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Lower Mekong countries to alert each other on river developments

Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam have agreed on specific procedures to notify each other of any Mekong River projects undertaken in their own countries, that may have impacts on the neighbours. The agreement was signed off on 12 November in Ho Chi Minh City at the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Council, the ruling body of the Mekong River Commission.



Jim Holmes

Among the Mekong's many users: Morning traders at Cai Rang, Can Tho Province, Viet Nam.

The new agreement, known as the Preliminary Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement, prescribes a detailed format for notification to be carried out. The agreement also requires a six-month time frame for consultation between the countries affected, before a proposed development can begin.

While previous notifications have been made within the framework of the 1995 Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, the new agreement will ensure provision of all relevant information and a more uniform approach to follow-up procedures between the four countries.

This agreement on notification marks the second step in the series of rules on water utilization that member countries of the Mekong River Commission have been committed to developing since 1999, with the help of the Global Environment Facility through the World Bank. Funding of US\$11

million over a six-year schedule is provided towards this rule-making process, which is also developing a "Basin Modelling Package" that can provide information about the impacts of planned water use in the future.

On the current schedule, procedures for monitoring existing water uses will be agreed by the end of 2003, rules for the maintenance of flows by the end of 2004, and rules for water quality by the end of 2005. The first agreement in this series, the Procedures on Data and Information Exchange, were signed off at the previous Council meeting in November 2001.

The incoming Chairman of the Council, Vietnamese Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development H.E. Mr Le Huy Ngo, expressed his satisfaction that this second critical milestone of the Water Utilisation Programme had been met. He suggested that strengthened information exchange between all six riparian countries should be an important target for MRC in the near future.

First Vice-Prime Minister of Viet Nam opens 9th Council meeting



H.E. Nguyen Tan Dung (left) open the MRC Council meeting in Ho Chi Minh City.

The 9th Meeting of the Council of the Mekong River Commission was opened by H.E. Mr. Nguyen Tan Dung, the First Vice-Prime Minister of Viet Nam, at the Rex Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City on 11 November 2002.

Speaking at the opening, the First Vice-Prime Minister expressed his satisfaction that the Council meeting was taking place in a "very positive" atmosphere following the ASEAN Summit and associated meetings the previous week.

He spoke of the Mekong River as an "invaluable asset" to the people of the region, including Viet Nam's 20 million people in the Mekong Delta and Central Highlands area.

The First Vice-Prime Minister ended his speech with a promise: that the Vietnamese government would "do our utmost to contribute our part in turning the Commission to an example of an international river basin management organisation in one of the most high-potential and rapidly developed areas of the world."

**The text of the notification procedures is now available
on the MRC website, www.mrcmekong.org**

MRC Events

Linking high technology to local knowledge

Communities at high risk of flooding in Cambodia and Lao PDR will soon have access to flood warnings based on satellite data linked to their own local knowledge, with the help of US\$1.25 million provided by the USAID Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) towards the Mekong River Commission's new Flood Management Programme.

The USAID/OFDA signed over the funding on 16 December in a small ceremony at the MRC Secretariat, making it the first donor to sign a financial commitment to the MRC's Flood Management Programme. It is also the first time that US government aid has been committed directly to the Mekong River Commission since its establishment in 1995.

The aid from OFDA will be used to prepare "flood-referencing" tools with the help of partner organizations working directly with communities at high risk of flooding in Cambodia and Lao PDR. During the an automatic data transmission system

flood season, the MRC already broadcasts daily flood warnings on its website for 21 stations along the mainstream of the

partner organizations, high-risk communities will also be assisted to prepare for floods so far as possible, in order to minimise loss of life and property.

The complete Flood Management Programme, launched recently at the MRC 9th Council meeting in Ho Chi Minh City on 11-12 November, will cost US\$25 million over 6 years, and includes the establishment of a Regional Flood Management Centre to provide technical and coordination services to the four member countries in the Lower Mekong Basin. Flood forecasting and early warnings to people living in flood-prone areas are key outputs of the programme.

The MRC Flood Management Programme is the first such programme to adopt a regional approach, with participation from the four countries on the Lower Mekong. Many donors have expressed support for the new programme. The national governments will provide around \$4 million of the programme's costs, with the remaining funds being provided from international donors.



Mekong. This has been made possible by established by the Appropriate Hydrological Network Improvement Project (AHNIP), with support from AusAID.

The new funding means it will now be possible to work with people at the grassroots to ensure that they know the relationship between flood levels at the mainstream stations that are constantly monitored, and their local situation. Through the

CEO begins 2nd term

Mr Joern Kristensen has begun his second term as Chief Executive Officer of the Mekong River Commission.



Mr Kristensen, a Danish national, has extensive knowledge of the political, economic and cultural conditions in Southeast Asia from holding senior positions in NGOs and the United Nations administration in the region for over 20 years. He is a trained engineer in management and coordination

socio-economist with extensive experience in management and coordination of multi-sectoral development and humanitarian programmes.

Under the direction of Mr Kristensen since October 1999, the Secretariat has sharpened its focus on integrated river basin management through increased integration of its programme activities. Social development and environmental issues involving active public information have been given a higher priority, with a greater emphasis on the Commission becoming a reliable

source of scientific and technical information. Over the past two years, the Commission's international profile has increased greatly. In September this year, the Commission was awarded the Thiess Services International Riverprize in Brisbane, Australia, in recognition of its work in river basin management.

Donor support of the Mekong River Commission has increased, going from a low of US\$ 2 million in 1998, to an annual average of US\$ 17.5 million since 1999.

New institute for fisheries research



"Where they go, how they spawn...it was like a secret." Mr Sam Nuov, Cambodian deputy director of the Department of Fisheries (DoF), is talking about Mekong fish, and the difference made by the years of research.

The project for the management of the freshwater capture fisheries in Cambodia began in 1994 through the Mekong River Commission and its predecessor, the former Mekong Committee, working with government agencies in the countries of the Lower Basin. Theories about spawning seasons and locations were validated by the methodical efforts of fisheries professionals working with expert fishers at the grassroots. The information they gathered has filled in some pieces of a complex puzzle, showing fish that make international journeys of hundreds of miles to spawn, and wait out the dry season in deep pools near the Lao- Cambodian border. It has resulted in a yearly "closed season" being enforced on commercial fishers from June to October, and in key spawning areas being protected.

When the newly constructed Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute at the DoF opens its doors early next year, there will be, for the first time, a national institution in Cambodia dedicated to the professional research of fisheries, in its biological and socio-economic aspects.

Why here, and why now? The idea of such a research institute was first proposed in 1992, in the context of Danida support to Mekong fisheries research. The Great Lake, the Tonle Sap, is commonly regarded as the beating heart of the Mekong river system, and it seemed natural to base such an institute in Cambodia, with the expectation that the knowledge generated would be shared for fisheries management in all four Lower Mekong countries. While much has been learned about the true value of the fishery and the secret life of Mekong fishes, more is needed.

Mr Sam Nuov elaborates, "Our view is that these resources don't belong to some higher power - they belong to the people themselves. There is a need for

continued awareness-raising about the importance of the fishery, and continuing efforts made to resolve possible conflicts between commercial and small-scale fishers, and between countries. And there is still a lot we don't know about migration and spawning, and fish habitats."

After its inauguration in February 2003, around 20 DoF staff will move to the Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute. The institute will carry out multi-disciplinary research, with all staff being exposed to international standards of research through collaboration with partners including the MRC Fisheries Programme, ICLARM (The World Fish Centre) and others.

The Institute plans to involve staff from provincial and district levels, rural farmers and fishers and the fisheries community as much as possible in research planning and implementation, in order to ensure that projects undertaken are relevant, and that results are disseminated to those who can use the information. Priority areas for research will include fish habitats, migration, consumption, marketing and export of fisheries products, freshwater fishing gear, valuing of the fishery and resource management systems.

The Institute has been completed at a cost of around US\$450,000 with the support of the Cambodian government and Danida. Initial expressions of support for the start-up work have been made by donor agencies, but the fledgling institute is now seeking further assistance over the next three years to establish financial and administrative management systems that will enable it to proceed on a strong footing.

Border areas targeted for reforestation

Critical watershed areas on the country borders of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam will be targeted for reforestation efforts, with the help of a US\$4.5 million grant from the German government to the Mekong River Commission.

Under the agreement, the German government will provide the funds over five years for forest rehabilitation, training of government officers and participation of local communities in land-use planning.

The project for Integrated Forest Rehabilitation in the Lower Mekong Basin

will be carried out by MRC experts together with government counterpart agencies in each country.

Maintaining forest cover in upland watershed areas is crucial to preserving water quality and quantity downstream. The average deforestation rate

for the Lower Mekong countries between 1990 and 1995 was 1.6 per cent per annum - one of the highest rates in the world.

The German support through the Mekong River Commission will provide

a regional boost to recent reform efforts introduced by the governments of all four countries. The project builds on the earlier project activities of the Mekong River Commission for classification of all watersheds in the Lower Mekong Basin, and will benefit ethnic minority people in the border areas.

In the case of Viet Nam and Cambodia, the watershed areas of the Se San and Srepok rivers, which drain into the Mekong, are targeted for project activities. In Thailand, the watershed areas of the Kok and Ing rivers are targeted, and in Lao PDR, the Mounng Mai river watershed area.

Workshops and events

Regional training workshop on water use monitoring in the Lower Mekong Basin

7-8 January 2003

Intercontinental Hotel, Phnom Penh
Contact person: Khuon Komar,
komar@mrcmekong.org

Regional workshop on strategy development for an MRC integrated training programme

9-10 January 2003

Annex building, MRC Secretariat, Phnom Penh
Contact person: Heng Socheath,
socheath@mrcmekong.org

Regional workshop on transboundary diagnosis analysis

15-16 January 2003

Cambodiana Hotel, Phnom Penh
Contact person: Somsanith Nhyobouakong,
somsanith@mrcmekong.org

Regional workshop on MRC navigation strategy

22-23 January 2003

Cambodiana Hotel, Phnom Penh
Contact person: Lieven Geerinck,
geerinck@mrcmekong.org

WWF-MRC Energy Workshop: "The changing face of energy markets and implications for hydro-electricity development in the Lower Mekong Basin"

27-28 January 2003

Phnom Penh
Contact person: Marc Goichot,
marcg@bigpond.com.kh

Regional workshop on content of an MRC integrated training programme

30-31 January 2003

Location to be announced
Contact person: Heng Socheath,
socheath@mrcmekong.org

International Symposium on the Management of Large Rivers and Fisheries 2 (LARS2):

"Sustaining Livelihoods and Biodiversity in the New Millennium"

11-14 February 2003

Hotel Le Royal, Phnom Penh
Contact person: Jane Williams,
jane@mrcmekong.org

Regional workshop on basin modelling and knowledge base

28 February 2003

Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Contact person: Nguyen Tat Dac,
dac@mrcmekong.org

17th Meeting of the MRC Joint Committee

11-12 March 2003

Siem Reap, Cambodia
Contact person: Luong Thu Thuy,
thuy@mrcmekong.org

3rd World Water Forum

16-23 March 2003

Kyoto, Japan
Contact person on MRC participation: Terry Clayton, terry@mrcmekong.org

Possible Futures: A Mekong kaleidoscope at the 3rd World Water Forum

Vietnamese farmers say, "Water comes first, then fertilizer, hard work and good breeding." Respect for water as the source of life and plenty runs deep in the Mekong region. In thousands of fishing boats, riverfront shops and homes on and off the water small offerings are made, while major festivals centre round water rituals, including drenching of passers-by during New Year celebrations, floating of candles on the river, and boat racing.

The diversity of Mekong voices and images will feature in a unique international arena next year as a major delegation of Mekong region representatives attends the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan, from 16 to 23 March.

The Forum will bring together 8,000 people from around the world for eight days of discussion, presentations and cultural events, with the aim of moving water issues higher up the political and economic agendas of world leaders.

In the Mekong region, preparations have been under way for some months, with MRC officers attending regional dialogue meetings and providing input to various Forum activities since early 2001. The Commission will host two key sessions at the 3rd World Water Forum: on Integrated Water Resources Management and on Water Transport.

Integrated Water Resources Management"

Possible Futures for the Mekong"

**1230-1515 on Thursday, 20 March
Room Ohmi 2, Otsu Prince Hotel Convention Hall Ohmi Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture, Japan**

This 2 3/4 hour session will present the breadth and diversity of Mekong

planning issues and outline the challenge of dealing with trans-boundary issues of economic, environmental and social change. A special screening of a half-hour movie, "Mekong: The Mother" will feature in the session, and case studies will be presented of successful or promising



strategies that have been adopted in fisheries, flood management and other sectors. The approach is built around the key questions: What are the possible futures for the Mekong River Basin?

This is a key session for anyone interested in regional integration, environmental governance and ecological sustainability issues. Government officials from four or more Mekong countries will attend the session. It is a rare opportunity to hear the views of these planners and policy-makers in an informal, international setting.

International Water Transport "A Regional Navigation Strategy for the Mekong"

**1230-1515 Room J, 2nd floor
Kyoto International Convention Hall
Kyoto, Japan**

After decades of turmoil and isolation, the Mekong River Basin is about to undergo a rapid transformation in terms of economic and infrastructure development. In the rush to connect road, rail and air networks, there is a danger that the many benefits of international water transport may be neglected or overlooked entirely.

This session will present the benefits of navigation improvement on the Mekong, addressing:

- Freedom of navigation on the Mekong River system - social and economic benefits
- Enhancing regional trade, including improvement of port facilities and links with maritime transport
- Environment protection, including safety and transport of dangerous goods

The session provides a unique agenda-setting opportunity for cooperation between public and private sector interests in the area of water transport. Proposals for strategic navigation activities are well-developed and will be presented during the session, which builds on work earlier done in national and regional workshops conducted by the Commission in cooperation with government agencies in the four member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam.

Mekong Water Voices

The Water Voices Project is a world

Possible Futures: . . .

wide effort by the convenors of the 3rd World Water Forum to collect grassroots opinions and comments on water issues from people around the world. These 'voices' will be gathered in a database which will be used to help prepare an official Forum Statement, to be presented to an International Ministerial Conference on 22 to 23 March.

Cambodia has contributed the largest number of voices from any country in the region. There are now over 150 statements from farmers, fishers and other ordinary working people now on-line at the 3rd World Water Forum with the help of Mak Solieng, Environment and Natural Resources Planner from the MRC Secretariat. Meanwhile Phin Sopheap, a programme officer with the Commission's Environment Division, is working with the Japan-Asia Friendship Society to help collect voices from Viet Nam, Lao PDR and China.

- **All Mekong government participants are welcome to join the Mekong River Commission's 'Possible Futures' delegation to the 3rd World Water Forum. Further information and official invitations may be requested from the Coordinator for MRC participation at the Secretariat.**

Non-government and private sector participants may request invitations to attend the MRC sessions.

**Please contact the MRC Session Coordinator,
email: terry@mrcmekong.org**



Inland Fisheries - Lynchpin in the Mekong's future

By Joern Kristensen, CEO



Peter Degen

For the first time in 18 years, inland fisheries will be the subject of a major international conference - the Large Rivers Symposium II in Phnom Penh next February.

Appropriately, it is being held in the heart of the Mekong River Basin, where people on the floodplains rank among the highest consumers of fish and fish products in the world. In areas of the greatest abundance - around the Tonle Sap and in the Mekong Delta - annual fish consumption is about 60 kg per capita. Based largely on estimates of freshwater fish consumed in the Lower Mekong basin, it is thought that approximately 2 million tonnes of fish and other aquatic animals are caught per year, providing more than 75 per cent of animal protein intake in the diets of rural people in the river basin.

This focus on inland fisheries is timely. Though it is still one of the most productive and bio-diverse fisheries in the world, the Mekong river basin now faces a population boom, coupled with widespread rural sector underemployment in some countries. For landless and poorly educated people, going fishing is one of their very few livelihood options. The coming impacts of increased trade and industrial development, if not properly managed, will also affect the health of the aquatic

ecosystem.

In this situation, it may be tempting to view natural resources mainly in terms of the export income they can bring. Water resources in particular have been taken for granted in the past - especially where water shortage seems not to be an issue, as in the case of the Mekong, the 8th largest river in the world.

But the abundance of the Mekong fishery is closely tied to water availability. The annual flood cycle of the Mekong drives fish to spawn, and the floodplains provide rich feeding grounds for the fry that drift downstream with the current. A low flood year means there will be less fish to catch. Diverting too much water for irrigation, or blocking fish migrations, will also affect fish production.

The issue reflects a central challenge of the Mekong River Commission today: the need to assist its member countries of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam in making the transition to more modern and open economies - a path already set by their own governments - without destroying the environment

Inland Fisheries . . .

on which the livelihoods of the poorer citizens depend.

Inland fisheries around the world have traditionally been undervalued. This is in part due to the difficulty of estimating total catches when there are many small market points and a large part of the catch is for household consumption.

When the former Mekong Committee (the Commission's predecessor) began assessing the Mekong fishery in 1994, the official estimate of the annual inland fish catch in Cambodia was 50,000 to 75,000 tonnes. Today this figure has been revised upward to 500,000 tonnes. There is also a better understanding of the nutritional value of fish and fish-based products, which provide animal protein, vitamin A and calcium in the diets of most Mekong people.

The real importance of the Mekong fishery is that it is both meat and "milk" (the major source of calcium) in a region where one-third of the population lives below the poverty line. But fish alone cannot lift the growing Mekong population out of poverty, though it will

keep their situation from getting worse. While aquaculture production can supplement the amount of fish available, it is simply not possible to grow on farms the enormous tonnages naturally produced in the extensive river system.

Valuation won't make an immediate difference to the people catching and eating the fish. But it puts the governments of poorer countries, which are the ones that depend most on fish and forests for their livelihoods, in a better position to bargain with neighbouring countries regarding the use of water resources, and to make fully informed decisions about which development projects they will endorse in their own countries.

In the final analysis, not developing water resources, whether through increased river trade, hydropower development or agriculture, is not an option. The question is how such development is to take place. In an increasingly globalised economy, the sound management of inland fisheries may well be the lynchpin ensuring the system works for the most vulnerable of the Mekong's people.

Water Voices at www.worldwaterforum.org

Vietnamese fish farmer

Using wastewater for rice cultivation can reduce fertilizer and give high yield with good quality. Using wastewater for fish raising also saves on food for the fish. We only need to feed the fish with food in the rainy season, when wastewater is diluted. Fish yield is quite high and good quality.

Cambodian farmer

We live in Trapeang Stong Village, which is located in the remote area of Kampong Speu province. We can plant rice crop and some vegetables in the wet season. Normally, in the wet season, we have enough water to use in the household and for our rice field. But everything is changing from time to time like this year rainfall started late than normal year and caused no water for rice or other vegetable cultivation.

Thai student

The river takes care of you. Why you don't take care of it. How we can help the river? Why every one don't know about World Water Day? How do you promote? Water is life.

Lao father

Children at schools need to be taught on the source of the water, how it is important to lives and the ways how to use it effectively as well as the problem by the flood and the drought together with the reasons why.

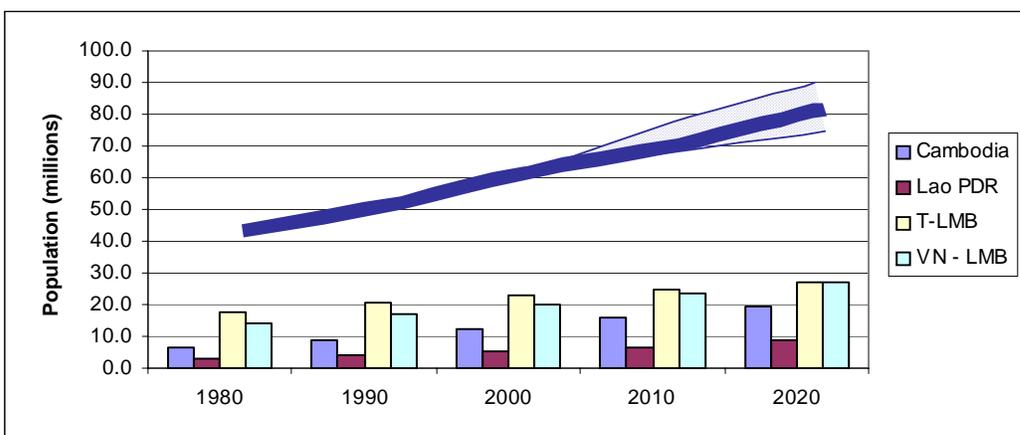


Fig. 1: Population growth 1980-2020 in the Lower Mekong Basin

Country	Population in the Lower Mekong Basin 1999/2000	Assessed consumption in per capita per year of all fisheries products. Average (range), kgs	Assessed total consumption of freshwater fish, fish products and aquatic animals (tonnes 1999/2000)
Cambodia total	10,775,000	47 (10-89)	508,000
Lao PDR total	5,087,000	26 (17-36)	133,000
N-E Thailand	22,439,000	35 (20-41)	795,000
Viet Nam – Mekong delta	17,958,000	33 (15-60)	597,000
TOTAL	56,259,000	36	2,033,000

Fig. 2: Estimated freshwater fish and aquatic product consumption in the Lower Mekong Basin

IMPORTANT LINKS

3rd World Water Forum Website
www.worldwaterforum.org

Registration
registration@water-forum3.com

Water Fair & Festival
fair@water-forum3.com

Water Voice Project
voice@waterforum3.com

MRC Coordinator for 3rd WWF
terry@mrckmekong.org

Note: The series on National Mekong Committees has been held over due to production deadlines. It will resume in the 2nd quarter issue of Mekong News, 2003.