

'The Lower Mekong, Water, War, Watts'

Presentation by Jim Holmes

Monday 12 April 2021



Before the presentation, Jim had circulated a very informative summary of his talk and notes of his extensive career, which included almost 15 years living in Laos with a strong connection to the Mekong River in the course of his photography work, including work with the transboundary body the Mekong River Commission.



By way of introduction, Jim showed maps of the 2,500 mile Mekong River and its course through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam to the South China Sea, where its delta is known as “The 9 Mouths of the Dragon”. He explained some of the science behind its management and showed some of its wildlife. Management of the river can be difficult because it flows through so many countries, which results in transnational issues.

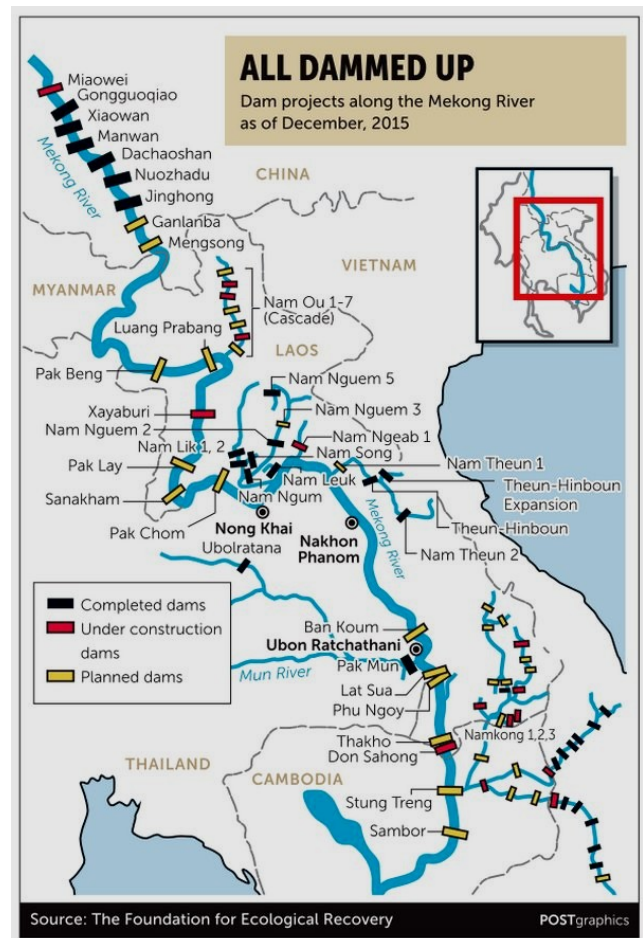
Dams on the Mekong mainstream have been planned since the 1950’s but the first was completed in 1995 in China. Since the 1990s, 12 others have been built along the course of the Mekong River for hydro-electric-power generation and many more are planned. This has had a detrimental effect on the life of the River. There is some benefit to damming tributaries, but impeding the main channel of the River is having devastating effects on biodiversity. Jim noticed a dramatic reduction in the water flow during the years he spent in Laos.

The main effect of damming the river is the depletion of fish stocks. Fish is the staple diet and main livelihood source for 70 million people, so this effect is devastating.

Jim showed an impressive slide of various local fishing techniques. January and February full moons bring the largest yields and in some places it is possible to catch 40 species in 1½ hours. There is a 9th Century carving of fish on the Angkor Wat Temple and many of the species depicted on it and can still be identified today. The Mekong has the second largest fishery catch in the World and there are estimated to be 400 – 1000 species of fish in the river.

Encouragingly, there is conservation research focussed on the Mekong River, including an area for wetland conservation on the Cambodian Border designated under the intergovernmental RAMSAR Convention. There is also further research in Vietnam.

Jim looked in detail at the Tonlé Sap Lake in Cambodia, which covers ten times its Dry Season area during the Wet Season. Its outflow joins the Mekong River downstream but the river actually reverses its flow into the lake during the rainy season – but recently, with reduced flow in the main river, this flow back into the lake has not been happening.



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In the delta region of the Mekong River, salination – the intrusion of water because of the reduced river flow – is a big threat to biodiversity. This is causing a reduction in rice production; in some places it is possible to grow 3 crops per year, but this may not continue. There is research into rice strains better able to withstand the salty environment. Another destructive industry in the lower reaches of the river is prawn farming. Mangrove swamps and melaleuca forest that grow on brackish muddy deltas have been chopped down, so cyclones will decimate villages as there is no protection from rising sea levels and storms. Oxfam is currently supporting projects trying to plant mangroves in the marginal soil.

Jim hopes to return to the area one day!

Questions:

BP asked why China only has “observer status” in the Mekong River Commission, given the extensive headwaters within China. Jim replied that there are lots of issues and noted that China and Laos have had amicable relations for the past 20 years. China, Laos, Thailand Cambodia and Vietnam all realize there are problems caused by the mainstream dams, but the Lower Mekong Countries (the groups without China) had been unable to influence China’s mainstream dam construction frenzy. China has observer status at the MRC.

GM commented that China is diverting water from the south of the country to address a water shortage in the north and Jim agreed that some of this is sourced from the Mekong River.

LS asked about the species of tree in the wetlands on the Cambodian Border, their huge mass of exposed roots shown in the photos. Jim informed us they are 70 metre Tropical trees – he will research the species and will supply this information.

GM asked about the effects of Climate Change on the Mekong River. Jim responded that these effects are already massive. The Rainy Season arrives later, which affects fishing and agriculture. The rice crop is consequently later, particularly for rain-fed upland rice (as opposed to paddy rice). All the effects are worsened by the lack of forest cover as there is less evaporation and poorer soil quality.

Mike Clark asked whether there were issues with the kinds of projects funded by the World Bank. Historically, Laos wanted to be the “battery of Asia” and persuaded the World Bank to assist with hydro-electric-power. Jim added that it is his personal view that the World Bank made some questionable policy decisions in the past but as with all research led organisations has changed its policies as new results emerge.

CG asked about controlling the water through the flow of dams and Jim replied that not all dams have fish ladders and as the water flow is held back during the early part of the wet season, while dams are being refilled, fish are not travelling to spawning grounds and cannot get through the dams that have impassable bypass channels.

CG asked about whether people are changing their diet as a consequence of depleting fish stocks. Jim added that they are eating more animals – and that grazing adds more stress to the land by requiring more grazing land by the removal of forest cover. Investing in animals costs money, but fish was free and readily available year-round.

Finally, SS asked – possibly drawing together the thoughts of the assembled throng – when can we have a CWDF Trip to the Mekong River!

For further information:

Mekong River Commission website <https://www.mrcmekong.org/>

Jim Holmes website <https://www.jimholmes.co.uk/index>

Terry Green hosted the meeting, welcomed Jim as a previous CWDF contributor, chaired the Questions and thanked all participants, particularly Jim.

Gill Miller provided the Zoom opportunity and necessary driving support.

Present on Zoom screens: Gill Miller, Terry Green, Katy & Brian Rowe, Bernard Payne, Heather Lannin, John Freeman, Linda & Stewart Shuttleworth, John Tacon, Mohammed Ahmed, Arnold Wilkes, Georgina Wilson, Ann McCarthy, Catherine Green, Mike Clark, Lindsay Cussons, Vicki Jenner

Apologies received from Heather Swainston and Angela Macquiban.

At the close of the meeting, Terry asked our assembly whether they wished the Committee to arrange further such “extra” Forum sessions. A show of “screen hands” confirmed this.