China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change."