

1-5. The Mekong River and People's Livelihoods

People and the River

The population of the Mekong River Basin exceeds 60 million. The population of the basin area in respective countries is 5.2 million people in Laos, 23.1 million in Thailand, 13 million in Cambodia, and 18.7 million in Vietnam¹. Approximately 85% are agricultural communities (MRC 2010: 31-32). Agriculture, fishing, and collection of aquatic life and vegetation are the main economic activities of the people in the basin, and about 62.6% of the working population in the region make their living primarily from water resource related work (MRC 2010: 48).

The Mekong River not only supplies water for the region's urban areas, it is also the source of water for daily use in agricultural communities during the dry season. In villages along the river, almost all drinking water, water for daily use, and water for agriculture depend on the river. The river is also very important as a place for children to play.



When the water levels decrease in the dry season, the region becomes very dry, and the river banks become important places for farming. In addition, an important source of protein for agricultural communities is freshwater fish that are caught in both the mainstream and tributaries, as well as the wetlands and channels connected to them. At present there are about 850 species of fish identified in the Mekong River Basin, and most can be eaten. Aquatic life forms, including fish and frogs, are people's main source of protein, and are also an important source of income. If

seasonal labor and side businesses are included, 40 million people in the region are involved in the Mekong River water system's fishing industry. About 40% of the population of Cambodia depends on the Tonle Sap Lake and the surrounding flood plain (MRC 2010: 49).

Rivers are also important transportation routes. It is not uncommon for people from multiple villages on both sides of the river to be distant relatives. Previously, in Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani Province, people living on the Thai side would do their swidden farming in the mountains of Laos. For them, the river was not a national border so much as simply something to cross.

Spiritual Beliefs and Rivers

The Mekong River and other rivers in the region have a special spiritual significance for people as well. In Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, Buddhist temples and monasteries, which are central to people's faith, are often constructed along riverbanks. During field studies, there are frequent opportunities to hear many folktales. For example, in southern Laos it is said that there is a *naga* (a deity taking the form of a snake) palace at the bottom of the Mekong River. It is believed that strong spirits live in rivers and at other special places, so it would be dangerous to launch fishing boats or to walk past certain locations without offering prayers². Along the Dom Noi River in Thailand, which is a tributary of the Mun River, which itself is a tributary of the Mekong, people ask the spirits for permission before fishing. Also, in Thailand and Laos it is widely said that rivers are vestiges of fights between *naga*.

Spirits are also said to reside in fish. In spite of its enormous size, very little is known about the life of the *pla buk*, the Mekong giant catfish, the world's largest freshwater fish with adults weighing up to 300kg. It is believed by Thai fishing communities, however, that the giant catfish lives according to the Buddhist precepts and is holy because only moss and other vegetation have ever been found in its stomach. In northeast Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani Province, it is believed that when this fish is caught in one's net, it is very inauspicious. These fish can now be sold for a lot of money, but because there is fear of losing one's life for committing the sin of killing this fish of merit, the fishers carry out a formal Buddhist memorial service after selling giant catfish.

The river is also a place of festivals. Every year, there is a boat race on the Mekong River and its tributaries around the time the rainy season ends. Also in April, the Thai and Lao New Year, people celebrate along the riverbanks by building sand towers in the shape of Buddhist stupas. The ceremonies carried out in the World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang are well known, but similar customs are also observed in lesser-known areas like the Mun River, a Mekong tributary in northeastern Thailand, and the Sekong River of Cambodia.



New River Uses

On the Bolaven Plateau of Laos, there is increasing use of small-scale hydropower generation using small Chinese electric generators. These generators are sold at local markets, and the villagers themselves can set up this simple and convenient apparatus if several households invest together about USD200-300. A drop of 2 meters is sufficient to generate electricity. Thus, even without external aid, villagers can use their own resources to attain and maintain electric power. In non-electrified villages in Laos, some residents have set up battery charging businesses, giving birth to small-scale business.

References

Mekong River Commission (MRC). 2010. *State of the Basin Report 2010*.
<http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/basin-reports/MRC-SOB-report-2010full-report.pdf>

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1. The population of the Chinese portion of the basin is unknown.
2. For example, the mouth of the Pak Kading River in Laos's Khammouan Province.