The Mighty Mekong, "Mother of Waters"

By Ted Osius

Naval veterans of the Vietnam War remember traveling in "swift boats," which draw only five feet and can glide into narrow, shallow tributaries in the fertile Mekong Delta. In Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, the sluggish Mekong River meets the Tonle Sap, so swollen in spring by melting snow that it backs up and runs in reverse. Further upstream, in Luang Phrabang, the light-chocolaty water runs fast, and shallow-draft boats must navigate carefully between sharp rocks. At dusk, the river turns pink and orange and green as kids swim and shriek along the riverbank. Red-and-gold peaked temple roofs of Laos' ancient imperial city are barely visible in the gathering dark. If you rise early, while the cocks crow and mist still hangs over the Mekong, you can watch long lines of monks walk barefoot along the still streets, carrying brass bowls suspended from their necks by saffron-colored cloth. Doors open and the women of the town emerge with steaming baskets of sticky rice. As each monk files by, a woman places a handful of rice in his bowl. Not a word is said; all is silent and magical.

Anyone who has experienced the Mekong's magic must worry now that dynamite – to improve river navigation – threatens the reefs and rapids between China's border and Luang Phrabang. China, Burma, Laos and Thailand agreed to destroy the rocks on this stretch of the world's eighth largest river, one that begins in the Himalayan snows and flows 4800 kilometers before easing into the sea. Eighty percent of the Mekong basin's more than 60 million inhabitants depend on water-related resources such as rice and fish. More than a third live below the official poverty level of about a dollar a day.

The Mekong's annual fish yield may be greater than 2 million metric tons; at $1 per kilogram, that is $2 billion per year – two percent of the world's freshwater fish catch. The Mekong basin supports over 500 species of fish, placing it among the top three rivers in the world (after the Amazon and Zaire) in terms of fish biodiversity. The reefs and rocks upstream from Luang Phrabang pose a threat to travelers and merchants, and cause several deaths each year. But no one knows how the dynamite will impact fishing, and the giant 600-pound catfish that live on the stretch between Thailand and Laos have already grown scarce.

China has already built two major hydroelectric dams on its portion of the upper Mekong; construction has begun on a third, and five to eleven more are planned for the next two decades. China wants to shift from its heavy dependence on coal to meet its growing energy needs, and hydropower is a clean alternative. China and its Southeast Asian neighbors want to expand and deepen ties between the economies of the Mekong Basin, and they are developing infrastructure to facilitate commerce. Transportation and power corridors will connect Kunming to Bangkok and Hanoi; roads and electric lines will tie central Thailand to Vietnam's central coast via Savannakhet; and they will link Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City via Phnom Penh. The region's governments want to improve the living standards of some of Asia's poorest, and to provide alternatives to subsistence farming, while at the same time converting national economies from centrally-planned to market-based. China wants a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN, and seeks durable economic links to the Lower Mekong countries.

Businesses are discovering, too, that sustainable development can be profitable. Leading industrialists in the China-U.S. Center for Sustainable Development recently launched three enterprises – in wind and solar energy and sustainable community design – that will help them tap into China's $15 billion per year

spending on clean energy and environmental goods and services. Countries in the Lower Mekong Basin would do well to follow this lead.

The dams, however, could bring about unintended consequences that could pose a long-term threat to these noble goals. Dams can prevent migratory fish from traveling to their traditional breeding grounds, and fish breeding and spawning in tropical Asia are directly related to the annual flood pulse. By "evening out" the water flow between the rainy and dry seasons, the dams reduce the life-giving ebb and flow. If China manages the water flow with attention to the needs of downstream fisheries, however, it could reduce the ecological effects of its dams. Hoping to strengthen cooperation between China and its downstream neighbors, Yunnan University's Asian International Rivers Center recommends preserving three Mekong tributaries as "ecological reserves" to reduce the dams' effect on fish breeding and spawning.

Some Southeast Asian communities work collaboratively with government and industry to manage shared bodies of water to benefit all stakeholders. In Laguna, site of the Philippines' largest freshwater lake and a source of drinking water for Metro Manila's 16 million people, communities, industry and local governments established river basin councils to coordinate resource protection activities, including raising awareness, mapping and restoring watersheds, and monitoring by citizens. With the assistance of the U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership (US-AEP), counterparts from Laguna Lake and America's Chesapeake Bay share experiences and best practices for strengthening their community-based environmental management programs. US-AEP and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also work with Royal Thai government agencies, citizen groups and private sector leaders to promote community involvement in restoring the Tha Chin River to good health. As in the Philippines, Chesapeake Bay organizations work with Thai counterparts to gain political support and mobilize citizen involvement.

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The Mekong River Commission (MRC), a regional body charged with addressing transboundary water issues, fosters exchange of information about the Mekong Basin. As a "dialogue partner" with the MRC, China now shares key water data on water levels and rainfall. This data helps downstream flood planning; during the rainy season flood forecasts are posted on the MRC website: www.mrcmekong.org. Working with universities, consulting firms, and individuals, the MRC can apply world-class, private sector expertise to identifying the unintended environmental and social consequences of dam operations and navigational "improvements." It can assist water resource managers balance competing demands for hydropower generation, navigation, flood control and habitat protection. The U.S. government seeks to strengthen the MRC's technical capacity, so that it can help governments and people in the region tackle the many challenges facing the Mekong. A strong MRC will help facilitate dialogue between the six countries sharing the Mekong, and in so doing promote regional stability and prosperity.

Thailand will play a critical role in the debate over the Mekong's future, since the Royal Thai government is more responsive than any other in the region to civil society concerns. Fearing danger to their livelihood, some villagers in northern Thailand have already voiced opposition to plans to dynamite the Mekong's reefs. Non-government and civil society organizations can also play a key role as partners with the MRC in flood management and mitigation. Community groups can help raise public awareness of flood-related issues, strengthen flood preparedness, and provide emergency relief after floods have occurred. While environmental threats to the "Mother of Waters" are great, together the people and nations that share its resources can cope with these challenges. Civil society and the private sector will play a pivotal role in this process. For generations to come, there can be magical moments along the Mekong River. ■

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