

Siam Society Seminar on “Mekong: The River of Life”

The Siam Society held an all-day series of talks and discussions on October 11, 2003, to discuss the meaning of “The River of Life,” the threats to its existence, and their probable consequences. This was the second seminar on the topic “Natural history in the new century” which is part of the Society’s Centennial Celebration activities.

The Society heard from fisheries experts, biologists, NGO leaders, and local residents of the river edge from Chiang Rai and Nakhon Panom. They all told of the importance of the river to them and to the whole basin of the Mekong, and the threats to their way of life that are being caused by changes in the river channel and in the surrounding basin. These threats are serious and are bound to degrade or eliminate the livelihoods of millions of people in the basin.

The seminar was opened by senior Vice President Prof. Krisda Arunvongse, who explained the role of the Society in promoting the arts and sciences since its founding in 1904, and its merger with the Natural History Society in 1925. The Society is particularly interested in how natural history sustains people, especially important ecosystems such as the Mekong River.

The bilingual seminar was introduced by myself and Dr. Kampanad Bhaktikul of the Faculty of Environment and Resource Studies of Mahidol University, the main organizers of the seminar. The major speakers of interest were representatives of villages in Chiang Rai and Nakhon Panom Provinces affected by changes in the flow of the river caused by development projects. These speakers included Khun Niwat Roikaeow and Khun Somkiet Keuanchiangsala, representatives of the Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Cultural Conservation Network, who explained the threats to the Mekong River created by the construction of dams in China, and the blasting of the rapids in Laos and Thailand to create passageways for larger commercial vessels. Ms. Siri-Lukana Prem-Siri, who works with the local people in Nakhon Panom Province, discussed the impacts of Mekong development projects on local people’s lives.

Following these discussions the audience was treated to two excellent DVD video presentations of the Mekong River and Tonle Sap fisheries resources and their problems, produced by the Mekong River Commission.

After lunch, Dr. Chavalit Vidthayanon of the National Inland Fisheries Institute, talked on “Perpetual development impacts to biodiversity and local communities.” He treated the audience to many pictures of the important fishes and invertebrates that are important to local fishers.

The last feature of the seminar was a panel discussion by three experts concerned with Mekong fisheries and development. These were: Dr. Chris Barlow, manager of fisheries programs of the Mekong River Commission; Dr. Tyson R. Roberts, an ichthyologist and frequent contributor to the *Natural History Bulletin* on riverine fishes; and Mr. Chainarong Srettachua, Director of the Southeast Asia Rivers Network. Dr. Barlow presented the problems from the perspective of the MRC, which collects data and makes recommendations to the four countries that created the Commission (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam). Unfortunately, China, whose development projects are the greatest threat to the river downstream, is not a member of the Commission. Dr. Barlow pointed out that the Chinese projects could be designed to release water in such a way as to maintain the natural flood

cycle of the river, but there is no sign that the Chinese intend to do so. Dr. Roberts explained how the Chinese dam projects, by interrupting or reducing the flood cycle of the river, may devastate the fisheries of the Tonle Sap on which large numbers of Cambodians depend on for food and livelihood. Roberts presented a satellite image showing the lake and its extensive floodplain which, when covered by inflow from the Mekong River and runoff within the basin, increases the area of the lake about five times. This allows the floodplain to supply nutrients and food to the fishes and other living things. Mr. Chainarong, the last panelist, discussed the concerns and activities of local villagers who may no longer accept without complaint their government's ill-conceived plans for economic development which place little value on local citizens lives, and simply acquiesce to the destructive plans of its large powerful neighbor to the north.

The seminar was useful in informing participants of the problems facing the several million people who live near the Mekong River and depend on it. A feeling of helplessness, however, was the prevailing mood at the end. Several distinguished speakers and participants in the audience lamented that they could not do more to inform decision-makers and influence their policies. The Siam Society could help by releasing to the media the conclusions from the seminar, particularly as no representatives of the media were present. It is obvious that the media representatives do not go out of their way to obtain information, however important—they seek news and excitement for readers. By the time the governments of China, Laos and Thailand agree to resume blasting of the channel and the villagers decide that the only recourse is to engage in public protests and make vivid news, it may be too late to do anything to stop the momentum of this destructive “development”.

—*Warren Y. Brockelman*