

In Indochina, 60 million people are living within the Mekong River Basin. Dependence upon natural resources is high in the four riparian countries (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand), three of them being ranked amongst the poorest in the world. This dependence is particularly high for the rural populations who, in addition to rice farming, derive most of their protein intake and earn supplementary or even dominant income from harvested goods. Fish and water-dependent products such as invertebrates or aquatic plants are critically important to the sustenance and economy of rural households. In Cambodia for instance, fish constitute up to 65-75 per cent of total protein in the diet of local populations.

Another peculiarity of the Mekong Basin is that it is seasonally flooded on a large scale. Every year very high flows in the rainy season, combined with low lying terrain in the Lower Basin, cover an area equivalent to that of Ireland. This exceptionally large area of floodplains corresponds with an equally high abundance and diversity of aquatic resources. The Mekong River Commission has recently estimated the fish production of the Lower Mekong between 1.5 and 2 million tons annually. This corresponds with more than 15% of the freshwater fish production worldwide! About 1200 fish species, the third highest number in the world for a river, occur in the Mekong.

Wetlands (including floodplains) are at the heart of this fish species richness, but what will become of many of these species in the future? When due recognition is not given to the wetlands, they are most often converted to permit agricultural intensification, industrialization and urbanization. Benefits then shift towards better off social groups, sustainable goods and services are lost to rural populations, rural poverty and emigration to cities increases.

Wetlands are biologically very rich and productive. Economic valuation is one way to make their usefulness more apparent to decision-makers. Ensuring the sustainability of the natural environment and of the goods it produces calls not only for investment in research and management, but also requires appropriate legal and policy frameworks. The feature article of this issue of NAGA describes an approach aimed at valuing wetlands and use, embedding their protection and use into institutional frameworks, for the sustainable use of poor communities. Beyond the particular case of the Mekong, this approach will be of interest to other countries in the tropical world.

Eric Baran

Why Naga?

The Naga is an underwater creature from Asian mythology. Superior to humans, it inhabits sub-aquatic paradises, living at the bottom of rivers, lakes and seas in resplendent palaces studded with gems and pearls. It is the keeper of the life-energy that is stored in the waters of springs, wells and ponds. It is also the guardian of the riches of the seas – corals, shells and pearls. Naga represents the very focus of ICLARM-The World Fish Center, namely protecting the wealth and productivity of tropical waters.



Cover photos by E. Baran. The many aspects of human use in the wetlands in the Lower Mekong Basin including human settlements, transportation and fisheries.