

Contents

- ◆ Joint planning process launched for investment
- ◆ Planning for research collaboration
- ◆ Lower Mekong countries agree to share crucial data
- ◆ Making river travel safer on the Mekong
- ◆ First two Junior Riparian Professionals join MRC
- ◆ How clean is Mekong water?
- ◆ Events



During the flood season, the Mekong River Commission broadcasts daily flood forecasts on its website, www.mrcmekong.org

Mekong News is published quarterly by the Mekong River Commission Secretariat in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Please send comments, queries and ideas to: Communications Officer, Office of the Chief Executive MRC Secretariat, Phnom Penh.

Phone: (855-23) 720-979 ext 2017
Fax: (855-23) 720 -972
E-mail: delia@mrcmekong.org

Joint planning process launched for investment



Thai Deputy Preminister H.E. Dej Boonlong (3rd from right) with the Joint Committee members and Chief Executive of Mekong River Commission (MRC)

The Mekong River Commission launched a regional planning process on 15 February to boost economic growth while maintaining environmental sustainability in its four member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. The event, held at Le Meridien hotel in Bangkok, attracted over 150 people, including representatives of government agencies from the four countries, donors, academics and journalists from local and inter-national media.

In opening the event, Thai Deputy Prime Minister H.E. Mr Dej Boonlong affirmed the support of the Royal Thai Government at the highest political level for the Basin Development Plan, saying that it is deeply committed to “strong and meaningful cooperation” with other countries sharing the Mekong River. The BDP, he said, “will provide a strong basis for our four governments and the MRC in approaching donors and lending institutions. Approval by the MRC

Council will mean that the projects are important for development of the basin, environmentally balanced and acceptable to all Governments.”

The Basin Development Plan is the first regional investment planning initiative to be fully owned by the four Lower Mekong governments without the intervention of external agencies. It will identify and seek investment for high priority projects that have been assessed as being the best mix of activities to achieve sustainable development. Investment will be sought for projects in the key areas of irrigated agriculture; watershed



Joint planning....

management; fisheries; hydropower; waterborne transport as well as river works; water-related tourism and recreation; water supply for domestic and industrial use; as well as flood management.

The newest of MRC's three core programmes, the Basin Development Plan began activities in late 2001 with the establishment of an eight-person team at the Secretariat and the appointment of National BDP Coordinators, located at the National Mekong Committee in each member country.

Despite its recent start, the programme was initiated in the 1995 Agreement which established the Mekong River Commission in its present form. Under this Agreement, the Basin Development Plan (BDP) would be the general planning tool that the Joint Committee of the Mekong River Commission would use as a blueprint "to identify, categorise and prioritise the projects and programmes to be implemented at the basin level."

The BDP Team at the Secretariat provides the technical and administrative support base for coordination of the BDP. It supports the work of BDP units and working groups in the member countries. The national BDP units located at each National Mekong Committee represent the member countries, agencies and other stakeholders who are expected to benefit from the BDP.

Well-chosen investments into development are a pressing need in the Lower Mekong Basin. Rural areas in all the Mekong Basin countries rank among the poorest in the world, with an annual average per capita income of US\$200 to US\$400. Three-quarters of the Lower Basin residents are farmers and fishers, who are greatly dependent on the shared natural resources of the basin.

Planning for research collaboration

Planning for research collaboration was the focus of a January workshop jointly organized by the MRC and CGIAR, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

Participants in the workshop proposed an economic-hydrologic approach to water allocation, based on a foundation of broad stakeholder involvement and dialogue. Computer simulations can show the impacts of proposed activities in the basin, allowing economic valuations and comparisons to be made. Water allocation scenarios can then be proposed, which specify flow rates, timing, return periods and locations in the basin ensuring the best, most equitable outcomes for all users.

"Competing demands for limited water and land resources can lead to haphazard development, which is likely to

The initial planning process will cost US\$6.16 million over three years. Funding is provided through five donor governments: Australia, Denmark, Japan, Sweden and Switzerland.

Planning for the Basin Development Plan (BDP) will involve the National Mekong Committees in each country and a wide range of other government, private sector and civil society players. The programme has already begun its work with consultation meetings and national launching workshops in each country, from late 2001 to early 2002. Public participation will be sought through workshops, forums and interaction through new BDP web pages on the MRC website, www.mrcmekong.org

The Basin Development Plan will maintain strong links with regional initiatives of external agencies, including the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Programme, and ESCAP's 10-year Decade of the Mekong Programme.

exacerbate existing inequities and threaten fragile ecosystems," said Mark Rosegrant, senior research fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute, a CGIAR centre. "Through this workshop, we hope to develop a collaborative research programme that will assist in the sustainable management of these crucial resources."

The workshop, held from January 23 to 25 in Phnom Penh, brought together over 50 experts on Mekong-related issues to identify and discuss the most important issues for joint research. Participants came from government agencies in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam; from CGIAR centers including ICLARM (International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources), ICRAF (International Centre for Research in Agroforestry), IRRI (International Rice Research Institute) and IWMI (International Water Management Institute); from bilateral donor agencies; and from other organisations including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the World Wide Fund for Nature and OXFAM.

By the close of the three-day meeting, a number of research priorities had been proposed for further development through the networks established during the workshop between the MRC, its regional contacts and international researchers. Besides research into options for water resource allocation, workshop participants also proposed an assessment of risk arising through land use changes, using material from the MRC's Land Resources Inventory for Agricultural Development (1997-2000), and an investigation into how water flows affect household activities and livelihood strategies.

The MRC Secretariat in Phnom Penh will now establish focal points to propose and coordinate emerging research on these priority areas.

Lower Mekong countries agree to share crucial data

Cabinet ministers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam committed their countries to exchanging and sharing crucial data and information needed for joint management of the Lower Mekong Basin resources at the 8th meeting of MRC Council on 1 November 2001.

Under this agreement, a broad range of data and information will be exchanged among the MRC member countries, including material on water resources, topography, natural resources, agriculture, navigation and transport, flood management and mitigation, infrastructure, urbanisation, industrialisation, environment and ecology, administrative boundaries, socio-economic change and tourism.

The Procedures for Data and Information Exchange and Sharing were agreed to after a long series of workshops and negotiations between the four member countries, under MRC's Water Utilisation Programme, a \$16-million programme funded by the World Bank over five years. Built into the structure of the Water Utilisation Programme is a series of "milestones" over the five-year time frame, representing key achievements in the cooperation arrangements between Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. In agreeing to these Exchange and Sharing Procedures, the four countries have reached the first milestone.

At the November Council meeting which brought the Procedures into force, Cambodia Council Member, H.E. Khy Tainglim said that the decision "will send a strong political signal to the world on the strong commitment of the MRC member countries to scrupulously implement the 1995 Mekong Agreement."

The adoption of the Procedures highlights the unique strength of the Mekong River Commission's cooperation arrangements among the four countries. While programmes are mandated from the highest political levels, they are carried out through very concrete working arrangements between the technical and administrative levels of the four governments.

The flood forecasting, carried out through the rainy season of 2001, is a good example of information-sharing. Gauge readers, administrators and technical experts from four countries took daily readings which were sent to a national data collection centre in each country, and to the MRC Secretariat in Phnom Penh every morning. Here, the information was integrated into a daily flood report that went out immediately to an email list of around 100 agencies, government departments and individuals, as well as being posted on the MRC website.

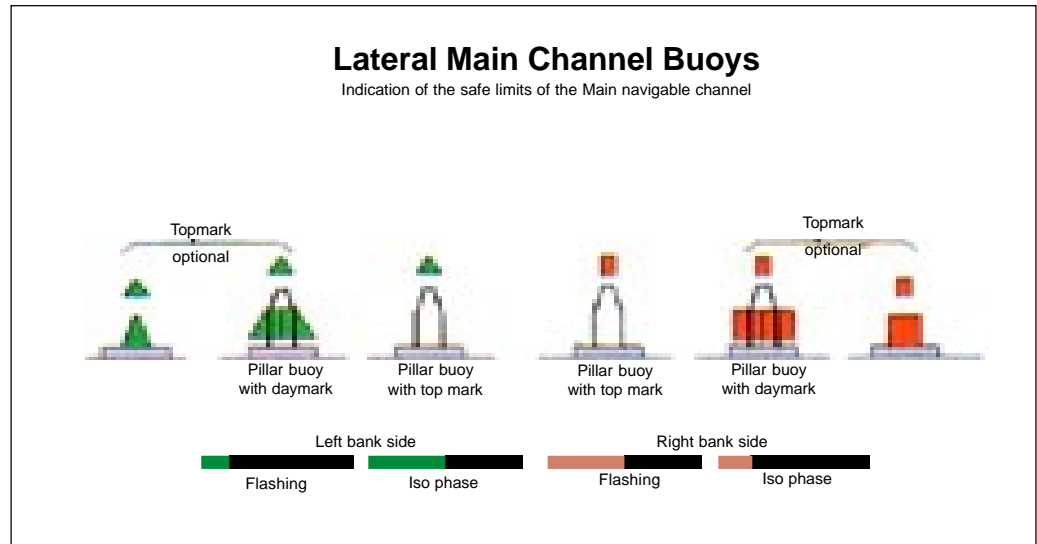
Other milestones under the Water Utilisation Programme include procedures for monitoring existing water uses - expected by the end of 2003 - and the final one, rules for water quality, by the end of 2005.

The screenshot shows the MRC website interface. At the top is the MRC logo and a navigation bar with links: About MRC, Mekong Basin, Programmes, Information Resources, Media, Home. Below this is a sidebar menu with links: Newsletter, MRC Publications, River Information, Maps, Mekonginfo, Links to other sites. The main content area features a 'River Monitoring Overview' table with columns for Overview, Station list, and Latest News... The table lists: Upper Mekong (Map Centre, About this site), Central Mekong (Partners, New features), Lower Mekong (Weather, Email comments), and Tabular data (Rainfall data, Disclaimer). Below the table is a timestamp: 'This page was last updated on Monday, 04 March, 2002 15:52'. A map of the Mekong basin is shown with a zoomable area. Below the map is a 'Station list' section with a legend and a list of 17 stations: Chiang Saen, Luang Prabang, Chiang Khan, Vientiane, Nongkhai, Paksane, Nakhon Phanom, Thakhek, Mukdahan, Savannakhet, Khong Chiam, Ubon (Nam Mun), Pakse, Stung Treng, Kratie, Kompong Cham, Phnom Penh (Bassac), Phnom Penh Port, Koh Khel, Neak Luong, Prek Kdam, Tan Chau, and Chau Doc. At the bottom, a blue banner reads: 'Seven-day forecasts of river levels updated daily on the MRC Website, www.mrcmekong.org'.

Making river travel safer on the Mekong

Aids to navigation (ATN) such as buoys and beacons are vital elements for safe passage. But the application of different systems on the same river causes accidents, endangers the lives of passengers and crew, and hampers cross-border river and maritime transport. Until October 2001, there were six different systems for navigation channel markers along the Greater Mekong River. Each Mekong country had its own system.

In October 2001, after national and regional consultations supported by the Mekong River Commission and UN-ESCAP, the six countries agreed to harmonise their systems. Countries upstream of the Khone Waterfalls - China, Lao PDR, Myanmar and



Thailand - adopted MRC/ ESCAP recommendations for ATN on the Upper Mekong. The two Lower Mekong countries Cambodia and Viet

Nam agreed in principle to use the international IALA/SIGNI system (International Association of Lighthouse Authorities).

Events

Annual Flood Forum, 23-24 April 2002

Lower Mekong countries will get ready for the 2002 flood season with an Annual Flood Forum on 23-24 April at the Cambodiana Hotel in Phnom Penh. The forum, convened by the Mekong River Commission, will provide a platform for about 100 participants from government line agencies, disaster management organisations and civil society organisations in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam to exchange information on flood preparedness measures. Participants will cooperate to map out their planned activities to ensure the best possible coordination of flood management, including relief activities, in the 2002 flood season.

Large Rivers Symposium, 11-14 February 2003

Large rivers provide substantial social and economic benefits to many people, particularly in developing or industrialising regions. Fisheries in

wetlands, provide a source of food, employment and/or income that is crucial to sustaining the livelihoods of multitudes of people, particularly the rural poor.

Yet rivers and their social, cultural, economic and ecological importance, remain grossly neglected or undervalued. Production from inland fisheries is thought to be two to five times the officially reported value.

An International Large Rivers Symposium was held in Canada in 1985. This event drew attention to the study of large rivers and the need to restore damaged river ecosystems. A

second international symposium is now being organized by the Mekong River Commission and the Cambodian Department of Fisheries, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (FAO), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the World Conservation Union (IUCN), on 11-14 February 2003 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Registrations will be accepted from April, and abstracts of papers can be submitted up to 15 June 2002.

For more information, please see the symposium website www.lars2.org or contact:

Chris Barlow, LARS2 Coordinator

Mekong River Commission

P.O. Box 1112

Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Email: barlow@mrcmekong.org

Robin L. Welcomme, Chairman

Scientific Committee Renewable Resources Assessment Group

Imperial College

University of London

8 Prince's Gardens

London, United Kingdom SW7 2QA

Email: welcomme@dial.pipex.com



First two Junior Riparian Professionals join MRC

Two new faces at the MRC Secretariat signal the start of the Junior Riparian Professional Programme. Ms Worawan Sukraroeek from Thailand, and Mr To Quang Toan from Viet Nam, joined the Secretariat in February for a two- to three-year internship. During their time with MRC, the Junior Riparian Professionals will work with different programmes to gain hands-on experience and understanding of the broad issues concerning river basin management.

Ms Worawan, 27, is a biologist with an MSc in Marine Science from Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. Part of her work at the Thai Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment over the past three years involved reviewing implementation procedures for Agenda 21, and screening of project applications routed through the ministry, for Global Environment Facility (GEF) funding.

Ms Worawan is no stranger to MRC. Her previous job also involved providing broad logistic and administrative support to consultants working on an MRC Pilot Study of Water Resources and Environment in northern Thailand, including meeting with farmer groups and liaising with them in their own language.

Working at the Secretariat, she said, is “a chance to advance my knowledge regarding sustainable development in this region. For sound river basin management, we need to have strong academic data, together with plenty of effective projects, and work on raising people’s awareness in the community.”

Mr Toan, 32, is a hydraulic engineer with a Master’s degree from IHE Delft in the Netherlands. Before joining the Secretariat, he worked as a Researcher for the Southern Institute of Water Resources Research in Ho Chi Minh



City, Viet Nam.

Mr Toan has been involved in several land and water resources development and management projects. He is especially interested in investigating soil reclamation methods with a view to their long-term impacts. These involve appropriate flood control measures in the Mekong Delta and use of hydraulic models for flood simulation.

Mr Toan has been following closely the discussion about minimum flow and water quality threshold levels needed along the Mekong. One of his recent projects has been carrying out an investigation of Mekong-related flooding upstream of the East Vaico River in Tay Ninh province. He was also responsible for EIA of the Balai irrigation project, where the first sluice gate is being constructed, close to one of the Mekong’s nine river mouths at the Delta.

He sees his time at the MRC as a good opportunity to learn more about water resource development issues in a broader perspective. “I’m very happy to rotate among the three core programmes of MRC, because for good

river basin management we need to have broad knowledge, not only about hydraulics,” he said.

MRC Chief Executive Mr Joern Kristensen commended the start of the Junior Riparian Programme, saying, “Through this programme, in time the Lower Mekong region will have an established corps of professionals with a wholistic understanding of joint river basin management. The working experience that they will share augurs well for relationships of the future. I am proud to say that the MRC is doing its part in developing the river basin managers of tomorrow.”

For now, both JRPs are settling into Phnom Penh as well as into their new roles, and getting used to the international environment of the MRC Secretariat. They will soon be joined by colleagues from Lao PDR and Cambodia.

The JRP Programme is supported by the Swedish government through SIDA under the MRC Capacity Building Programme, and is designed to promote competence in river basin management and to strengthen regional networking for effective cooperation in the Mekong basin region.

How clean is Mekong water?

Water quality in the mainstream of the Mekong is usually expected to be good because the large amount of water in the river - eighth-largest in the world in terms of water flow - dilutes any effluents to insignificant levels. Cities along the Mekong are generally small, and industrial development is still at a relatively low level - reasons why industrial pollution is not yet a problem.

The MRC has been collecting water quality data since 1985. There are 98 sampling sites at mainstream and tributary locations in the Lower Mekong Basin, where monthly water samples are taken. The data indicate that water quality in the Mekong is still

good. However, as the basin population increases and industry concerns such as data develops, the water quality sampling network needs to be improved.

Under its Environment Programme, MRC began, in the year 2000, a process of modernising the water quality monitoring network (WQMN). This process will address a number of reliability, quality assurance and control in laboratory procedures, and network revision. The WQMN modernisation will re-examine the location and number of sampling sites, sampling methods, sampling frequency, and parameters. Some of the issues can be addressed relatively quickly and easily, while others, such as upgrading

of laboratories will take longer.

A Regional Water Quality Workshop in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR in October 2001 brought together key government agencies from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam to provide information on the modernisation process to participating agencies, and seek their guidance and advice on future operations of the water quality monitoring network.

Major concerns with water quality at present are the transport of sediment from bank and catchment erosion, and contamination from agro-chemicals such as pesticides and fertilisers. The WQMN modernisation process will address these concerns.

MRC publications

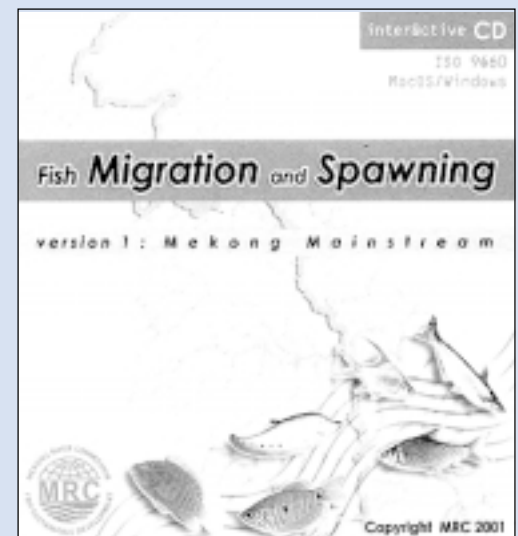
A new series of **MRC Technical Papers** will be available in April 2002:

- Deep pools as dry season fish habitats in the Mekong
- River basin financial analysis and risk assessment of selected aquaculture and fishery activities in the Mekong Basin
- Mekong giant fish species: On their management and biology
- Status of the Mekong *Pangasianodon hypophthalmus* resources with special reference to the stock shared between Cambodia and Viet Nam
- Status of *Pangasiid* aquaculture in Viet Nam.

Mekong Conference Series No. 2: Proceedings of the 4th Technical Symposium on Mekong Fisheries

The MRC's new **Hydropower Strategy** is available on-line at www.mrcmekong.org

Knowledge about migration routes, timing of fish migrations, and location of spawning areas is crucial for assessing impacts of water management projects as well as for fisheries management in floodplain river systems. A CD-Rom on **Fish Migration and Spawning** is now available with results of a survey that interviewed 355 fishers in 113 locations in the Lower Mekong Basin. US\$20 not including postage.



For all products, please contact:
Documentation Center,
MRC Secretariat
Phone: (855-23) 720-972
Fax : (855-23) 720-972
E-mail: mrcs@mrcmekong.org