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In Life on the Mekong, China's Dams Dominate

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This is the last of three articles examining China's rising power in the Asia-Pacific region as it extends new economic, diplomatic and cultural ties.

Jane Perlez looks at the effect of Chinese activity on those who live down the Mekong River.

CHIANG KHONG, Thailand - For countless generations, fishermen along the Mekong River have passed their lore and way of life from father to son: the rhythms of the water, the habits of the many kinds of fish, the best nets and traps to use to survive and prosper.

But Sri Sumwantha, 70, one of the old men of Asia's majestic river, has left his delicate pirogue tied up at the riverbank for longer stretches than usual. Through green bamboo stands, he has watched the caramel-colored current slow and surge unpredictably and his catch diminish. Now, he worries how much longer his family can live off the river.

The reason is China. China's ravenous appetite for hydroelectric power at home and its thrust southward into Southeast Asia in search of trade is changing the very character of the Mekong. This is true not only in China itself, but also for the five nations and 60 million rural people downstream for whom the great river serves as their life's blood.

Several hundred miles upstream from Sri Sumwantha's simple home, China has completed two dams. It is pushing ahead with three more and has three others on the drawing board. Just about 70 miles away from here, China has blasted reefs and rocks at the border of Laos and Myanmar to clear the way for its trading vessels to reach new markets deep into Laos.

The effects of the river projects that serve China's colossal upstream ambitions have been visible for several years, but are growing more worrying, say conservationists and those who live on the river.

The fish species found in this stretch of the Mekong in northern Thailand dwindled from 100 to only 88 last year, said Sayan Khamnueng, a researcher with the Southeast Asia River Network, an environmental group.

Water levels and temperatures have fluctuated widely, threatening the river environment and disrupting the livelihoods of the fishermen and others who depend on the \$2 billion annual catch of migratory fish.

For the fishermen, their revered river, once nearly untouched and steady in its moods, has turned into a fickle sea. "In the past the river was up and down like nature - every three or four days up and down," said Tan Inkew, 72, a fisherman who lives in Meung Kan village. "Now the river is like the sea - up and down, up and down very quickly."

Protests by Mr. Tan and other fishermen helped persuade the Thai government to stop China from blasting the rapids in Thai waters near his home, between the port of Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong.

"We protested outside the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok," Mr. Tan recalled. "We told them to stop blasting - and if they don't stop, we'll fight them."

Still, he worries about the impact of China's dams as well. He recalled how his son was recently out on the water for nine hours but "did not catch one thing."

While Mr. Tan and his neighbors may have scored a small victory, clearly China cannot be kept at bay for long. The Mekong has been protected through the ages by a lack of development, and more recently by wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, as it winds its way on a brawling 2,870-mile journey from the Tibetan plateau to its delta in Vietnam.

But today the countries downstream from China - Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam - have settled into an era of relative peace and have shed their old fears of China, indeed, are currying favor. Booming Thailand is seeking more trade with China. Impoverished Laos and Cambodia want China's aid to kick-start their economies. Myanmar shares China's passion for hydropower to supply future growth.

"China seems to be doing this with impunity," said Aviva Imhof, director of Southeast Asia programs at International Rivers Network, a nongovernmental group in Berkeley, Calif. "The Mekong is slowly being strangled to death. Why aren't the downstream governments challenging China's activities?"

The concern extends beyond environmental groups and fishermen.

Ted Osius, until recently the State Department's regional environmental affairs officer and once a senior White House adviser to Vice President Al Gore, suggests that an unchecked China could turn the Mekong into an ecological disaster, akin to the Yellow River and the Yangtze River.

Erosion has worsened along the Mekong, clouding the river, because the natural flow is often given added force when dams are opened.

"China has a poor record on river protection," Mr. Osius said in a speech in Bangkok, noting that 80 percent of the Yangtze's historic flood plain has already been cut off by a dike and levee system.

Today China's economic and political power along the Mekong is unrivaled. More than ever, it is being strengthened and extended through growing trade and diplomatic ties and its use of new multilateral tools, like the Asian Development Bank.

The bank, a major lender for poverty alleviation, was until now dominated by Japan. China contributed to its capital fund for the first time in 2004 - gaining more power over how the bank's loans are distributed. The impact was immediate.

The bank added a new vice president, Jin Liqun, a former deputy finance minister in Beijing. Most important, the bank's grand plan for roads, bridges and a telecommunications network to knit southern China together with the five other Mekong River countries - a plan 10 years in abeyance - got a quick boost.

Long-stalled work was suddenly under way on a 152-mile road from Yunnan Province across untamed territory to Houey Xai, a Laotian river town just a few hundred yards across the Mekong from Sri Sumwantha's village. Although relatively short, the road provides the vital link to China.

A bridge is also in the works to replace the little ferryboats now used to cross the river. By the end of the decade, China could be connected by roads that cross the Mekong, head down to Bangkok and then run on to Malaysia and finally Singapore.

"China's donation gives them a seat at the donor's table," said Bruce Murray, the bank's representative in Beijing. "When they give, donors always have a certain agenda."

China's new clout can be felt on other important projects as well.

One of the most controversial is a \$1.3 billion dam proposed for the Theun River, a major Mekong tributary in Laos, a plan that has been fought over for more than a decade.

The World Bank is expected to approve loan guarantees for the dam in March. American diplomats say they have quietly supported the World Bank's role - its first dam project in a decade - for fear that otherwise China will step in.

"The Laotians have told the World Bank that if the bank does not guarantee the dam and make it go ahead, they will turn to the Chinese," an American official said. The United States is reluctant to have China build and manage one of Southeast Asia's biggest dams, he said.

China, diplomats and conservationists say, would be much less fussy about the dam's impact than the consortium seeking World Bank support, led by Electricity Generating Authority Thailand (EGAT) and France's state-owned Electricité de France.

Here in Chiang Khong, where the fishermen's bamboo houses are nestled along the banks, the changes to the river that China has already made are quickly causing a way of life to recede, along with the bounty of the Mekong's waters.

Mr. Sayan, of the Southeast Asian River Network, said fishermen had stopped selling their fish at the main market in Chiang Rai. "They don't have enough," he said.

In extreme cases, the fishermen have given up and become laborers, unloading the trading vessels from China that dock at Chiang Saen, laden with fruits and vegetables, electronics and cheap garments. "As laborers they become impoverished and are miserable," said Chainarong Srettachau, the director of the river network.

Some fishermen have begun supplementing their incomes with crops. But crops are being hurt, too. China's upstream dams are also holding back as much as 50 percent of the fertile silt that is essential to the soil and that normally flows down river, according to conservationists.

Erosion is also worsening. At Pak Ing, a small village near Chiang Khong, fishermen pointed to a 12-foot-high wall of exposed soil, a muddy mini-cliff where the water, flowing faster because of blasting of the rapids, has cut into once gently sloping riverbanks. The next step will be to erect concrete banks to hold back the land.

Farther downstream, the effects may be even more severe. In Cambodia, an intricate ecology and age-old economy depend on the ebb and flow of the great lake fed by the Mekong, Tonle Sap, which can swell fourfold during the rainy season. The rhythm of life is built around the seasonal tides and the bounty that the waters provide.

The fish catch dropped by almost 50 percent last year, according to the Mekong River Commission. In many areas, the low catches were caused by the sudden fluctuations that occurred when dams in China released water to allow easier passage for trading vessels, said Milton Osborne, an Australian historian and an expert on the Mekong.

The water from the dams is also much colder than the water downstream, affecting the fish, which are extremely sensitive to changes in temperature, Mr. Osborne wrote last year in a paper titled "River at Risk" for the Lowy Institute, a public policy group in Sydney.

Large species in particular had fallen off, he said. The outlook for the river and its vast ecosystem was not promising, he added.

"Because of the enormous imbalance of power between China and the downstream countries," he said, "it is highly unlikely that there will be a halt to China's projected dam building program on the Mekong."

But Mr. Chainarong of the river network was less pessimistic.

"Two or three years ago, people said we would never be able to stop China blasting the Mekong inside Thailand," he said. "But we did."

"One good thing," he noted, "is that China doesn't want to have conflict downstream. That's the challenge. The situation is up to China: does it want to go friendly or hostile?"

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