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Madness on the Mekong: How Dams are Killing the Largest Inland Fisheries in the World

Par Tom Fawthrop
Mondialisation.ca, 03 août 2016
The Ecologist 3 août 2016

Région : Asia
Thème: Environment

Investigative reporter, Tom Fawthrop has just returned from the site of the Don Sahong – a hydrodam being constructed in the middle of an eco-paradise of wetlands in Southern Laos where over 200 fish species have been recorded.

The Four Thousands Islands (Sipangdon) in southern Laos, has long beguiled explorers tourists and locals with its vast number of islets, spectacular waterfalls and 26 major islands. Over a stretch of 50 kms the mighty Mekong River splits into seven major braided channels. This pristine area of precious wetlands screamed out for international protection as provided for under the Ramsar Convention, a protection that has been embraced by Cambodia just two kilometres away across the border. But the Lao authoritarian state opted for a hydropower dam, rather than Ramsar protection for endangered dolphins, the abundant fisheries and one of the region's most cherished waterscapes.

Malaysian real estate company *Mega-First MFCB* has selected the worst possible site for the dam which has blocked the only channel (out of the seven channels) that is deep enough and wide enough for large fish to migrate, a channel that has provided an all year round effective fish passage around the rapids, rocks and waterfalls over the millennia.

The Don Sahong dam construction launched in January 2016 has already stopped the water flow along the Hou Sahong channel (see the video) disrupting fish navigation and depriving hundreds of fishing families of their livelihood.

Earth-moving machinery, trucks and several thousand Chinese workers from construction giant Sino-hydro, which signed the contract with Mega-First Malaysia, have occupied Saddam Island and built a bridge to the mainland.

The acting director of the Cambodia's Inland Fisheries Institute, Chheng Pen told the Ecologist « The fish are trapped in dry season. It became a killing zone for two months. The migratory fish could not move upstream deeper into Lao because the water was too shallow. »

A small colony of Irrawaddy Dolphins and many villagers have suffered a periodic noise barrage from the din of dynamite blasting for several months. Dolphins are ultra-sensitive to sound. The excavation is scaring the landscape and shatters the normal serenity of this unique ecosphere of rock formations, flooded forests and waterways.

On the opposite bank (a 15-minute ride by boat) lies Cambodia. Preah Rumkel is an eco-

tourism site on the Cambodian side that attracts many visitors who come to watch the dolphins. Chhith Sam Ath, programme director of the World Wide Fund for Nature in Cambodia says: « Cambodian people have a deep respect for dolphins and want to see dolphins and fisheries protected. »

The Importance of the Mekong Fisheries

Sipangdon fisheries has been 4,000-tonnes-a-year business with 70% consumed by Lao people. Based on first-sale prices and the Mekong River Commission's (MRC's) recently released figures the total wild-capture fish catch in the Mekong in 2015 was 2.3million tonnes and is worth about $11 billion.

http://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/newsletters/catch-and-culture-vol-21-no-3

Chhith Sam Ath, says: « The Don Sahong Dam is an ecological time bomb that threatens the food security of millions and a population of critically endangered Mekong Irrawaddy dolphins. The dam will have disastrous impacts on the entire river ecosystem all the way to the Delta in Vietnam. »

The Mega-First Corporation claim they have come up with an engineering solution to divert fish away from the Sahong channel to Hou Xang Phuek and Hou Saddam – two much smaller channels that have been artificially deepened.

However, Dr So Nam, from the MRC fisheries unit, reports that MRC technical experts have concluded « Hou Saddam and the Hou Xang Phuek channels cannot compensate for fish losses from Sahong and there will also be an impact on the Khone Falls. »

Has the Mekong River Omission Failed to Protect the Mekong Ecosystem?

The 1995 Mekong Agreement that created the MRC (The Mekong River Commission) was based on the four-member states Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. All decisions were to be made by consensus, hence Mekong dam projects are not subject to any veto and the MRC secretariat is really only an advisory body.

Increasingly the Mekong has become an arena of unilateral 'water grabbing' for the sole purpose of hydro-dam construction by China and Lao, with scant regard for good governance in water sharing or for the protection of the rich biodiversity of the longest river in SE Asia.

The six dams built on the Upper Mekong by China were built without any consultation (Beijing has never joined the MRC). The MRC has a detailed consultation process, but it failed to curb the zealous drive of the developers and the determination of the Lao Government to ride roughshod over all the objections and protests over the two dams launched on the Lower Mekong.

The Xayaburi Dam was launched in 2012 and this year the Don Sahong Dam. Construction started and in both cases building commenced before the MRC consultation process had been completed.

The new MRC chief Pham Tuan Phan explained, « The MRC is not a regulatory body for the management of water-related resources. Nor can it approve or disapprove any development projects such as hydropower development. »

The Lao regime steamed ahead against of a tide of opposition from Cambodia, Vietnam, civilians and riverside communities that was expressed during the six months MRC-run consultation process known as the PNCPA [MRC public consultation process Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement.)

MRC leaders have passively watched the ongoing erosion of the Mekong River's unique biodiversity with the apparent justification « we have no regulatory powers » to stop the rush to build dams. Many critics say this is an all too glib excuse for not accepting a greater responsibility as an advisory body, with considerable scope for advocacy based on their own research.

Dr Philip Hirsch the director of the Mekong Research Centre (University of Sydney) told the Ecologist « The MRC's fisheries programme has produced reports that advised against proceeding with Don Sahong (dam). Yet the MRC leadership has not used these scientific reports to make a proactive recommendation against the dam. The Secretariat and its CEO have played an overly cautious game in which fear of offending governments, has taken precedence over its duty of care for the river. »

Cambodian fisheries expert Chheng Phen is depressed by the looming prospect of more dams and shrinking fish stocks. If the cascade of nine dams on the Lao side of the Mekong goes ahead, which the HDI Delta Study projects a 55% loss of fisheries if 11 dams go ahead. « I am very disappointed in the failure of the MRC consultation process. They have failed to protect fisheries, I feel very sorry for Cambodian people who rely on fish. »

The MRC has a stock response to such criticism. « We understand certain stakeholders have different expectations about the role of the MRC that go beyond our mandate under the 1995 Mekong Agreement. Unfortunately, it's very challenging to balance everyone's interests and impossible to satisfy all parties. »

But the MRC mandate does in fact clearly refer to protection of the environment. There is nothing in the 1995 Agreement that prohibits the CEO and the secretariat from expressing stronger concerns about the destruction of the Mekong, dam by dam.

The fact that a clear majority of Mekong citizens have clearly rejected the two Lao dams as documented by the MRC consultation feedback from riparian stakeholders in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, could be used as mandate for the MRC to raise concerns about reckless dam development much more stridently. The CEO can readily cite article 3 (mandate for environmental concern) and article 7 of the Mekong Agreement (which specifics that where harm is done to the river calls for a suspension of projects can be made)
www.internationalrivers.org/blogs/263/changing-tides-for-a-common-future-the-mrc-and-hydro-diplomacy

Has the MRC forgotten the landmark SEA Report (the Strategic Environmental Assessment Report) that concluded that the only way to protect the Mekong was to declare a moratorium on all dam-building for 10 Years?

They commissioned this independent study on the environmental impacts of the 11 scheduled dams on the mainstream Mekong but has never endorsed it. The recommendation to suspend all dams clashed with the pro-business tilt of « sustainable hydro-power » and the political agenda of the Lao PDR to utilise its part of the mainstream

Mekong for maximum profit by selling electricity to Thailand, regardless of the environmental cost to the Mekong itself.

Dr Hirsch points out that the SEA « expressly warned against using the Mekong mainstream as an experimental site for untested mitigation approaches ». Vietnam has endorsed the report but the Lao team threatened to « walk out » if it was ever brought up again by the secretariat. A former CEO capitulated to this threat. And the dams go on being built.

Destroying the Mekong Dam by Dam

Two more dams on the mainstream Mekong are currently being readied for construction. Altogether a total of nine dams are being planned by the Lao Ministry of Energy.

During this year's drought when the Mekong river hit its lowest point for 100 years, downstream countries could only get some trickle of relief, if China turned on the tap and released water from its six dams. And nobody needed to ask who is the new overlord and master of the once mighty Mekong?

China's geo-political power has been greatly enhanced by its cascade of dams, and its control over water resources. It has even set up its own Lancang-Mekong committee to deal with Mekong affairs posing a challenge to an already weak MRC suffering major budget cuts.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/15/c_135190799.htm

But climate change scientists warn this is the worst of times to build new dams, when the vital glaciers of Tibet – the common source of many great rivers including the Mekong – are melting. Water flow is diminishing year on year. And by the time more dams in Laos come online, the water flow maybe insufficient to drive the turbines which means, in effect, the Mekong River's rich biodiversity may well be needlessly sacrificed to build ineffective dams that can no longer deliver the promised supply of electricity.

If future dams become unviable, there is no technology in the world that can recover the lost biodiversity and reverse the damage done to the Mekong. Machinery can be restored but the fragile ecosystems and nature can never be resurrected.

Vietnamese scientists are increasingly aware of this developmental madness. Wetlands scientist Nguyen Huu Thien, a participant in the SEA environmental report on dam impacts toldme: « If all the Mekong dams go ahead, then Vietnam will cease to be a rice exporter, and the delta denied sediment flow will no longer be able to support 18 million population. Social unrest, migration and other problems should not only concern Hanoi but all the Asian governments. »

The failure of the MRC should motivate other international agencies, not only Asian. The collapse of the Mekong ecosystem has global implications and several UN agencies UNDP, FAO and WFP that regularly buy Mekong rice for humanitarian missions would be directly affected by this impending disaster.

At a recent conference in the Delta capital of Can Tho, Dr Tran Dinh Thien director of Vietnam's Institute of Economics declared: « We can only save the Mekong by shedding the narrow pond mentality of making profit from the river in the name of development » adding « there must be a Mekong River Protection Fund to protect the flow and a global movement

to protect the river as an ecological and cultural asset of the world »

https://youtu.be/TPXRVe35h7c

Tom Fawthrop has previously reported on dams, ecology, human rights, rebellions and military coups in the South East Asia for Al Jazeera TV, The Economist, the Guardian and The Ecologist. He is also a documentary filmmaker and has directed two films about dams on the Mekong and the Salween (Eureka films).

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Articles Par : Tom Fawthrop

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