



for a living planet®

for a living Mekong

The Situation

The Mekong River - a name that conjures a hundred images - flows for some 4,500 kilometres through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam before discharging into the South China Sea. Its catchment area - home to more than 60 million people - encompasses an extraordinary range of vegetation and geographical features.

Recent political upheavals in the Indochina region have, ironically, protected the Mekong from the dramatic changes in landscape and flood patterns that have damaged the ecology of many of the world's rivers. This offers a unique opportunity to become a model for sustainable development by improving living standards without destroying the environment.

An Abundance of Life

The Mekong River basin is estimated to house at least 1,300 species of fish, a level of diversity that is only rivalled by the Amazon River basin - which is over six times the size of the Mekong basin. Amongst these species are some of the world's largest and most charismatic fish, including the Giant Carp (*Catlocarpio siamensis*), Mekong Stingray (*Dasyatis laosensis*), Largetooth Sawfish (*Pristis microdon*), and one of the world's largest freshwater fish - the Mekong Giant Catfish (*Pangasianodon gigas*). Beyond fish, the Mekong basin is also home to a tremendous diversity of endangered water birds, like Giant Ibis (*Pseudibis gigantea*), and the unique Mekong Wagtail (*Motacilla samveasnae*), as well as other highly endangered species such as the Siamese Crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*) and Irrawaddy Dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*).

The river system is also home to great cultural diversity, with more than 95 distinct ethnic groups living in the Mekong basin. The vast majority of these people are heavily dependant on the river and its natural resources. This point is clearly illustrated by the fact that aquatic resources account for up to 80% of the animal dietary protein of the basin's population. The fisheries of the Mekong are estimated at over US\$ 1,500 million per year.

An Integrated Approach

Not only is the Mekong one of WWF's focal global rivers, but its catchment area also spans several terrestrial habitats of high global significance for biodiversity. Two of these areas, the Lower Mekong Dry Forests and the Greater Annamites, are also focal areas for long term conservation and sustainable development efforts of WWF and its conservation partners.

In such an important region where freshwater and terrestrial systems are so intrinsically linked, both biologically and socially, there are numerous opportunities to integrate activities. The WWF Living Mekong Programme is actively seeking to identify and foster these linkages to enhance its effectiveness and efficiency, and to benefit the region as a whole.

“Healthy freshwater systems are established and maintained that enhance and sustain the livelihoods of local communities, whilst ensuring the long-term conservation of Mekong biodiversity.”

Living Mekong Programme Vision Statement





Photos: WWF/Marc Goichot and Barney Long

WWF explicitly recognizes that it is only one of multiple actors involved in the Mekong River Basin, where there is a well developed framework for international and regional cooperation. In order to ensure that its own role is clearly defined and adds value to the overall management of the river basin, WWF has established strategic partnerships with a wide range of key partners. The range of partnerships needed reflect the scale of the challenge as well as the promise for successful and sustainable development across six countries.

Working Across the Basin

In 1995, the four countries of the Lower Mekong Basin - Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam - signed a co-operative agreement for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin. This agreement formally established the present day Mekong River Commission (MRC) to facilitate collaboration on regional river development issues. The WWF Living Mekong Programme has developed a strong working relationship with the MRC through collaboration on areas of common interest.

However, a large portion of the Mekong catchment lies outside these four countries, predominantly in China's Yunnan province and the special territory of Tibet. This portion is significant not only for its size, but also because it constitutes the headwaters of the Mekong Basin and therefore any activities can have a significant impact on the entire downstream basin. This point has been highlighted recently by China's plans to construct a series of dams on the mainstream of the Mekong and to improve navigation along the upper Mekong.

In addition to the four Lower Mekong countries, the WWF Living Mekong Programme is now actively working in China to raise awareness on conservation issues and support linkages between China and the MRC to attain socially, economically and environmentally sound solutions for the whole basin.

The Work of the Living Mekong Programme

The WWF Living Mekong Programme aims to marry successful biodiversity conservation with sustainable development, particularly using the tools and approaches of Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM). The Programme follows a two-tiered approach, with WWF country offices acting as the on-the ground implementation arm and the Living Mekong Core Team coordinating these efforts as well as working on basin level issues such as regional policy advocacy and strategic planning.

Action for a Living Mekong

1) Sustainable River Basin Management

Policies and mechanisms that significantly reduce major and large scale threats, particularly infrastructure, to sustainable livelihoods, biodiversity and social equity of the entire Mekong basin are formulated and used effectively in decision-making processes.

2) Conserving Freshwater Ecosystems, Processes and Habitats

Effective protection, management and, where necessary, restoration measures are established for critical Mekong species, habitats and ecosystem processes.

3) Sustainable Resource Management

Local people in targeted priority areas sustainably manage and use Mekong basin aquatic natural resources to their benefit, thus contributing to local livelihood security, national economies and regional development.

4) Awareness Raising and Capacity Building

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. Particular mechanisms are promoted, developed, and established in order to enable effective civil society involvement in, and influence on, decision-making processes.

5) Energy

All possible/viable options, strategies and alternatives for energy sector development in the Mekong basin are considered, with suitable approaches selected and promoted for support based on sound economic, social and environmental principles.

Through these actions, the WWF Living Mekong Programme works to blend scientific knowledge with socio-economic understanding, aiming towards better harmony between the Mekong Basin's millions of people and the very nature they depend on.

WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption



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