

## Developing the River of Life

Ecologists have for some years decried the plans of governments in the region to “develop” the Mekong River to obtain benefits of increased industrial energy production and transportation. During the past year or so, newspapers and other media have also become more aware of the threats. The issues that are beginning to arise over Mekong development promise to become classic ‘government-versus-local-people’ conflicts. When this happens, local leaders, NGOs, and some concerned politicians become involved in the issues, and they become politicized. This is good, in my opinion, because if they don’t become political issues they will not receive serious attention. The question that remains to be answered, however, is: will the government recognize the plight of local communities and deal with grievances in a responsive fashion, or will protests arise and escalate as the people become more and more desperate. It is the desire of the Siam Society to promote rational decisions and a peaceful solution, and thus avoid a replay of the Pak Mun Dam controversy. In that conflict, it is widely recognized that the government and development agencies chose the wrong path, in which costs to the Mun River and to the local people turned out to be just too high, and not worth the benefits of constructing the dam. The most irreversible loss in the constriction of the Pak Mun Dam was the blasting and canalization of the rapids below the dam, which eliminated fish breeding areas and shelter, migration pathways, local fishing areas, and tourism potential of the Kaeng Tana National Park with its spectacular riverine rock formations. There is no way to restore these. When such public conflict erupts over a development project, rational discussion usually stops and avoiding loss of face demands that villagers and officials alike will not back down or compromise.

How can we promote rational and compassionate decision-making in the government of Thailand (let alone the government of China)? Most decisions are made in the interests of one agency or sector of society or the other. Which side prevails is a matter of political influence and the relative lack of information available. We are fortunate that in Thailand, local people and NGOs are taking stands and speaking up about the issues. However, the main problem in decision-making is lack of broad enough knowledge and understanding. Most decisions by policy-makers are probably made in good faith, but with limited knowledge of environmental science and social effects. There are also biases against poor people and different ethnic groups.

One of the best sources of general information I have seen about the biodiversity associated with the Mekong River is the 30-page brochure *Biodiversity and Fisheries in the Mekong River Basin*, published by the Mekong River Commission (Mekong Development Series No. 2, May 2003). It is unfortunate that this well-produced and illustrated document does not reach a wider readership. In it we find that the Mekong fish fauna is both exceptionally diverse and productive. The Lower Mekong Basin produces approximately 2 million tons of fishery products per year—about 2 percent of the total world production including marine fisheries. There are over 1000 species of fishes in the river, about 160 of which are important commercial species. Virtually all of these are migratory. In contrast to most marine fisheries, the Mekong fishery is dominated by small scale operators. Surveys have revealed that from 64 to 93 percent of rural households in the Lower Mekong Basin either consume or sell fish from the basin. The greatest threats to this fishery are environmental degradation of the basin: deforestation, pollution, and changes in the natural

river flow and flood cycle. The report explains how both dams and canalization will reduce the productivity of the fishery, although it does not go into specific threats. No one could read this document and come away feeling that interference with the channel and flow of the Mekong would produce only easily mitigated side effects. It will have huge effects on the food supplies and livelihoods of poor people throughout the middle and lower basin. The potential effects on Cambodia alone are so great as to threaten the basic security of the entire nation.

One of the major flaws in the thinking of developers is a willingness to trade irreversible assets for benefits, such as energy and transportation, that can be obtained in alternative ways. To do so is to permanently degrade our environment and local communities. We must not trade irreplaceable resources for replaceable ones or ones that can be substituted, such as energy. One of the myths of cost-benefit analysis is that major irreplaceable losses can be “mitigated”, and that all such resources can be monetarized and hence compensated. We have already lost too many rivers to development interventions that weren’t really necessary. We should defend the mother waters and their basins on both sides of the kingdom—the Mekong and the Salween—against permanent degradation.

—*Warren Y. Brockelman*