

Mekong News

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

Mekong River Commission Secretariat moves into new riverside home



Vincent Gaugier

The new MRC Secretariat in Vientiane has been fully operational for two months.

At last the boxes are unpacked and it's business as usual again for the Mekong River Commission Secretariat; only the place has changed.

In mid-June the MRC staff took up occupancy in a brand new building built on the banks of the Mekong River in Vientiane, Lao PDR, which will be home for the next five years. Purpose built for the MRC, the graceful white building with its traditional design has a stunning view of the river stretching across to fellow member country Thailand.

The move took place over a month, with

staff beginning to pack up their Phnom Penh offices from mid-May and shipping starting shortly after that. Staff commenced moving into the building from June 21, and on July 1 the doors opened officially to the public.

Officer-in-Charge at the time of the relocation, Dr Dao Trong Tu welcomed the staff to the new building on June 22, and commented on how well the relocation operation had gone.

He thanked the Lao and Cambodian Governments for all their help in making the move as trouble free as possible, while extending his gratitude to the donors who

supported the set up of the building. In addition he added special thanks to the Thai Government, through the Thai National Mekong Committee, which has provided the new office furniture for the Secretariat building and to the Viet Nam National Mekong Committee which provided funds to support the completion of the building.

Dr Tu said that prior to the move, the MRC had tried to mitigate staff losses to ensure that the work of the programmes was not unduly disrupted. Continued smooth running of the MRC's ongoing programme implementation had been further supported by the on-the-job training of the first intake of Lao support staff

in Phnom Penh, alongside their Cambodian counterparts, prior to relocation. In addition a number of Cambodian support staff had moved to Lao PDR for a period of up to one year to help train the second batch of support staff in order to further reduce the impact of changing personnel.

"At the professional level very few people decided not to relocate, which is very pleasing and overall we managed to keep the inevitable disruptions of such a move to a minimum," Dr Tu said.

Over coming months, the MRCS will keep hiring local, regional and international professional and support staff, to bring its total employee figure to around 120.

The decision to rotate the location of the MRC Secretariat between Phnom Penh and Vientiane was made following the signing of the 1993 Agreement, resulting in the Secretariat relocating from Bangkok to Phnom Penh in 1998. Following its five years in Phnom Penh, the Secretariat moved to Vientiane for the next five-year period.

The Vientiane building has been provided by the Government of Lao PDR. The new headquarters agreement was formalised in a signing ceremony in Vientiane on June 14, 2003 attended by Deputy Prime Minister of Lao PDR H.E. Asang Laoly.



Thailand provided new office furniture.

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Farewell to Phnom Penh



Chhoy Pisei

H.E. Mr Lim Kean Hor addresses the crowd, accepts a gift from Dr Dao Trong Tu (left) and Mr Mok Mareth, then chats to Australian Ambassador H.E. Lisa Filipetti and greets Alternate Joint Committee member for Lao PDR Mr Boriboun Sanasisane.

The MRC entertained a host of guests including ministers from the Royal Cambodian Government, donors, local NGO representatives and ambassadors at a farewell function for the MRC Secretariat in Phnom Penh on May 27.

Officer-in-Charge at the time Dr Dao Trong Tu told the assembled crowd how grateful the MRC Secretariat was to the Cambodian Government, donors, partners and supporters for the generous and continued support the MRC Secretariat had received, saying it could not have been able to undertake the work it had achieved over the past five years without them.

“All of our staff have been made to feel extremely welcome in this country. We have at all times received the highest level of cooperation from the many government agencies we have worked with regularly,” he told guests.

“Relocating an organisation like MRC is a complex task. The assistance and support of a number of Cambodian authorities has facilitated what will be a very smooth relocation process.”

H.E. Mr Lim Kean Hor, Minister of Water Resources and Meteorology, Chairman of the MRC Council for 2003/2004 and Chairman of the Cambodia National Mekong Committee said the Government had been proud to host the Secretariat at such an important time in its development.

“The Mekong River Commission is now fully implementing the 1995 Agreement

for sustainable development,” he said.

“The development of the basin development planning process is taking place through the Basin Development Plan, measures to ensure the ecological balance of the region are being developed through the Environment Programme, rules for water sharing continue to be established through the Water Utilisation Programme and Flood Management and Mitigation is now a dedicated core programme in its own right.

“In addition, key areas of sectoral interest, namely fisheries, water resource management, and agriculture irrigation and forestry, are operational.”

As current chairman of the MRC Council, Mr Lim Kean Hor said he was, personally, very proud of the establishment of the Flood Management and Mitigation Programme in particular. Cambodia was committed to the successful implementation of this programme and was delighted to be the host of the Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Centre to be established in Phnom Penh.

He added that Cambodia’s participation and contribution to MRC would continue to strengthen.

Following the speeches, guests enjoyed a traditional performance by dancers from the Cambodian Fine Arts Department and had time to catch up with contacts and counterparts. ~

Five-year milestones

The past five years spent in Phnom Penh have been historically significant for the MRC. In this time a new structure and programme approach for the organisation has been forged and implemented.

Donor support that was at a low point in the late 1990s is now at an all time high.

All four countries are active participants in ongoing liaison with donors and with the upstream dialogue partners China and Myanmar.

In 2002, Cambodia hosted the Second Symposium on Large Rivers for Fisheries (LARS2), which launched the MRC onto

the international stage and to the global network of world class fisheries knowledge.

In 2002 MRC was recognised internationally for its river basin management with the award of the Thiess Services International River Prize for excellence in river basin management, in Brisbane, Australia. This prize money was used to involve all children in the Mekong Region in an art competition.

In 2003, the MRC Fisheries programme with the support of Danida; and the Department of Fisheries, Cambodia opened the Inland Fisheries Research Development Institute in Phnom Penh.

This institute will continue to monitor the Mekong fishery and contribute to regional initiatives that will help grow and safeguard its productivity in the future.

In November 2003 the MRC Joint Committee approved a new six-year Navigation Programme, which will implement a strategy agreed upon by the four riparian members.

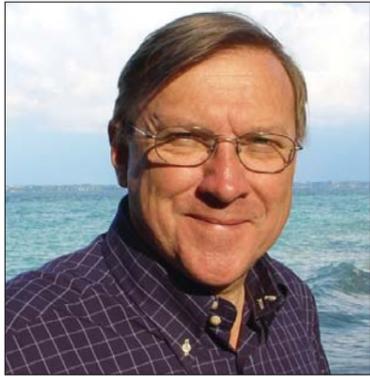
The Water Utilisation Programme (WUP) saw the signing of two new procedures on water use, completing its schedule of agreements on procedural rules and paving the way for two upcoming technical agreements on rules for water quality and quantity.

In July this year the MRC established a Flood Management and Mitigation Programme, which will become one of its new core programmes and will be housed in a new Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Centre in Phnom Penh. ~



The Cambodian HQ saw many successes.

Meet the MRC's new CEO



On August 9, Dr Olivier Cogels took over as Chief Executive Officer of the Mekong River Commission. We asked Dr Cogels to tell us a little about himself and share some of his thoughts on his new role

Q: Firstly could you tell us something about your background?

I am a Belgian citizen and studied at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium where I gained a MSc in Land and Water Engineering and a PhD in Hydrodynamics and Water Resources Management. I also did a post-doctorate at the University of California, Davis. Following an academic career, I founded my own remote sensing and GIS company and then served as the Resident Representative of the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC) in Senegal, before joining the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome 2002. Before accepting this new position I was Programme Manager of the International Programme on Technology and Research

in Irrigation and Drainage (IPTRID) and Executive Director of the IPTRID Secretariat.

Over my career in international consultancy, project management, fund raising and policy development, I have worked in Africa, Asia and South America with organisations including the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNESCO, the World Bank and the European Space Agency.

Q: What was it about the position of CEO at the MRC that attracted you to apply for this position?

I believe that this job offers the opportunity to make a real impact on socio-economic development and poverty reduction. Furthermore, for a water management specialist, the possibility of contributing to sustainable development of one of the largest and most beautiful rivers in the world is, of course, very attractive.

Q: What do you see as the biggest challenges facing this region?

The Mekong region still suffers from high levels of poverty, while its population continues to grow fast. The main challenge is to succeed in enabling socio-economic development in order to increase the welfare of tens of millions of people, without damaging the environment and while facilitating good understanding and friendship between the countries. The Mekong River offers real potential for the development of agriculture, fisheries, energy production, navigation, etc, but this

is not without risks. Equitable, sustainable and peaceful use of the Mekong waters can only be reached through increased dialogue and cooperation between all countries that share the river, who may have different priorities and interests.

Q: And what role do you think the MRCS can play in meeting them?

The MRCS has an advisory role, both at strategic and operational levels. It is an organisation at the service of its member countries. The Secretariat can greatly facilitate cooperation and integrated development in the river basin through providing a number of services. One is the delivery of accurate and reliable information to planners and policy-makers. Another is to help countries to elaborate and implement sound development strategies. A third service is to provide technical advice on specific issues in the various sectors involved. Finally, the Commission itself provides a platform for dialogue and negotiation.

Q: What would you say are your initial goals?

In the very short term, we will ensure that the Secretariat rapidly regains its full operational status and effectiveness after its recent move from Phnom Penh to Vientiane. We will then focus on the further implementation of the Basin Development Plan through a participatory approach involving the National Mekong Committees. I also see it as important to continue to develop the necessary rules and procedures for equitable and sustainable

use of the river. An important objective would also be to continue to stimulate concrete cooperation with the MRC's dialogue partners China and Myanmar.

Q: The MRC draws its staff from many countries and many disciplines, what benefits do you feel this brings to the region?

Maintaining the balance of the cultural and technical diversity that is present within the MRC requires respect for cultural difference. Ultimately the goal of the MRC is to achieve a level of riparianisation that ensures long term sustainability, but it will always be to the MRC's advantage to continue to develop the expertise within the region whilst drawing from the best quality experience available from around the globe. This will ensure continued growth of the MRC and the region and provide a highly creative approach to the design of solutions to the challenges that the region will continue to face.

Q: On a personal note, what is it that appeals to you about SE Asia and what do you think you will enjoy about your new life in Vientiane?

I think one of the highlights of being in Vientiane will be its proximity to the Mekong River. I am looking forward to being able to observe its changing nature on a daily basis. Undoubtedly, I will enjoy the friendliness and hospitality of the people, the extraordinary beauty of the landscapes and, last but not least, the delicious food, which is one aspect of such a rich culture. ~

Chinese data brings early flood warning

For the second year running daily water level figures from China are helping MRC hydrologists monitor water levels and provide the data to relevant regional agencies so they can issue more timely flood warnings this wet season.

But this year the stations will be generating this information automatically, following an upgrade programme carried out as part of the AusAID-funded Appropriate Hydrological Network Improvement Project (AHNIP) this year.

Work began early this year to bring all the stations up to top operational standards and by early June they were fully commissioned and ready for the upcoming wet season. Now the two hydrological stations at Manan, on the mainstream of the Lancang and on a major tributary at

Jinghong near the Lao border, are transmitting hydro-meteorological data from Kunming Data Centre via telemetry every day between June 15 and October 15. The centre will provide one 24-hourly water level and two 12-hourly rainfall readings.

The idea behind this co-operation is to obtain early warning of potential floods so those concerned can take action within their local communities and avoid disaster.

This data sharing agreement was formalised in March, 2003, when the MRCS and representatives from the Chinese government signed an Agreement to monitor water levels from the two hydrological stations in China.

Peter Clews, AHNIP's Australian

Consultant Team Leader explained that the AusAID-funded AHNIP project started in 2001 and had established 18 monitoring stations and five national data-handling centres around the region as well as a regional data centre in the MRCS.

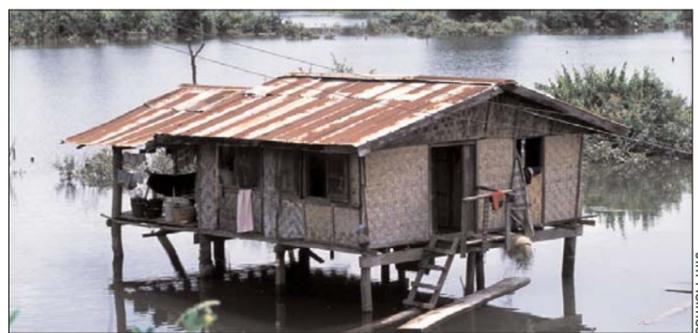
All these stations automatically read the water levels at the specified times and then transmit the data to the National Data Centres and the MRC Secretariat by telemetry on a real time basis.

"Our job is to facilitate the gathering of data then pass it on to those who can use it to act as an early warning system. As the Chinese stations are upstream knowledge of changes in water level can give some prior warning to those in the lower reaches of the basin," Mr Clews said. Monthly data files downloaded from

the loggers are e-mailed to the MRC Secretariat at the end of each month, explains Technical Support Division Programme Officer Thanongdeth Insisiengmay.

Mr Thanongdeth says that data are sent from the two stations to Kunming via PSTN (landline telephone) with satellite backup. The Kunming Data Centre then automatically transfers the data (using data management software called HYDSYS) by e-mail to the MRCS. "Graphical presentation will later be included in the automation process once a series of data are collected," he added.

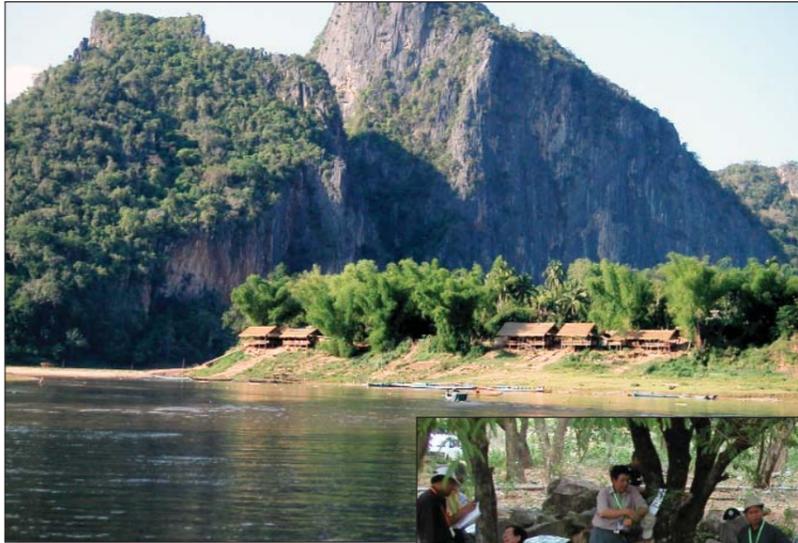
AHNIP is now building a new station 6km south of the China Lao PDR border at Houakhong, which will monitor the river immediately as it enters Lao PDR. ~



Early warning of possible floods can help local people prepare to cope.

Jim Holmes

Study tour opens up new horizons for basin development planners



In May 2004 three representatives from each of the four member countries joined MRC Basin Development Plan experts on the Mekong River Basin Study Tour - the fourth and final module in the basin development planning training programme.

The 11-day tour took the 12 participants through Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam with the aim of introducing them to the diversity the basin. The study tour was financed by the AusAID-funded MRC-Murray-Darling Basin Commission Strategic Liaison Programme that concludes in October this year.

It was a packed schedule, explained Muanpong Juntopas the Socio-Economist of the MRC Basin Development Plan (BDP) team. "Our days stretched from 6am to 8pm and we travelled by plane, boat, bus and by foot as we visited many areas of the basin," she said.

The participants visited Luang Prabang,

inland waterways transport and light industry. Issues examined included pollution, reduced water flows, wastewater treatment, future demands from tourism, flood protection control and salinity.

These training modules seek to develop the understanding and skills of the BDP team both at the MRC Secretariat and at the four National Mekong Committee Secretariats. The main objective of the Mekong Basin Study tour was to help the participants from the four countries understand the

Nam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR. The same people have continued wherever possible and, as a consequence, the programme is seen as a great step in capacity building. Government officials from the countries get to meet their counterparts who are directly involved in basin development planning, something they rarely get the chance to do.

The Basin Development Planning Programme is a participatory one and concentrates on stakeholder involvement; planning and enhancing capacity. It aims to examine different ecosystems in different places and help national representatives to see how important they are to the people who live within the basin and cultivate that understanding.

The team participants said they felt this trip achieved two very important things. They gained a basin-wide perspective of the river and they also came to realise the difference between life upstream and downstream.

"We took government officials from capital cities and brought them into village houses to talk to local people who depend on local resources, it was extremely valuable for their understanding. Seeing something for yourself is often ten times more useful than reading reports," Ms Juntopas said

During the tour, think tank sessions helped participants synthesise their ideas and there was constructive discussion on a number of regional planning issues.

The BDP team sees this as a good omen for the future. "If planners can sit together and discuss sensitive issues it has to help improve the decision-making processes in each country through better understanding of each other's concerns," they said. ~



Tour participants take a break in one of the sites they visited in the countryside.

Lao PDR, where they looked at tourism, agriculture, micro hydropower generation and fisheries production, while in Vientiane they studied issues such as commercial and industrial water use.

In Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, they examined irrigated agriculture and aquaculture and the influence of the Pak Mun dam. In Cambodia they gained an overview of agriculture, navigation and cross border trade fisheries, and in Chau Doc, Viet Nam they focused on aquaculture (including shrimp production)

important links between river basin communities and the river, in particular the importance of the social and economic development of the river as a whole.

It is hoped this will add a level of understanding to the knowledge they apply to the planning of river development, including issues such as decision-making processes, stakeholder involvement and dealing with conflict.

Previous modules have involved the 12 participants in training sessions held in Viet

Award for Mekong River Awareness Kit

The Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRC) and Hatfield Consultants Ltd were named as finalists for the 2004 Canadian Awards for International Cooperation last month. The awards recognise achievements in supporting sustainable development and social programmes to reduce poverty in developing countries.

Two government agencies sponsor the awards: the Canadian International Development Agency and the Canadian



Jim Holmes

Manufacturer's and Exporter's Association.

Hatfield and the MRC received the runner-up designation for the Mark Drake Award Recognising Excellence in Communicating International Cooperation Issues for the project entitled Mekong River Awareness Kit, which was developed under the Environmental Training Programme Block II of the Environment Programme of the MRC from January 2002 to February 2003.

The River Awareness Kit itself is an educational interactive teaching tool, designed to communicate environmental awareness issues to the people of the Greater Mekong Region, and to help protect one of the great rivers of the world. The overall objective of the kit is to

promote a better understanding of Mekong River science issues, in an interactive and user-friendly format.

This format has proved to be a success with river professionals in the riparian countries, and the kit has also been embraced by organisations like the Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal, Canada, a division of the United Nations Environment Programme.

Dr David Coates Environmental Affairs Officer, inland waters, at the Convention says he has distributed the kit widely amongst his colleagues and it was now being accessed by the Parties to the Convention (187 countries plus the European Union). "It is a major reference source in our library here in Montreal and

we are also now using it as source material for public education and awareness programmes in Canada, working with local NGOs," Dr Coates said.

The project's original activities included the development of the Mekong River Awareness Kit interactive CD-ROM, a project website, Internet Discussion Board, a three-month self-study period, and a series of demonstration and evaluation workshops.

The aim was to contribute to poverty reduction through providing education, supporting improved environmental management, and promoting enhanced governance as well as illustrating how humans impact on sensitive ecosystems around the world. ~

Wetland Biodiversity Programme to run in four countries

The Mekong River Commission has joined forces with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to launch a new \$30 million programme to promote conservation and sustainable use of the biodiversity of wetlands in the Lower Mekong Basin.

Working in partnership with the Governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam as well as civil society organisations, NGOs and rural people, the Mekong River Basin Wetland Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) is the first of its kind to undertake a combination of assessments, dialogues and pilot interventions addressing a range of ecological, economic and social challenges in the region.

At a signing ceremony held on July 19 in Vientiane the Governments were represented by HE Dr Ty Phommasack from Lao PDR, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry; HE Mr Suwit Khunkitti, Thailand's Minister of Natural Resources and Environment and HE Mr Chhann Sophan, Secretary of State for Ministry of Environment, Cambodia; together with UNDP Resident Representative Mr Finn Reske-Nielsen, MRCS Officer-in-Charge at the time Dr Chumnam Pongsri and IUCN Regional Director for Asia Ms Aban Marker Kabraji.

The bulk of the programme's funding (US\$20 million) has come from the Global

Environment Facility (GEF) through UNDP, the Royal Netherlands Government, the Mekong River Commission and other donors. The programme will seek a further US\$10 million funding through aid agencies, NGOs and the private sector after it begins operation.

IUCN says it will collaborate with the riparian governments to implement conservation, biodiversity and community management programmes through the national offices and through four distinctly different demonstration sites in each country. Developing management approaches and action plans, the programme will support planning at community, provincial, national and regional levels.

This experience and information generated will be fed into the Mekong River Commission's Basin Development Plan and subsequently contribute to the development of agreements on water use.

In addition to specialist knowledge on possible environmental, socio-economic impacts of potential changes in river flows, the role of the MRC will provide a mechanism for information exchange, integration and mapping of socio-economic and biophysical resources to support planning and decision making in the region.

This will form a critical link bridging the gap between grass-roots policy implementation and the highest level of

policy making through the MRC Joint Committee and MRC Council.

"Wetland research and preservation has always been an integral part of MRC policy and we are acutely aware of the balance that needs to be maintained between societal and economic needs and environmental requirements. This is our mandate and this is why the MRC is delighted to be a major partner in this programme," Dr Chumnam told the guests at the signing ceremony.

"We anticipate that the technical expertise provided by our specialists and our formal links to government, through the National Mekong Committees, the MRC Council and the Joint Committee, will play a vital role in the success of this programme."

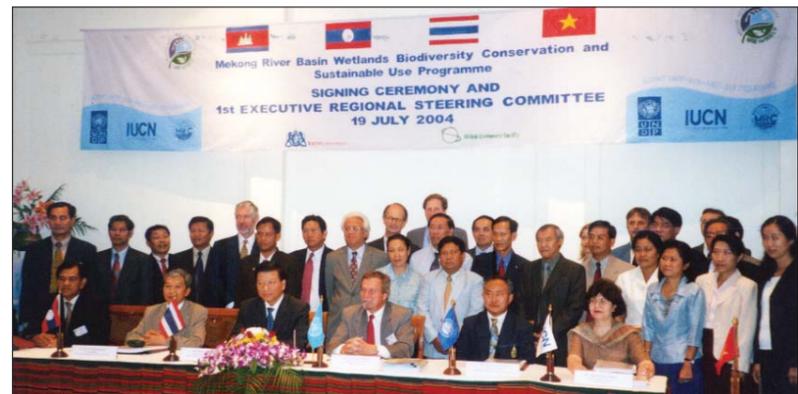
UNDP Programme Team Leader Mr Peter-John Meynell said the MWBP was trying to bring the economic value of wetlands into the planning arena so those who made plans for the basin understood

the implications of losing these wetland resources.

"We hope that the governments of these regions will take these findings on board and incorporate them in any wetland policies they have or are formulating, while using the findings to ascertain how other developmental or agricultural activities will impact on the wetlands," he said

GEF is the executing agent of the whole project through UNDP, while it is being implemented by IUCN and the MRC. The programme will employ a total of around 50 people with a regional management unit based in Vientiane, national offices in each country and provincial offices serving the four demonstration sites - in Stung Treng, Cambodia; in Attapeu province, Lao PDR; in the Songkram river basin, Thailand; and in the Plain of Reeds, Viet Nam.

Mr Meynell said operations would start immediately. ~



Representatives from the four riparian governments, the MRC, UNDP and IUCN after the signing ceremony in Vientiane

Cambodia: In Cambodia the site is at Stung Treng. It is the home of the Irrawaddy dolphin, the Siamese crocodile and the location of many deep pools and flooded forests, which are vital for the spawning of large Mekong fish.

Lao PDR: In Lao PDR the site is in Attapeu province and consists of more than one distinct site. The province is relatively untouched by industry and developed infrastructure and has a high level of biodiversity.

Viet Nam: The Plain of Reeds in Vietnam provides two sites for the study. Tram Chim, is a national park and home to the Sarus Crane, while Lang Sen has just been declared a provincial nature reserve.

Thailand: The site at Songkram is an area of intense use of resources in terms of water and agriculture and this puts pressure on the environment. It is also the only tributary of the Mekong main stream with no major dam.

Taking the strain off the drains

The Mekong River Commission has entered a new partnership with the European Commission's Asia Link Programme and Universities from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, the UK and Sweden to find ways of improving stormwater management in two of the capital cities in the region.

The new project, called CityBlues, was launched on July 5 this year at the MRC Secretariat's Vientiane headquarters with a Kick-Off workshop.

Joining forces with city management authorities in Vientiane and Phnom Penh, the international partnership aims to improve the water quality in the drainage network using an approach that combines ecological and engineering principles.

Many of the rivers, canals and drains in the two cities had been concreted in recent years, in an attempt to alleviate flooding problems, but this had affected the health of the cities' wetlands, explained CityBlues project coordinator Dr Jean Lacoursiere.

"Urban wetlands have special drainage needs. They provide a natural method of purifying water. Concrete is quick, but not good for the environment, we need to find new ways to deal with stormwater problems," he said. Because they had sediment, bacteria, fungus and plants that could remove toxins, wetlands were also an efficient way of treating sewage as the plants and sediment could be removed regularly taking the toxins with them.

"CityBlues will build on research we have done previously over 7-10 years in

Vientiane as part of the then Mekong Committee's wetland programme in Thailand, Viet Nam and Lao PDR, "Dr Lacoursiere explained.

As part of the MRC's Environment Programme, the MRCS is implementing an Environmental Hazard Assessment activity focusing on the potential impact of the cities of Vientiane (Lao PDR) and Phnom Penh (Cambodia) on trans-boundary water quality. MRC involvement is under the responsibility of Senior Environmental Advisor Dr Ian Campbell.

Dr Lacoursiere said the main aim of the project was to integrate engineering and environmental issues. "We hope to take departments of engineering and departments of biology and bring them together in discussion workshops, followed

by one week of country research. The main component of the programme is to do research together. We are taking a learning-by-doing approach to strengthening links between problem-solving-based teaching, faculty research and practitioners needs."

Representatives from the Lao National Mekong Committee Secretariat, the Asian Development Bank, UNDP, King Mongkut's University of Technology, the National University of Laos, the Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre (Lao PDR) the Lao Institute of Urban Planning and the Vientiane Urban Development Administration Authority (VUDAA) attended the kick-off function. The project is co-financed by the European Union's Asia-Link Programme, Kristianstad University in Sweden, and the University of Sheffield in the UK. ~

Collaboration a great way to support balanced development

Following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2003, the Mekong River Commission and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Living Mekong Initiative (LMI) have collaborated on several projects over the past year and have agreed to increase their cooperation and enter into a partnership in fields of common interest.

The LMI is part of the WWF's Living Waters Programme, which is working on the principles of integrated river basin management to achieve its objectives.

LMI and MRC have developed specific areas of collaboration including energy; sustainable management of floodplains; engaging with China and Myanmar and development and exchange of information.

In April and May this year the teams met to review the work achieved in 2003, set future targets and milestones and plan for the coming year.

In 2003 the partnership achieved several things explained Marc Goichot, WWF LMI coordinator and focal point for the MOU with MRC.

To date, he said, collaboration had included the second international symposium on the management of large rivers for fisheries (LARS2), where WWF sponsored the event, which was hosted by the government of Cambodia, the MRC, and

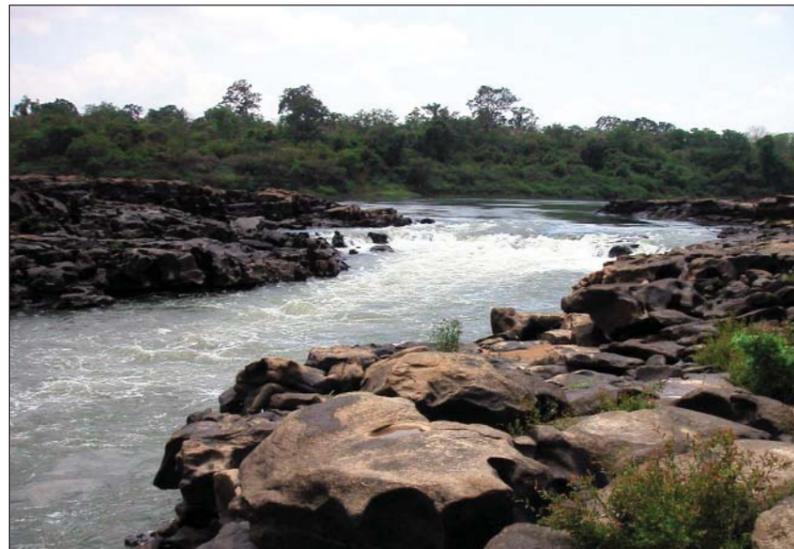
led by the FAO, and a regional workshop entitled "The Changing Face of Electricity Markets in the Lower Mekong Countries", organised by the MRC in collaboration with WWF and IUCN.

The MRCS and WWF also joined forces to develop an interactive mapping CD-Rom for the Lower Mekong Basin. The CD-Rom, *People and the Environment Atlas of the Lower Mekong Basin*, packaged existing MRC core datasets and added additional environmental layers available to WWF networks.

WWF, MRC and IHE-UNESCO collaborated to develop and host a training course on integrated river basin management in the Mekong basin for participants from the six Mekong Basin countries.

Ongoing collaboration will include The Wetlands Ambassador Programme, which was launched in May (see separate story) and the second annual Mekong Flood Forum to be held in Vientiane in November this year.

Over future months fisheries and environmental experts from the MRC will help provide data on such topics as the population, migration and spawning of the giant Mekong catfish, the fate of the Irrawaddy dolphin and vital watersheds needing protection or restoration. Studies on the latter started in four pilot sites in



Sharing environmental knowledge is a good way to help keep the river healthy.

Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam in July.

In a study now being undertaken by the Environment Programme, sediment samples from Cambodia, Viet Nam and China are undergoing analysis for toxins to help estimate the impact of dams on the river's health. This information will be shared with WWF as part of the agreement focusing on water quality issues.

Other areas where the two organisations have agreed to work together include

navigation, roads and wildlife trade.

"Since the MRC and WWF are committed to sustainable development, partnerships are essential, building on the synergies of each organisation's strengths and our shared vision of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development," Mr Goichot said.

"Thus it is considered mutually beneficial for the MRC and WWF and countries they serve in the Mekong Basin to develop closer, more formal working arrangements." ~

Student ambassadors unite to help conserve water and wetlands



Mikkel Ostergaard

Wildlife conservation is vital to the basin.

Twelve teams of university students from Cambodia, China, Myanmar and Viet Nam have been selected as this year's "wetland ambassadors" as part of the 2004 Wetland Ambassador Action campaign for the Mekong region.

The 2004 Wetland Ambassador Action campaign is a collaborative effort between Evian-Danone, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Ramsar Bureau, the State Forest Administration in China, and the World Wide Fund for Nature

(WWF) China, WWF Indochina, WWF International and WWF Thailand.

The students, who were selected in late May-early June, will serve as ambassadors by investigating and raising the profile of important wetland issues at a local level and within the larger context of the region as a whole.

This concept of thinking about rivers as an entire system is the inspiration behind the theme for this year's campaign: "Living River - From the Mountains to the Sea".

With support from the campaign partners, the ambassadors will collaborate with local NGOs, government agencies and media to raise awareness on various themes: from species conservation and the cultural value of wetlands, to the effects of pollution, dams and irrigation projects on river systems.

Each team has been provided with a grant and will take part in a one-day training

course to help run their project.

Upon completion of the studies, the Wetlands Ambassadors Committee will review the projects and judge the teams. The winning two teams will visit another Mekong country to exchange ideas with overseas wetlands ambassadors. Second and third teams will receive cash and publications.

Among the projects students in the region will undertake is a study of Cambodian wetlands in four locations across the country, including the Kampi Pool in Kratie province, one of the few remaining habitats of the Irrawaddy dolphin.

And in Vietnam three teams of students will ascertain the importance of wetlands to local people, raise awareness amongst high school students of the role of mangroves and investigate a site with a unique and remarkable biodiversity, represented by the existence of endemic and endangered species.

The Mekong River Commission considers the Wetlands Ambassador Programme will encourage young people to make a very valuable contribution to fostering a commitment to good management for wetlands, according to Dr Hans Guttman, Coordinator Environment Programme, MRC.

"The Wetland Ambassador Programme's Living River approach of integrated river basin management and its principles of information exchange, cross border and inter-agency liaison and awareness raising are in line with the priorities of the MRC and link strongly to our overall strategic objectives for sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin and its related resources," he said.

More information on the Wetland Ambassador Action campaign and the teams involved in this campaign is available from the website: <http://www.wwfthai.org/home/ambassador2004.htm> ~



Low water, fishing pressure take toll on Tonle Sap's bagnet catches

This year the seasonal bagnet catch in Cambodia was the lowest on record, falling to 6,550 tonnes or 47 percent down on last season's figures. However, while low water levels are partly to blame, writers in the latest issue of the MRC's *Catch and Culture*, say the catch has now declined for three years in a row, indicating increased fishing pressure from.

The bagnets, or dai in Khmer, are similar to trawl nets and are suspended in one location to filter the current. They mainly work on the Tonle Sap (river), which flows from the Great Lake. Each net is about 25m wide and about 120m long, extending a few metres to the bed of the river. Normally several nets are set across the river in a row and for the latest season, there were 64 nets in 14 rows.

During the wet season rising Mekong waters flow "up" the system towards the Great Lake, flooding the surrounding plains and wetlands. The floodwaters bring millions of fry, the progeny of fish, which have spawned upstream in the Mekong and its tributaries. The small fish feed and grow rapidly in the flooded areas and are

joined by larger adult fish, some of which spawn.

Water levels begin to fall in October and the Tonle Sap starts to flow back to the Mekong. Fish are forced to follow the receding waters back into watercourses, and eventually migrate en masse down the Tonle Sap. The largest migrations are in January and February, and this is when fishing activity of all kinds is intense. Peak catches mainly comprise small cyprinids known as trey riel.

The yield from flood plain fisheries is mainly determined by flooding. A larger flood creates more habitat and food, so, all other factors being equal, fish production should be higher. If the fishery is based on young fish spawned in the same year, the best correlation is with the flood height in the same year.

The Tonle Sap fishery comprises mainly small fish spawned in the same year. However data shows that after the 1998 drought catches did not reach levels that might be expected based on the pre-1998 data, suggesting some lag in the recovery.

And in 2001-2, catches were much lower than would be predicted from flood level alone. The 2003-4 catch is the lowest ever recorded, and far lower than might be predicted based on flood-levels alone.

The flood peaks in the Tonle Sap occur over a very narrow time slot each year and the flood is predictable to within about two weeks. As well as the relatively consistent timing of the flood, annual variations in flood height are very small compared to some other large tropical rivers.

In 2003 there was a very narrow flood peak, indicating a short duration flood. This would have contributed to the low dai catch in 2003-2004, but there is no overall pattern, such as a series of low or short floods, which would explain the declining catches over the past few years.

Fishing pressure is continually increasing along the Tonle Sap and in the Great Lake. Each year there are more fishers and gears, both legal and illegal. There are now tens of thousands of small-scale fishers operating in the peak season and they are

mainly using small-mesh nylon gillnets. Observations earlier this year showed many fish tagged and released from the most downstream bagnets were immediately caught by gillnets.

Other features of catches which are consistent with overfishing are continuing declines in both larger species and the average size of the dominant small fishes.

So the dai catches in recent years can be partly explained by high fishing pressure. Either some of the fish normally caught by bagnets are being caught by others (including those competing with different types of gears) or total catches are falling.

A fall in total catches is of great concern as it signifies overfishing, generally defined as catches falling below optimum levels. Scientists are traditionally reluctant to confirm any phenomenon without proof, but the writers say we should not wait until the fishery collapses to bring in effective management measures.

Catch & Culture is a publication of the MRC Fisheries Programme

Latest information products

The People's Highway: Past Present and Future Transport on the Mekong River System



The Mekong River has always been a working river. Through centuries people and goods have moved along this wide brown highway that preceded roads. Today there is increased talk of the Mekong as an inland waterway corridor linking the region. The discussion in this report aims to provide some context to the broader current public discussion of the current issues relating to navigation and its potential to improve livelihoods for some of the poorest people of this region.

Mekong Development Series No3, April 2004. US\$5.

Distribution and Ecology of Some Important Riverine Fish Species of the Mekong River Basin



This new report complements an earlier report on fish migrations and provides more detailed information of 40 key species which are significant in the Mekong River fishery. For each species it provides notes on critical habitats, distribution and life cycle. The information has been gleaned from surveys carried out throughout the lower Mekong Basin from 1995-2001 by fisheries agencies in each country, coordinated by the MRC fisheries programme and funded by Danida.

MRC Technical Paper No 10, May 2004. \$US5.

An Introduction to Cambodia's Inland Fisheries



The fisheries of Cambodia are the mainstay of the country, providing income and food security for millions of people. This report draws on varied data to document the current state of the fisheries, while examining their significance and the problems they face for future sustainability.

Mekong Development Series No4, July 2004. US\$5.

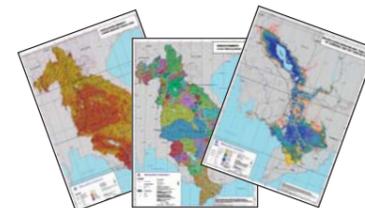
Catch & Culture newsletter



Print editions of the MRC's thrice yearly newsletter on fisheries are now available. The newsletter may also be viewed and downloaded from the website.

2004. Free. Postage costs apply

Technical data maps are available from the Documentation Centre.



How to order

All products can be ordered from the MRC Secretariat's Documentation Centre. Postage costs apply. Mekong region government agencies may write to the MRC to obtain free copies.

Check the MRC website for a full list of products. Credit card sales are also available through the website.

Contact

Documentation Centre
Mekong River Commission Secretariat
P.O. Box 6101, 184 Fa Ngoum Road, Unit 18, Ban Sithane Neua,
Sikhottabong District, Vientiane 01000, Lao PDR
Phone: (856 21) 263 263 ext: 1122 **Fax:** (856 21) 263 264
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Art contest draws in young talent

The “Our Mekong, Our Future” art contest organised earlier this year was voted a big success by both the Mekong River Commission Secretariat and the partners who helped support it.

Nearly 2,000 young people from the four Lower Mekong Basin countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam took part in the contest, which was open to children between the ages of 9 and 15 years old. Prizes were awarded in five age categories. The 20 winners were then judged again to select the five top entries for the whole region.

MRC Officer-in-Charge at that time Dr Dao Trong Tu announced the winners at a special function held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in April. Subsequently, award ceremonies, celebrations and exhibitions of the entries have been held at schools in Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam.

The 20 winning entries will have their final home in the new Secretariat building in Vientiane.

The contest, which was organised with the co-operation of the four National Mekong Committees, IUCN and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), aimed to get the children of the river basin thinking about what the Mekong meant to them and what they would like to see happen to it in the future. Funding for the competition came from the Thiess International Riverprize, which was awarded to the Mekong River Commission in 2002.

“We were delighted with both the number and the high standard of entries from the children,” Dr Tu said. “The range of topics covered in the pictures reflected their present lifestyles and their hopes for a future where their river is protected so it can continue to provide their families with improved livelihoods.”

Dr Tu said the young people of today had a valuable role to play both in ensuring the balanced development of the river and maintaining the good relationships, which had been established with our Mekong neighbours.

A panel of judges from the four member countries of the Mekong River Commission selected the winners. The best entry in each age group in each country received a cash prize of US\$50, art materials and a book about the Mekong.

The artists whose entries were judged best in the region received an additional cash prize of US\$100, art materials and a celebration at their school. The winner’s

schools also received some art materials. Every child who entered the contest was presented with a special contest T-shirt.

Although the competition is now over, the children’s images will be used in future MRC publications and displays. ~



Dr Dao Trong Tu and the panel of judges congratulate the winners at the announcement ceremony in Phnom Penh.

Below, from left: Winning students from Cambodia, Vietnam and Lao PDR all had a chance to share in the fun of a school celebration.



Workshops and events

20th Meeting of the MRC Joint Committee

24-25 August

Dialogue Meeting

26 August

Inauguration of the MRC Secretariat

27 August

Informal Donor Meeting

All to be held in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

Contact Thuy Long Thu. (856 21) 263 263 ext: 4104

Mekong Rice Conference

15-17 October

Organised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Viet Nam in collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute.

Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam.

Email: buibabong@hn.vnn.vn or see www.agroviet.gov.vn

Ninth International Symposium on River Sedimentation

18-21 October 2004

Yichang, China

www.irtces.org/issahu/9ISRS.htm

Advances in Integrated Mekong River Management

25-27 October

International conference dealing with basin-scale hydrological modelling, water use and water environments and flood management.

Lao Plaza Hotel, Vientiane, Lao PDR

Contact: Yukiko Hirabayashi. email: rr-conf-lao@serv2.cee.yamanashi.ac.jp

Community-based Integrated Watershed Management

8-26 November 2004

This course offers a new approach for integrating technologies and participatory strategies within the natural landscape or "watershed" for resource conservation, production and sustainable use.

Contact IIRR Education&Training@iirr.org or see www.iirr.org

IUCN World Conservation Congress

17-25 November

Bangkok, Thailand

www.iucn.org/congress

2nd Annual Mekong Flood Forum

16-17 November

Vientiane, Lao PDR

Contact Bun Veasna (856 21) 263 263 ext: 4040

Seventh Asian Fisheries Forum: New Dimensions and Challenges in Fisheries in the 21st Century

29 November - 3 December 2004

Hotel Equatorial, Penang, Malaysia

Contact Chris Barlow (856 21) 263 263 ext: 4060

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