



"Healthy freshwater ecosystems are established and maintained that enhance and sustain the livelihoods of local communities whilst ensuring the long-term conservation of Mekong basin biodiversity"

WWF & the Mekong River Commission

A Partnership towards Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Natural Resources Management of the Mekong River Basin

In March 2002, WWF signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Mekong River Commission – an intergovernmental organization established in 1995 by an agreement of the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam to facilitate collaboration on regional river development issues. This MOU constitutes the framework upon which decisions are made about projects and activities to be undertaken cooperatively by the two parties.

Since its establishment, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has been fostering regional cooperation among member countries in all fields of sustainable development and management of the river basin and its resources. The MRC's main objective is to promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of the Mekong's water and its resources for the countries' mutual benefit and the people's well-being by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice



WWF's Mission towards a Living Mekong

As one of the multiple actors involved in the Mekong River since 2001, WWF seeks to work with a wide range of key stakeholders, particularly the MRC, towards effective biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resources management of the basin. In recognition of this commitment, WWF was invited to attend the MRC joint committee meetings in 2002 as an observer – the first time an NGO was represented in such a way. Both institutions recognize that this partnership is essential, building on a collaboration of each organization's strengths and their shared vision of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

As part of its general mission, WWF recognizes the Mekong River as one of its highest global priority ecoregions and works to stop the degradation of the river's ecosystem by conserving its biological diversity, and to ensure that its natural resources are being used in a sustainable way. The Living Mekong Initiative (LMI) of WWF's Living Waters Programme is working on the principles of Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) to achieve these objectives. The LMI focuses its work on ensuring:



Unspoiled River under Threat

The Mekong River has been described as one of the most intact trans-boundary large rivers in the world. Its basin is home to over 60 million people with more than 100 different ethnic groups, making it one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world. Most of these people are heavily dependant on the river's natural resources for their livelihoods. The river itself is among the richest in the world in terms of its abundance of aquatic biodiversity, with fish diversity alone rivaled only by the Amazon and the Congo, which cover an area of over seven and four times as large as the Mekong respectively. However, it is coming under increasing pressure from the rapid development and population growth of the region. Some of the ambitious development projects such as the construction of unnecessary or poorly planned dams and flood diversion infrastructures are major obstacles to sustainable management of the river basin and could adversely affect the socio-economic balance of the whole region.

- Policies and mechanisms that significantly reduce major and large scale threats to sustainable livelihoods, biodiversity and social equity of the entire Mekong basin are formulated and used effectively in decision-making processes.
- Effective protection, management and, where necessary, restoration measures are established for critical species, habitats, and ecosystem processes.
- Local people in targeted priority areas sustainably manage and use natural resources to their benefit thus contributing to national economies and regional development.
- Local, national and regional stakeholders have the capacity (awareness, understanding, and skills) to plan and implement long-term biodiversity conservation and sustainable use activities for the Mekong basin.

Combining Efforts

WWF shares the belief that a strong and coordinated river basin organization is the most effective way to plan for and manage the sustainable development and conservation of the Mekong River basin. Thus, MRC and WWF have agreed to increase their cooperation and enter into partnership in fields of common interest which include:

Dams and Energy – Including promoting the acceptance and implementation of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) recommendations, and the holistic approach to meeting the energy needs of the basin (from Demand-Side Management to alternative/renewable energy generation technologies).

Sustainable Management of the Floodplains – Recognizing the values and benefits of the natural flood cycle and working to ensure the integrity of this system, particularly in relation to infrastructure development.

Engaging China and Myanmar – Acknowledging that working on the basin scale is the most effective way to attain socially, economically and environmentally sound solutions for the basin.

Feeding Technical Information into Policy – Collecting, maintaining and disseminating sound technical data to guide and support practical policy development.

National Mekong Committee

The National Mekong Committees (NMCs) serve as a liaison body between the regional MRC and the line agencies of the government of each member country. Their overall goal is to strengthen co-operation by providing a link between the MRC secretariat and the national governments and by coordinating MRC activities at the national level. In Laos PDR, WWF Laos has established a good working relationship with the Laotian NMC and thus LMI attempts to pursue relations with other NMC to assist MRC cooperation and information sharing with national decision-makers.

Collaborative Results to Date

From these common interests, WWF and MRC develop specific activities and areas of collaboration through a detailed annual work plan, monitored using quarterly review meetings. Outcomes achieved to date from this cooperative approach include:

2nd International Large Rivers Symposium – WWF was a sponsor of the event hosted by the government of Cambodia whereas MRC and FAO led the organization. WWF was represented in both the steering and the scientific committees; had panelists in 2 sessions and played an important part in drafting recommendations to form the symposium.

Dams and Energy – WWF-LMI (in collaboration with MRC and IUCN) organized a regional workshop entitled "The Changing Face of Electricity Markets in the Lower Mekong Countries", to discuss the status and potential development orientation of energy demands in the riparian countries. Important conclusions of the workshop supported the suggestion that the demand for electricity in the region has been overestimated in the medium term, and also indicated that the economic competitiveness of dams is likely to fall in the future due to liberalization of the market and the development of alternative technologies.

People and the Environment CD-Rom – WWF-LMI and MRC collaborated to develop an interactive mapping CD-Rom for the Lower Mekong Basin. This CD-ROM packaged the existing core datasets of MRC and additional environmental and social layers to produce an easily accessible conservation planning tool to be distributed to partners, key stakeholders and decision makers in the basin.