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The Australian Mekong Resource Centre

was established at the University of Sydney in 1997 to promote research, discussion and debate on development and environment issues in the Mekong Region. The AMRC is a focal point for information, dialogue and activities in support of an equitable and sustainable development path for the Mekong Region.

The *Mekong Update & Dialogue* provides:

- lead article on the key topic of the issue
- responses to the lead article
- news of current developments in the region
- news from the AMRC
- information on Mekong-related conferences and events in Australia

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READER CONTRIBUTIONS

The Mekong Update & Dialogue welcomes the comments of its readers on issues raised in the Feature article and in the Responses to the Feature. If you do wish to make comment please email us at mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au. Comments should be sent by late January and should be limited to 1-2 paragraphs.

EDITORIAL - Ecotourism in the Mekong

A regional approach to tourism is among the several agendas of economic integration that come under the umbrella of the Greater Mekong Subregion program. Prominent in this approach is the sub-field of ecotourism. The ways in which ecotourism features in Mekong travel and leisure promotion are indicative of its ambivalent role with regard to livelihood and ecology. On the one hand, ecotourism has emerged out of a critique of culturally and environmentally insensitive tourism development over a longer period of time. On the other, ecotourism itself targets the environment as a resource to be commodified in response to a “market in nature”, as demanded by tourists who are sold images of the Mekong as exotic, pristine, a new frontier.

Clearly, the eco-resources of the Mekong are a major selling point that, according to the Asian Development Bank, makes the region the fastest growing tourism destination in the world. The environmental and cultural implications of rapid tourism growth have been well-described elsewhere, and Anita Pleumarom – a prominent media critic of tourism and its impacts within the region – expands on these below. While ecotourism has emerged partly in response to the past negative impacts, it has itself become the subject of debate. In part this is due to the lip-service paid to environmental concern under the legitimising rubric of ecotourism in projects that are very much business as usual. In part it is due to seeming contradictions between ecotourism as an engine for continued growth in an industry that many see as having already developed beyond sustainable limits in several parts of the region.

There are, however, also less obvious livelihood implications of ecotourism. By commodifying “nature” as a major source of revenue and foreign exchange income, resources that have hitherto been integral to the livelihoods of the rural poor become the object of business-oriented conservation interest. Increasingly, areas are being set off-limits through de facto enclosure of coastal resources and an uplands protected areas policy that has tourism potential in its sights, restricting access for local communities. The experience of both southern beaches and northern forests in Thailand is instructive for other countries of the Mekong Region in this regard.

What, then, are the appropriate responses? One is to reject tourism, or further tourism growth, and to pay primary attention to cleaning up existing tourism activity and protecting affected communities, cultures and environments from further predations. Another is through a more technocratic planning approach, stressing better planning and regulation of the industry. In this regard, the public sector role is crucial, as intimated by both the respondents to the main feature in this issue of Mekong Update. However, the state’s role as regulator and as provider of facilitating infrastructure, with implicit public subsidies to tourism, raises further questions of ambivalence.

FEATURE

'Sustainable' Mekong tourism: a realistic approach or hot air?¹

by Anita Pleumarom

The Mekong river basin area,² with its peculiar history and great political, economic and social differences, is a region in which many of the issues and problems associated with tourism development can be observed.

Thailand, with its free-market economy, was until recently the only country in the region to have systematically developed a tourism industry, designed to boost foreign exchange earnings, investment and job creation. With the collapse of the state socialist block in the late 1980s, however, all Mekong nations decided to reform their economies and promote tourism as an engine for growth.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Mekong countries have increasingly participated in regional economic cooperation programs. The most important program is the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) initiative, led by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The GMS tourism program

Established in 1992, the GMS initiative has become the prime mover of Mekong tourism. Through the ADB, the initiative has financed or co-financed over 100 infrastructure projects - including road, railway, water and air transport, electricity generation and telecommunication - aimed at developing regional tourism and trade.³

The GMS tourism working group - known as the Agency for Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities (AMTA) - is based at the headquarters of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, in Bangkok.⁴ It has garnered support from governments, international aid agencies, large industry associations and corporations to promote the Mekong basin area as a single tourism market and to remove physical, economic, organizational and legal barriers to travel that are still hampering the visitor industry in the region. Apart from the ADB, representatives of the six Mekong countries' national tourism organizations, international tourism associations such as the World Tourism Organization, the Pacific Asia Travel Association, the Association of South-east Asian Nations' Travel Association, as well as the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific have been involved in the program.

The GMS tourism policy emphasizes "sustainable tourism" and "ecotourism" as worthy goals. The Concept Plan for tourism development in the Greater Mekong Subregion 1999-2018, which outlines the GMS strategy for the next 20 years, forecasts that the Mekong will be "one of the world's most important ecotourism and cultural tourism destinations" by 2018.⁵

However, the list of proposed priority projects reflects a heavy emphasis on establishing large-scale transportation systems and tourism complexes. The plan is to attract 2-2.5 million new international tourists per year to the Mekong area by the end of

2006 (over the current level of 14.1 million visitors in 2000); and even higher growth rates are expected in the following years after the ADB's infrastructure program is completed.⁶

The massive GMS program appears to be incompatible with the concept of "ecotourism", which is supposed to nurture small-scale, environmentally and socially sound development. For instance, the GMS initiative envisions the creation of several "economic corridors" linking various parts of the region with advanced transportation facilities, some of which are already underway. The rapid construction of highways, ports and airports, along with hotels, resorts, casinos and other facilities, has already caused damages to ecosystems, disruption of community life and made local people vulnerable to exploitation by tourism and other industries.

The harsh realities of Mekong tourism

Thailand receives about 70 percent of the tourists coming to the GMS and has seen the number of visitors soar over the last 20 years from one million to almost 10 million annually. The country's tourism industry has often been described by academics and the local and international media as a negative model. There are countless media reports, academic studies and NGO statements on how reckless development has resulted in the environmental degradation of many places, exacerbated economic inequalities and contributed to undesirable social changes, such as the proliferation of the sex industry, AIDS, drug abuse, gambling, crime and cultural erosion.⁷

Official and industry leaders framing Mekong tourism insist that with improved planning and management, past mistakes can be avoided in new destinations. But in fact, uncontrolled and outright destructive tourism activities have spread throughout the region over the last decade. Even officials and tourism entrepreneurs have expressed worries about the deterioration of unique cultural and natural attractions. These include UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Luang Prabang in Laos, Pagan in Burma, Halong Bay in Vietnam and Lixiang in Yunnan.⁸

Since the late 1980s, the aggressive promotion of golf tourism, first in Thailand and then in other Mekong countries, has also posed immense pressure on local communities and ecosystems. The construction of golf courses - often involving other large-scale developments such as hotels, residential houses, shopping centres, entertainment facilities, power plants, access roads and even airports - has come under heavy attack for consuming large stretches of land, replacing biodiversity-rich wilderness areas, fertile agricultural land and farming communities. Critics have also pointed out the enormous waste of water resources and the excessive application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides for the maintenance of the courses.⁹

More often than not, local communities have not been properly informed about the projects and the impacts they may have, such as deforestation, contamination, disruption of community life and even forceful eviction of villagers. In Thailand, several golf course developers have been accused of illegally grabbing land and encroaching on protected areas, and it is an open secret that politicians and military officers have financial stakes in the projects.¹⁰

In Thailand, environmentalists have for many years campaigned to stop the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Royal

Forestry Department (RFD) from opening up national parks to private tourism businesses. Under the pretext of “ecotourism”, the RFD has in recent years implemented large-scale infrastructure projects in many national parks, with funding from the World Bank and Japanese Bank for International Cooperation. These projects have involved the clearance of many park areas for the construction of roads, parking lots, visitor centres, bungalows, campsites and other facilities, despite growing public criticism and local citizens’ protests.¹¹

Sustainable tourism?

A hard look at tourism development in the Mekong subregion leads to the conclusion that the policies pursued by national tourism authorities and supranational bodies have been those most suitable for promoting the industry rather than for the protection of the environment and the well-being of local communities.

National and regional tourism agencies have done little to develop effective mechanisms to monitor and control developments aimed at curbing environmental, social and cultural problems resulting from rapid tourism expansion. Management plans, if there are any, are often sidelined, and environmental, zoning and construction laws are not being properly enforced. Many critical tourism-related issues - such as corruption, social vices, encroachment of public lands and diversion of natural resources, displacement of local and indigenous communities, and political suppression and human rights abuses - have been typically neglected by tourism policy-makers and project managers.

Whereas the concept of “sustainable tourism” implies a high degree of public participation in the development process, Mekong tourism remains a “top-down” affair. Despite the fact that governments and international institutions, including the ADB, have in recent years vowed to work with civil society organizations to involve all stakeholders in development initiatives, critics remain highly skeptical.

Indeed, there is so far little, if any, evidence that civil society has more say in shaping tourism policies at the national and regional levels. In Thailand, people can at least to some extent advance their interests through a well-established NGO movement and a relatively free press. But in other Mekong countries, ordinary citizens barely have an opportunity to make their voices heard due to the lack of democratic institutions. A case in point is military-run Burma that has been subjected to an international tourism boycott because of its rampant human rights abuses.¹²

There is no adequate public discussion on crucial questions relating to tourism development, such as: Who owns the land and natural resources earmarked for tourism; where and how tourism-related facilities and infrastructure should be built; or how to handle the anticipated mass influx of visitors in the region; and how exactly to minimize tourism’s impacts and conflicts of interests between government, industry and ordinary citizens?

The old question, who actually benefits from tourism, also needs to be raised anew, particularly in the face of globalization and liberalization. As with Third World tourism in general, Mekong tourism is largely driven by foreign corporate interests, and the economic gains are often greatly over-estimated. A 2001

UNCTAD study found that the economic viability of tourism in less developed countries is threatened by levels of external financial ‘leakages’ that can easily reach 75 per cent.¹³ That means a high proportion of tourism revenue never reaches destination countries or leaves as profits to foreign tourism companies or in exchange for goods and services imported to meet the demand from the tourism sector.

The pressure on governments to open up their travel and tourism industries is being augmented by the structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis - despite increasing recognition of the risks. For instance, most of today’s foreign direct investment in tourism in the region is not devoted to new job-creating projects but primarily to mergers and acquisitions. Transnational corporations are rapidly buying up domestic tourism-related companies, which results in a massive transfer of wealth to foreign corporate hands.¹⁴

This situation is compounded by ongoing efforts to deregulate the travel and tourism sector under the World Trade Organization (WTO)/ General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) system. There are grave concerns that progressive liberalization of the service sector further undermines the economic viability of local enterprises and countries’ ability to allocate necessary resources for the preservation of natural and cultural assets and sustainable community development.¹⁵

In addition to the political, social and ethnic turmoil that characterizes many parts of the Mekong basin area, events such as the Gulf Crisis in 1991, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the last year’s September 11 attacks in the United States, have shown the highly volatile nature of the global tourism industry. Countries that rely heavily on tourism income, are most vulnerable to unexpected setbacks, with millions of people directly and indirectly involved in the industry immediately facing greater economic and social insecurity.

For all these reasons, Mekong countries and regional inter-governmental agencies should recognize that unbridled tourism promotion and development is an unsustainable route for any country and region. Rather than opening up more and more areas in the name of “ecotourism”, decision-makers need to be persuaded to develop and implement proper rehabilitation programs for areas already affected by inequitable and damaging tourism. Instead of relinquishing control over land and natural and cultural resources to outside tourism corporations and other forces of commercialization, the top priority should be to strengthen local residents’ rights to self-determined development. Innovative strategies are needed to help people in tourist areas create a new identity and rebuild livable communities - in social, economic, cultural and environmental terms.

¹ This article is based on a longer paper, entitled “Mekong Tourism - Model or Mockery?: A Case Study on ‘Sustainable Tourism’”, published as a booklet in Third World Network’s TWN Environment & Development Series (No.3), Penang 2001.

² This region includes Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan province of southern China.

³ ADB (1996), *Greater Mekong Subregion: Sixth Conference on Subregional Cooperation*, Kunming, Yunnan, People’s Republic of China, 28-30 August; see also ADB (2001), *ADB’s Role in the GMS Program*, <http://www.adb.org/GMS>.

RESPONSES TO FEATURE

Is there a clue to the future of the GMS tourism industry?

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pham Trung Luong

It is now somewhat early and hard to draw a conclusion on the sustainability of the tourism industry in the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion).

The tourism industry in the region is currently in the first stage of its life cycle. Similar to any other newly established development, governments are giving more priority to attracting huge investments in developing their tourism infrastructure and facilities. The strategic decisions of governments could be well justified by the fact that the tourism sectors in these countries are boosted from weak infrastructure platforms. Meanwhile, the policy-makers and planners realize that inadequate infrastructure is one of the most serious constraints to future prospects for tourism development.

Clearly, infrastructure development and preservation of tourism resources are a two-fold concept. That is to say, if the development is properly planned and managed, it can positively contribute to preservation of tourism resources; otherwise, it will undermine, or more seriously, destroy the fragile assets.

Regarding development planning, all the regional countries have already undertaken several master and detailed planning projects, at both national and provincial level, as well as with the participation of both national and international policy-makers and planners. In Vietnam, the national master plan on tourism development was formulated in 1995 and has been revised every 3 years in order to keep up with socio-economic development of the country. The latest update of the plan, containing the concept of sustainable tourism and keeping up with developments in the global tourism industry was in 2001 under a WTO project financed by UNDP and has been in effect up to now. The plan has functioned as a base on which provincial master plans and detailed plans for specific developments have been developing systematically. Such a system has been creating a strong mechanism for state management of the tourism sector in the country. Similarly, in Cambodia the government has set forth the strategy for tourism development based on cultural heritage and the natural environment. Policies, planning and control measures for environmental management of tourism should focus on the carrying capacity of the environment as well as follow integrated land use planning for tourism areas. Last but not least, in order to gain reliable data about the economic impact of tourism, the Thai government has approved a budget to develop a tourism satellite account (TSA). (TSA is a set of accounts that gives a picture of the benefits of tourism to the economy.) The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has been working closely with WTO and WTTC since 1997 to develop a TSA. Once it is developed, TSA would be used to propose a national tourism policy.

The GMS countries have also promoted regional cooperation on sustainable development of the tourism industry. Good examples can be seen in certain ADB initiatives such as the Mekong

⁴ The agency publishes the quarterly *AMTA-Newsletter* and has recently launched a GMS website www.visit-mekong.com to promote Mekong tourism.

⁵ AMTA (1998), *Concept Plans for Tourism Development in the Greater Mekong Sub-region 1999-2018*, Bangkok.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See for example: Thai Development Support Committee (1991/92), *Regarding Tourism Development in Thailand*, *Thai Development Newsletter*, No.20; Thailand Environment Institute (1994), 'Tourism, Ecology and 'Sustainable Development' ', Special Issue of the *TEI Quarterly Environment Journal* 2(4); Cohen, E. (1996), *Thai Tourism: Hill Tribes, Islands and Open-Ended Prostitution*, Bangkok; issues of *New Frontiers*.

⁸ For more information on problematic tourism developments at World Heritage Sites and other destinations in Mekong neighbouring countries, see various issues of *New Frontiers*.

⁹ *GAG'M Updates* (1993-1996), a documentation series by the Global Anti-Golf Movement, published by Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Penang.

¹⁰ Pleumarom, A. (1994), 'Sport and Environment: Thailand's Golf Boom Reviewed', *TEI Quarterly Environment Journal*, 2(4).

¹¹ Tim-team (2000), *Tourism Projects in Thai National Parks Funded by the World Bank/Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF) Social Investment Programme*, <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/iye7.htm>.

¹² As for the debate on tourism and human rights in Burma and campaigns against 'Visit Myanmar Year', see for example, Sutcliffe 1994, Tim-Team 1994; NCGUB 1995; Pilger 1996; Parnwell 1998; various issues of *New Frontiers*, *Burma Issues* and *The Irrawaddy*; websites of the Free Burma Coalition <http://www.freeburma.org> and Tourism Concern <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk>.

¹³ UNCTAD (2001), *The Sustainability of International Tourism in Developing Countries*, Paper presented to the OECD Seminar on Tourism Policy and Economic Growth, Berlin, 6-7 March 2001, <http://www.oecd.org/dsti/sti/transport/tourism/news/UNCTAD.pdf>

¹⁴ Pleumarom, A. (1999), *Tourism, Globalization and Sustainable Development*, Third World Resurgency, No.103, March.

¹⁵ Pleumarom, A. (1999), Foreign Takeover of Thailand's Tourism Industry: The Other Face of Liberalization, *Third World Network Briefing Paper for the 7th session of the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD7)*.

Anita Pleumarom presently coordinates the Bangkok-based Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team and is editor of *New Frontiers - Briefing on Tourism, Development and Environment Issues in the Mekong Subregion*.

- Lancang Tourism Planning Study project and the West-East Economic Development Corridor project. Furthermore, the relevant international organizations in the region such as WB, ADB and JICA have been increasingly paying more attention to facilitation of sustainable development in the region through several ODA and TA projects.

Apart from making systematic development planning, governments have also been taking several other strategic actions in order to realize sustainable development in the tourism industry. Thailand recognized that management of tourism resources should involve people at all levels in the industry. All stakeholders have a role in monitoring the impact of tourism, assessing the environment, collecting data and balancing carrying capacity with tourists' demand. Strong emphasis is given to ecological and cultural sensitivity, conserving biodiversity, finding alternative energy sources and managing waste disposal. The government would have a major role through linkages between policy and community participation, as well as developing national laws and regulations. Thailand places few impediments on visas for international tourists, especially those from major markets. Facilitation of travel in the form of visa exemptions or visas on arrival applies to about 158 countries. Immigration procedures have been facilitated for tourists at 30 permanent checkpoints and other checkpoints could be opened on request. The more tourists coming, the more economically sustainable are the country's tourism industry.

In Vietnam, the Vietnam National Administration for Tourism (VNAT) has been actively undertaking a greater role in the guidance of tourism development. Under the State Action Program on Tourism Development in the year 2000, VNAT has conducted six national projects for the improvement of service offerings in tourism destinations all over the country, and on intensive promotion in-country and overseas.

However, there has also been abundant evidence, or at least symptoms, of unsustainable development in these tourism industries. Except in the case of public hearings in Thailand, local communities have had little opportunity to be directly involved in and benefit from tourism development. Human resources development in the tourism sector has been severely constrained due to the low level of qualifications of tourism personnel in terms of average education level and low education standards. As for Thailand, the demand for labour in the tourism sector was expected to increase by 56 per cent per year, with the greatest demand in the accommodation and restaurant business. At the same time, just over half of all people working in the tourism industry were educated only to high school level. Many of these people had few opportunities for training, especially to develop technical skills and management and language capabilities. There has also been weak cooperation between tourism and other relevant economic sectors in the exploitation of resources. That is why, in April 1999, the WB supported the organization of an international conference in Halong Bay, Vietnam, in order to address problems which had become critical. In addition, it is possible to observe several natural and cultural problems such as pollution, biodiversity losses, deforestation and prostitution.

What are all these arguments about? To conclude, it can be said that the future of tourism industries in GMS countries depends heavily on all the players themselves. As for the governments

and incumbent international organizations, they should find the appropriate way to involve and empower local communities and the private business sector in sustainable tourism development activities, instead of making unrealistic plans, guidelines, and strategies. These local communities and the private business sector themselves should be more active in organizing provision of services, and understand benefits from tourism development that ultimately encourage them to protect tourism resources.

Last but importantly, governments and the incumbent international organizations should give priority to implementation of planned development infrastructure projects in the region. They should set aside appropriate amounts of investment capital in order to finance priority projects, especially those relating to environmental conservation. Also, they should give more technical assistance as well as tighten global supervision in the implementation of these infrastructure projects.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Pham Trung Luong is Vice Director of the Institute for Tourism Development Research, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Response 2

by Pradech Phayakvichien

In general Anita Pleumarom's article has expressed her point of view with clarity as well as raised a few concerns related to the tourism development in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), which is part of the economic cooperation program being led by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Apart from anything else, this tends to reflect negativity on the construction of infrastructure projects. It is an understandable fact that if we want to increase the number of tourists, good accessibility is a must; this includes good all-weather roads, ports, airports, railways, etc. When these are available, they not only benefit tourism but the livelihood and well-being of the local people.

The GMS tourism program, initiated in 1992, received the full support of the ADB as well as many international organizations. A secretariat, called the Agency for Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities (AMTA), was set up in 1997 with its main support from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). It is seen as an effective mechanism to follow up agreed tourism projects under the supervision of the tourism working group. Balance between promotional and development activities has been achieved at certain levels. A case in point is the joint effort with the Canadian University Consortium (CUC) to promote sustainable tourism through the "Village-Based Tourism" project which aims to improve the living standard of local people through an acceptable scale of tourism development. A stakeholders' meeting is planned in order to allow an interactive discussion among those concerned. It is also a positive sign for this GMS Economic Cooperation framework when "poverty reduction" programs are prominent in most of the sectors including tourism. Reports and studies are being compiled to be used as models and guidelines for poverty reduction activities.

I would like to stress that it is not a case of agreeing or disagree-

NEWS FROM THE REGION

River Dialogue in Thailand

The Mekong component of the **Dialogue on River Basin Development and Civil Society in the Mekong Region** which the AMRC organised, in cooperation with key civil society partners in the Mekong Region, was held in Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand, on 8-12 November. At its peak there were around 250 people attending the conference - many were Thai farmers. A number of delegates from both the Mekong Region and Australia who attended the Brisbane Workshop in September also took part in the Ubon conference. Those attending included representatives from various civil society groups in the Mekong, local and international NGOs, the MRC, government line agencies as well as academics.

The first day of the conference was a Workshop for Policy Makers entitled **“Civil society in river basin development: obstacles, opportunities and directions in policy and practice in the Mekong Region”**. Three case studies, from northern and north-east Thailand, the Se San River Basin in Cambodia and the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, were presented in the morning session. All examples were based on a critique of existing development and revealed how the problems of development and the nature of civil society were viewed in different ways at different levels. After lunch the National Mekong Committees of Vietnam, Thailand and Laos presented their perspectives of participation and cooperation in development of the Mekong River Basin.

The weekend Public Forum and Conference segment, called **“Civil Society, Water Resources Development and Livelihood Futures in the Mekong Basin”**, comprised a mix of formal presentations, panel discussions and questions from the floor. It brought in lessons that had been learnt from the Australian experience. These included that: while it is never too late to start fixing things up, it is very expensive to rectify problems later; the poor and the environment tend to bear the cost; community processes and politics have been integral to the approach we now have in Australia; official liaison programmes tend to put community processes and politics in the background; it is necessary to recognise differences of context.

Monday was devoted to study tours of the Pak Mun and Rasi Salai dam sites. Villagers had the opportunity to explain to the visitors how their livelihoods had been adversely affected by these hydropower developments. In the evening a performance of Isan region music and dance along with a delicious meal was organised for conference participants at Ubon Ratchathani University.

The morning of the final day comprised four workshops focussing on: privatisation of water resources; civil society's role in river basin development and issues of alternatives; the impact of large-scale river development structures on fisheries, riverine ecosystems and livelihoods; and cross border issues in Mekong River Basin development. In the afternoon a short march took place from the centre of Ubon city to the Mun River bridge where a banner was displayed declaring that the state should return water management to the people in the Mekong Region. This was followed by a symbolic launching of small bamboo boats bearing incense sticks and candles.

ing with Anita Pleumarom's article. The issues being raised are happening everywhere around the world, not only in the GMS or Thailand. The world's economies are moving rapidly; tourism is also an integral part of that phenomenon. Are we going to stand still and let the rest of the world go by? Instead I would like to look at it from a wider perspective. In every field of progress and development, we are faced with positive and negative aspects. There is no escape from that. In the case of Thailand, bitter lessons from the past are being remedied in terms of concepts and applications in order to achieve sustainable goals with maximum economic and social benefits.

Anita showed concern that in Mekong countries there is still a lack of control over the direction of tourism development as well as an appropriate way to handle a large number of visitors. In the case of our neighbouring countries, they are also trying to develop their tourism industries, understandably for the cash needed to fuel other necessary projects such as healthcare and education. To assist this scenario is to provide information as truthfully as possible and include all the pitfalls, so that these countries can benefit from our experiences.

In response to her prime concern over the conflict between ecotourism and sustainable tourism development, I would like to stress one particular point. In my opinion, ecotourism is only one part of the overall picture of sustainable tourism development. There are other equally important factors in the overall picture of development. One of them relates to the standard and sufficiency of tourism-related infrastructure.

I agree with the point raised about a proper rehabilitation program in the damaged areas. Also at the top of the agenda is the strengthening of local residents' rights to self-determined development. In this respect, the Tourism Authority of Thailand itself has initiated a project to evaluate the status of tourism attractions around the country. This is to ensure that a proper rehabilitation program is being carried out effectively.

Anita raised her concern about the impact from rapid expansion of tourism on the environment and local communities. I quite agree, despite the fact that in most kinds of development there are prices to be paid in particular Mekong countries. It will take some time to build-up an effective mechanism to monitor and control development in order to minimise negative impacts on society and the environment. In the case of Thailand, it is high time to re-engineer the growth of tourism. One way to do that is to have a clear tourism policy as well as practice strategies based on analysis of short term gain versus long term gain from tourism development. Destination management and product quality are two crucial issues for long term success.

In Thailand, at present, the government has initiated various development projects to promote a “self sufficient economy” among villagers in the rural areas. This is the concept initiated by H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand and it has proven very useful as a basis for sustainable development in the long run.

Pradech Phayakvichien, a former Tourism Authority of Thailand governor, is currently an advisor there. He is also a frequent guest speaker at various international organisations, especially the World Tourism Organisation.

While there no doubt were shortfalls in some aspects of the Dialogue, overall it proved a very worthwhile effort by providing opportunities for the airing of issues before key stakeholders and by facilitating vigorous behind-the-scenes networking activities.

AUSTRALIAN MEKONG NEWS

Alarm at Mekong Basin Development

At the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion) meeting preceding the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh in early November, leaders from the six Mekong countries backed large-scale development projects for the region. However, at the *Regional Environmental Forum for Mainland Southeast Asia* held in Phnom Penh and *Dialogue on River Basin Development and Civil Society in the Mekong Region* held in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, environmental activists warned of the serious harm such projects would inflict upon the ecology of the basin and people's livelihoods. The ADB is the major funder of GMS projects. There is particular concern about the downstream effects of the series of dams underway in China's Yunnan province. The MRC has also come under fire for not acting proactively enough in response to transboundary impacts of development such as the Yali Falls Dam on the Se San River.

-- 2002 "Leaders back huge projects for Mekong but activists warn of environmental harm", Bangkok Post, 4 November 2002

Wasant Techawongtham 2002 "Call to improve transparency - govts urged to allow input by civic groups", Bangkok Post, 18 November 2002

NEWS FROM THE CENTRE

National University of Laos

Phil Hirsch has recently worked with staff at the National University of Laos in two activities to round off a three year training program for 12 university teachers from four faculties in local natural resource management research. The program, supported by the International Development Research Centre (Canada), has taken the NUOL staff through the entire research process from conceptual development, through formulating questions, to research planning and proposal writing, fieldwork, analysis, writing up and presentation. The first part of the final stage involved report-backs in each of the three village research sites in early November, a useful opportunity to present findings back to the villagers with whom the NUOL staff and external resource persons (from AMRC, York University, Chiangmai University and East-West Centre) have been working, to check data and interpretations, and to hone presentation skills in village settings. The second part of the wrap-up involved a one-day workshop at NUOL on 3 December, followed by a national workshop on the Land and Forest Allocation Program hosted by the University on 5-6 December, to which a number of governmental, non-governmental and international agencies were invited to participate. The latter event was a milestone for NUOL in hosting a critical review of natural

resource management practice and policy. The next phase of our work with NUOL will be focusing both on further research skills development and on the role of NUOL in managing and facilitating research that has both practical and teaching relevance.

Political ecology of risk

AMRC is now host to a three year project entitled, "Toward a political ecology of risk in river basin development: the case of the Mekong". The research is funded by the Australian Research Council's "Discovery Project" scheme (2003-5) and will be carried out by Phil Hirsch and Andrew Wyatt. The project focuses on water resource infrastructure (dams in upper Mekong catchments, irrigation in central parts of the basin, and flood protection infrastructure in the Delta) to examine the distribution and redistribution of risk associated with environmental change and large-scale development interventions. The work is aimed at conceptual development in the field of political ecology, looking at how uncertainty inherent in water resource infrastructure development is dealt with in the context of prevailing power structures and value systems, and hence shapes the social construction and social distribution of environmental risk. At a practical level, the research will involve document reviews associated with project planning and assessment and interviews with key decision makers, affected groups and other stakeholders.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The Second International Symposium on the Management of Large Rivers for Fisheries: Sustainable Livelihoods and Biodiversity in the New Millennium

11-14 February 2003, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Contact: Chris Barlow, LARS2 Coordinator, Mekong River Commission, PO Box 1112, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Email: barlow@mrcmekong.org
<http://www.lars2.org/>

3rd World Water Forum

16-23 March 2003, Kyoto, Japan

Contact: WWF Registration Office
Telephone: (81.3) 5212.1640
Email: registration@water-forum3.com
<http://www.worldwaterforum.org/eng/index.html>

The events listed above are changed with each issue of Mekong Update & Dialogue. For a complete list of upcoming events please go to our website at www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au. For submission of new events please contact the AMRC Administrator at mekong@mail.usyd.edu.au

IMAGES OF ECOTOURISM IN THE MEKONG



*Tour board, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
(Source: Kate Lloyd)*



Karen village set up to receive tourists in north-west Thailand. (Source: Anucha Leksakundilok)



A local village along the way to Luang Prabang, Laos, where tourists have an opportunity to view pottery making and other aspects of lifestyle. (Source: Olivia Dun)



Elephant treks are part of community-based ecotourism at Ban Kiad Ngong in southern Laos. (Source: Phil Hirsch)

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