



Fact Sheet: Mekong Mainstream Dams

The Mekong River is under threat. The governments of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand are planning eleven big hydropower dams on the Mekong River's mainstream. If built, these dams would block major fish migrations and disrupt this vitally important river, placing at risk millions of people who depend upon the Mekong for their food security and income.

Since the 1950s, several mega-schemes to dam the Lower Mekong River's mainstream have been proposed. The most recent plan, prepared by the inter-governmental Mekong Secretariat in 1994, was shelved in part due to public outcry over the predicted impacts on the river's fisheries and the large number of people who would be displaced or otherwise affected.

The Mekong River supports one of the world's most productive inland fisheries, which feeds over sixty million people. Official estimates put its value at between US\$2-3 billion annually. Yet, even this staggering figure understates the true value, as fisheries are also central to peoples' nutrition and food security. Experience around the world points to the fact there is no way of mitigating such large dams' impacts on fisheries.

The undammed Mekong River also has an extraordinary aquatic biodiversity, second only to the Amazon. Building mainstream dams would push the endangered species such as the Irrawaddy Dolphin, the Mekong Giant Catfish, and countless other migratory fish species to the brink of extinction. Losing this ecological wealth would be a tragedy of global proportions.

As the Mekong River sustains both rural and urban populations and is intimately linked to local cultures and traditions, the recent revival of plans for dams on the river's mainstream will undermine the region's prospects for sustainable development. China's dam construction on the Upper Mekong mainstream (Lancang) has already caused serious environmental problems on downstream Burma, northern Thailand and northern Lao PDR. Declining fish stocks and unpredictable water levels have made life more difficult for downstream communities, pointing towards the damage that mainstream dams will inflict.

The bulk of electricity generated by the Mekong mainstream dams is destined for distant energy-hungry cities in Thailand and Vietnam. Yet the region's urban electricity needs could be better met by improving energy efficiency and deploying recent innovations in decentralized energy technologies. By adopting policies that encourage investment in new energy technologies, Mekong governments could leapfrog 1950s-era big hydro and start growing sustainable, modern economies. Securing electricity supply in this peaceful way would also avoid cross-border disputes arising from these dams' cross-border impacts.



Location of proposed Mekong mainstream dams

Over the past decade, public concern about extensive plans for large hydropower dams throughout the Mekong region has been growing. Since early 2006, these concerns reached new heights when the plans for eleven large dams on the lower Mekong mainstream were revived. Potentially-affected riverside communities, civil society groups, academics, journalists, businesses, and the general public within the Mekong region and internationally have all raised their concerns. In November 2007, 201 individuals and organizations co-signed a campaign letter to the inter-governmental Mekong River Commission, and in November 2008, 300 people joined the Mekong Public Forum in Bangkok about the Mekong mainstream dams, raising concerns about the threats that they pose.

Continued efforts by civil society groups over the past two years to ensure disclosure of information on the impacts of the dam from major actors, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC), have received limited response. The MRC is an intergovernmental agency with a history of promoting hydro development along the mainstream that dates back to the 1950s. Today the agency is supported by the lower Mekong governments and survives on international donor aid from the World Bank, Australia, Denmark, Finland, France, Japan and Sweden, amongst others. Despite its mandate to promote sustainable development of the Mekong River, the MRC has failed to adequately respond to the threat posed by Mekong mainstream dams.



The **Save the Mekong coalition** is open to non-government organizations, community groups, academics, artists and ordinary citizens within the Mekong region and internationally, anyone who shares concerns regarding the future of one of the world's greatest river systems. It was formed in response to the public's growing concern about the effects dams on the Mekong River's mainstream would have on the Mekong's migratory fish stocks, regional food security, and the livelihoods of millions of people. The **Save the Mekong coalition** aims to do two things: to raise further public awareness about the risks associated with damming such an important international river, and to persuade policymakers to adopt more sustainable and peaceful ways of meeting people's energy and water needs.

For more information visit www.savethemekong.org and sign the online petition at <http://tinyurl.com/Save-the-Mekong>

