



A tipping point for the Mekong by Sarah Bardeen

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The Mekong River is, by any measure, an extraordinary river.

It's home to an estimated 1,000 species of fish, some of which are found nowhere else on earth. It boasts one of the world's largest annual fish migrations, with many species traveling over a thousand kilometers –the distance between Atlanta and Washington DC – to feed and reproduce each year.

But the Mekong is not a remote wildlife refuge located far from urban centers – in Southeast Asia, the river is very much a daily part of life; it's a vital source of trade, transport and sustenance for over 60 million people.

But now the river is at a tipping point.

A cascade of hydropower dams, driven primarily by Thailand and Laos, threatens to turn this thriving, productive waterway into a fragmented, impoverished ghost of itself. And that spells trouble for the region – and beyond.

As President Obama meets with Southeast Asian leaders in California this Mon.-Tues., he must address the conflicts over these projects, and advocate for a solution that will ensure the health of the river and thus the region's economic and political future.

A cascade of dams

The river's health depends on its connectivity and flood-drought cycles, which are vital for sustaining its rich ecology, its fisheries, sediment and thus the region's agricultural productivity. But in Laos, large dams are disrupting a cycle that's evolved over millennia.

Two hydropower projects are already under construction on the lower Mekong: Don Sahong and Xayaburi. Construction on both projects began despite ongoing concerns over their impacts, and without regional agreement between the lower Mekong countries.

The Don Sahong Dam, the second in a cascade of eleven dams planned on the lower stretch of the river, began construction last month. The dam will block one of the main channels passable year-round for fish migrating between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, threatening the endangered Irrawaddy Dolphin and vital commercial fisheries.

It follows in the footsteps of the Xayaburi Dam, which is now more than 50% complete. Since the early stages of construction, Xayaburi has threatened regional food security:

Thai villagers who live downstream from the project – and who fear for their future when the project is completed – have taken their grievances to court, in a dispute that is still ongoing.

Ironically, the dams are not even a good financial bet. If all the hydropower projects were to proceed on the Lower Mekong, they would result in a net economic loss of roughly \$22 billion for the region. And technologies such as wind and solar are now cost-competitive – and much less expensive and environmentally destructive – to build.

While proponents suggest these dams will alleviate poverty and address the region's growing energy demand, all the evidence suggests they'll in fact lead to greater inequality, particularly in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Additionally, studies have shown that regional energy security wouldn't suffer if the dams aren't built. An alternative Power Development Plan for Thailand even shows that the country is not actually expected to need the power.

The problem is that there's no functioning mechanism in the Mekong basin to solve such disputes. The 1995 Mekong Agreement has so far failed, while the China-led Lancang-Mekong cooperation does not seem to be promoting real cooperation among riparian countries.

“The economic lifeblood of an entire region”

Two consecutive U.S. Secretaries of State have shown they understand the immense value of a healthy Mekong River. In 2012, then-[Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pushed for more studies](#) of the Xayaburi Dam and backed a 10-year moratorium on all lower mainstream dams.

Just last year, [John Kerry waxed poetic](#) on the value of the river he came to know as a young member of the U.S. Navy. “I...came to understand this is one of the great rivers of the world,” he told the Lower Mekong Initiative. “And the natural beauty is really only part of the story. This river basin is the economic lifeblood of an entire region.”

In the Mekong, Southeast Asia has a functioning river that supplies protein and economic wellbeing to millions. The waterway is an essential and irreplaceable lifeline for more than 60 million people living in the Lower Mekong River Basin.

To destroy the river is to court instability in a region that can scarcely afford it.

Ultimately, change must come from the region's governments themselves. But when President Obama meets with Southeast Asian leaders this week, he can – and must – raise his voice for regional cooperation, environmental protection, and long-term stability on the Mekong.

The river – and the people who depend on it – deserve nothing less.

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