

The Nam Theun 2

A photo report on a site visit on
March 16–19, 2011 by Mekong Watch





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**TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE ORIGINAL
AUGUST 15, 2011**



An irrigation tank, Nakai Neua Village

The farm owner said, "Pipes are not connected. So, I can't use the water from here for farming." The Mekong Watch team couldn't meet any villagers who conduct the dry-season irrigation farming either at the Nakai Neua or the Ponesoon Village.



Fishing boats at the reservoir, Nakai Neua Village

Among the activities promoted under the Project's Livelihood Program, the reservoir fishing brings the highest income to resettled villagers. But experience at other dam projects shows the reservoir fishing is not sustainable. In fact, some affected villagers at Nakai Neua reported that fish was already declining.



Non-timber forest products, Nakai Neua Village

A woman was on her way home from a forest that had not gone under the water. She said, while showing the Mekong Watch team what was inside her basket, "I went to the forest by motorcycle and spent three hours there only to find these. We used to find much bigger bamboo shoots". Most of the productive forests have been permanently flooded by the Nam Theun 2.



Dinner table at a resettled family, Nakai Neua Village

This family had to buy most of the food, including rice, from a local market. The head of the household said, "We eat fish when we catch them. Otherwise, we end up buying food at a nearby market a couple of times a week."



A fridge at a resettled home, Nakai Neua Village

The owner explained, "I bought this refrigerator simply because everyone else has one. It cost me 1.5 million kip (about 180 USD)." The Mekong Watch team only saw drinking water inside.



Rosewood piled under a villager's house

Illegal rosewood logging is the biggest income source for many resettled villagers. One villager said, "It's worth taking the risk of being arrested because we can earn more than we're fined." The villagers find no other ways to earn cash due to the failure of the Livelihood Program. They now need more cash to buy food and goods. Improved road access also contributes to increased illegal logging.



A local market in Ponesavan, Ponesoon Village

This village market was constructed as part of the project's compensation package so that resettled villagers can sell fish they catch and vegetables they make. However, it is hardly used. Their products do not sell well because they cannot compete with cheaper vegetables brought from Thailand and other parts in Laos. Very few families now plant vegetables for cash income. In this picture, vendors from Thakhek, the Provincial capital, are using the market to sell their goods to the villagers.



Fishing along Xebangfai, Phanang Village, Mahaxai District

Fishing in downstream Xebangfai, where the Nam Theun 2 reservoir water is discharged, has become almost impossible. Up to around February 2011, the discharge decreased over the weekend. However, the dam is now in full operation and there's not even a single day when villagers can fish. A female fish trader, who buys fish from the villagers and ships them to Mahaxai for a living, said, "I haven't bought fish for a month. Villagers find fish barely enough to consume for themselves at home."



Fishing in May 2010, Mahaxai Village

Villagers could still fish after the dam's commercial operation had started. Fish traders from the Panan Village were seen to come to sell fish in the Mahaxai Village.



Fishing in March 2011, Mahaxai Village

This picture was taken at the same spot as the previous one. No fish trader was seen. This port used to be a place for active fish trading. The owner at a near-by local store said that fish trading could not be seen here any more.



A fish pond at Khum Kang, Mahaxai Village

The Village Saving Fund (VSF) was set up as part of the compensation for the loss of fish catch along the Xebangfai River. The owner borrowed 2 million kip (about 245 USD) from VSF to dig this pond. He made 0.8 million kip (98 USD) the 1st year, but after that he hasn't been able to use the pond because there's no enough water. He said, "I still owe 1.53 million kip (187 USD)." He keeps paying back 20,000 kip (2.4 USD) a month for interest. At Khum Kang (Kang Area), eight families dug a fish pond but it is reported that only one family is successfully earning income.



A fish pond at Khum Kang, Mahaxai Village

The owner of another pond reported to the Mekong Watch team that he had lost all the fish because of the flood. He also lost his income. He finally reclaimed the pond because a baby fell into it and died. All this cost him 7 million kip (about 855 USD). He was threatened by a district official that he would be arrested unless he paid back the loan to VSF. So, he worked as a construction worker and returned 2 million kip (244 USD) with his wages.