

“If we lost our environment and suffer the impacts, can anyone return our original environment?”

The Government of China, with the support of the Governments of Burma, Lao PDR and Thailand, plans to widen and deepen the upper Mekong River to facilitate the passage of large tonnage ships from China for tourism and trade. China has already begun exploding the rapids and deepening the riverbed in Yunnan province. The blasting of the rapids along the upper Mekong along the Thai-Laos border near Thailand’s Chiang Khong district in Chiang Rai province is planned to begin in December this year.

Watershed talked with four village people and a local activist in Chiang Khong and Vieng Kaen districts in Chiang Rai province about the impacts of the proposed navigation and tourism project on the Mekong River ecosystem, fisheries and local livelihoods.

Mr. Bounsaw Jinarat, fisher from Hadkrai village in Chiang Khong district; Mr. Somboon Ponsawat and Mr. Thongpan Daungthida, fishers from Huay Leuk village, and Mr. Humpaeng Pondee, head of Huay Leuk village in Vieng Kaen district in Chiang Rai province discussed the Mekong River ecosystem, local people’s fishing livelihoods and their concerns about the future if the rapids of the Mekong River are removed.

Mr. Bounsaw: I am 75 years old. My parents, grand parents and great grand parents were all born here and we have our livelihoods here. We are called the family of *Pran Pla Buek* [the hunters of the Mekong giant catch fish]. Apart from catching fish, we also grow rice and tobacco.

I have been catching *Pla Buek* [Mekong giant cat fish] since I was 12 years old. We normally catch *Pla Buek* around April. In the past, we catch lots of *Pla Buek*. We also sold *Pla Buek* to the people in Laos across the border as the *Pla Buek* could not be found in their area. Up until 1991, we could still catch about 60 *Pla Buek* every year. But since 1991, the number of *Pla Buek* has rapidly decreased to about 30 fish a year.

Mr. Somboon: There are 136 households in this village and almost every household has a boat. Fishing is our main means of livelihood. Most people don’t have rice fields. My main occupation is fishing which provides income to my family while vegetable farming brings supplementary income.

We catch fish all year round. Our fishing gears have been developed over a long period of time and are used in different situations. However, during the past two to three years, local fishers have been facing difficulties since the river’s flow has become unpredictable and the fish catch has decreased. The seasonal flow of the river and the fish migrations have changed. For example, the fishers know that after May, many fish species migrate into our area of the river. But nowadays the river’s flow is unusual, with the water reaching high and low levels within the same day. Even after heavy rains, the river’s flow is unusually low. I heard that some dams have



Mr. Bounsaw: “My heart stopped when I first heard the news about the plans to explode the rapids. At first, I felt such pity for the fish, as they will all die. They will use dynamite. Can you imagine? I think it is very scary.”

have been built in the upper Mekong River and realised that these dams must be causing the changes in the river.

The village people living here along the Mekong River have never before heard about this project to blast the rapids. I first heard about the project to clear the rapids only in early June this year. Until today, there is still no formal announcement to the local people about the project.

Around April 1997, during the dry season, we saw a ship carrying the four national flags of Thailand, Laos, China, and Burma. The people on the boat had binoculars with them. We later realised that it must be a survey ship for the project.

If the rapids in the Mekong River are removed, the water currents would become very strong and our fishing activities would be affected. If the rapids are being cleared, it will be difficult for fish to migrate against the strong currents, and we will have no fish to catch. Also, how can our small fishing boats survive if the huge ships are allowed to pass here? At present, even the waves made by the 50-tonne ships from Laos has already affected our fishing activities and damaged our boats and fishing gear many times.

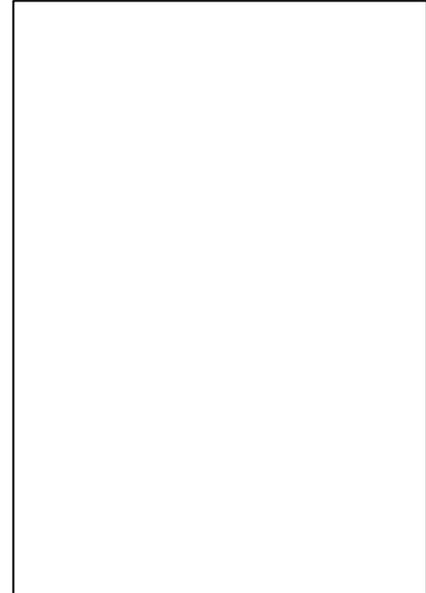
Mr. Bounsaw: There are many rapids along the Chiang Khong area and I am familiar with all the rapids.

The rapids in Chiang Khong are the place for the *Pla Buek* to play. The *Pla Buek* enjoy the areas in the river with strong water flows such as around the rapids. They seem to gather and play around the strongest rapids. They will let the currents lift them up and then break through the river surface. When we see them, we know that they are really having fun. We also believe that they lay their eggs in the rapids and reefs during that time. We are not 100 per cent certain that Chiang Khong is the spawning ground for the *Pla Buek*. But this area is definitely important for their life cycle.

To catch *Pla Buek*, we need to wait at the narrow parts of the river with fishing gear such as *Ly* or *Mong* or *Kuak*. The fishers need reefs or small islands in the river to stay and to set up their fishing gear. Apart from the *Pla Buek*, we also catch other big fish like *Pla Pia* and *Pla Waa*.

Apart from fish, we also collect and sell *kai* [an edible water plant]. The local people can make many kinds of food from *kai*. There are also some small factories that dry *kai* for export. People can collect *kai* for three to four months of the year and make several thousand baht from selling *kai* every year. The *kai* need clear and clean water to grow. In the past, the water was clean but now there are many problems in our river. The river is so much more polluted partly because of

the farming chemicals used along the river. Also, it seems like the river is getting muddier than before. Hence, we find less *kai* these days. *Kai* has decreased in the last four or five years as the quality of the water in the river has changed. When I was young, *kai* used to grow so abundantly along the rocks in the Mekong.



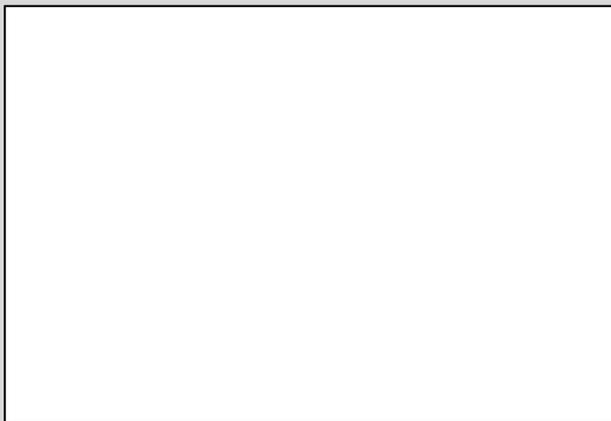
Mr. Somboon: "It will be all gone! No more livelihoods! We will have nothing to rely on."

Mr. Somboon:

We used to earn good income from selling *kai*. But more importantly, it is our community's main food as every family has *kai* for their meals. Even some people who do not live near

"Money cannot replace the rapids that we will lose."

Mr. Niwat Roikaew is an activist with *Rak Chiang Khong* [Chiang Khong Conservation], a group comprising the local communities of the province including teachers, vendors, and government officials, which is monitoring environmental issues in Chiang Khong district in Chiang Rai province since 1995.



Mr. Niwat: "It is clear that it is China and not Thailand that will benefit from this navigation project."

How did you learn about the navigation and tourism project for the Mekong River?

We only found out this year that the first phase of plans for navigation would explode the rapids along a 331-kilometre stretch of waterway from Yunnan province in China to

Chiang Rai province in Thailand. More than 100 rapids will be exploded including 13 sites between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong districts. We asked the local district officials who said that they don't know about the details of the project. Later we found that it is the Harbour Department under Thailand's Ministry of Transportation.

Once our group knew about the project, we went and discussed with village people in 10 villages along the Mekong River. Everyone became anxious because they can imagine that the way they live and fish and everything that is related to the river would be affected and the survival of future generations would be at risk.

We have already witnessed the impacts on our lives from the other developments in the Mekong River. Three years after the operation of dams in the upper Mekong in China's Yunnan province, the people in Chiang Khong have seen changes to the fisheries, the water tide fluctuates sharply and has become unpredictable, and fishers are facing many difficulties. The opening or closing of the dam gates in China influences the water level in the lower part of the river basin. In 2000, local fishers only caught two *Pla Buek* [Mekong giant catfish], while last year there was no giant catfish to be found. In the past, fishers could catch large numbers of giant catfish; one year, they caught up to 69 giant catfish.

What do you think are the impacts from the navigation project for your communities?

The navigation project includes the construction of piers and dikes, dredging and widening of the riverbed, and the blasting of the river rapids.

community voices

the river hire cars to come and collect the *kai*. The *kai* is not only a source of food for humans, it is also a source of food for fish. Wherever the *kai* grows, there is fish.

Now the *kai* has disappeared because the seasonal water tides have changed – the water tide will be low during the dry season and the *kai* would start to grow. After the water level is low, it takes six to seven days before we could collect *kai*. Nowadays the water just rises up one day and then dries up, so the *kai* cannot grow.

Mr. Bounsaw: Some of us believe that the river's tides have changed because of the big projects along the river. I have heard that there will be some water diversion projects built in the Kok River. The Kok is a deep river with many permanent pools. The Kok River flows to the Mekong River and any change in the Kok River will cause changes to the Mekong River too.

I always describe to my children and grand children that there is no place better than our village along the riverbank. There is good, moist and fertile soil from the edge of the banks up to 100 metres into the mainland. When we grow vegetables along the riverbanks we don't need to worry too much about watering them. The vegetable gardens are also an important source of income for many people.

Even though there are more problems occurring now in

The village elders in Chiang Khong district know that the Mekong River is a winding river with strong currents. The natural river rapids act like natural barriers to slow down the river currents. If these rapids are removed, the river flow will become much stronger and lead to increased erosion of the riverbanks. The vegetable gardens that people cultivate along the riverbanks would be flooded and even some houses could be washed away.

Moreover, along the riverbanks, fishers normally put their *bet rao* [a line attached with many hooks] to trap fish and use *sawing* [a small scoop net with a long pole] to catch small fish and shrimps. In some areas, dikes have already been built that prevent local people from fishing. Furthermore, the riverbank is a playground for children for playing, swimming and exercising. If the project is implemented, no one will be able to swim in the river anymore.

I heard that China has started to explode the rapids in the upper Mekong in January this year. We have noticed that the river has become turbid and the river ecosystem has changed. Every village person we met told us the same thing: this year there is no *kai*, the edible water plant. *Kai* is a main source of food and an important item for local people's income.

How do the local people view the navigation project?

We do not see improving the navigation in the Mekong River as necessary for encouraging international trade in Thailand. What will Thailand really gain from this project?

It is clear that it is China and not Thailand that will benefit from this navigation project.

Mr. Thongpan: "We cannot accept if the riverbank has to disappear as a result of human-made development projects."

our river, we can still use the river well. However, I think we need to make sure that our river does not change too much.

Mr. Thongpan: We cannot accept if the riverbank has to disappear as a result of human-made development projects. If this project to clear the rapids is implemented, the strong currents will destroy the riverbanks and we will lose not only fish but also the riverbank areas.

Unlike the project's claims, if the 300-500 tonne ships from China pass by Chiang Khong to Luang Prabang, Thailand will actually lose. At present, the trade between Thailand and Laos between Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong and Luang Prabang is good. But if one day the 300-500 tonne Chinese ships can reach Luang Prabang, obviously China will benefit the most. But if this project goes ahead, the most important thing is that we will lose our river and environment, and local people will lose their river-based means of livelihoods.

Have you been monitoring the environmental and social impact studies of this project?

The Mekong River ecosystem is a diverse and complex river ecosystem. But the environmental impact assessment (EIA) of this project was completed in six months and the study concluded that there are no negative impacts. We don't know how many times the study team really visited the sites and talked with people who live and depend upon the Mekong River.

It is not only the environment impacts that are of concern, but the social impacts as well. At present, illegal migrant labour is a major problem in Chiang Saen district. If ships could travel further into other parts of Thailand, it would worsen these social problems. Furthermore, there is no study on the impacts of the project on the local economy of our communities. There is no indication about how many local fishers and fishing boats, both from Thailand and Laos will be affected by the project. Then how will these people survive? The destruction of the Mekong River and its rapids and riverbanks will force local people to abandon

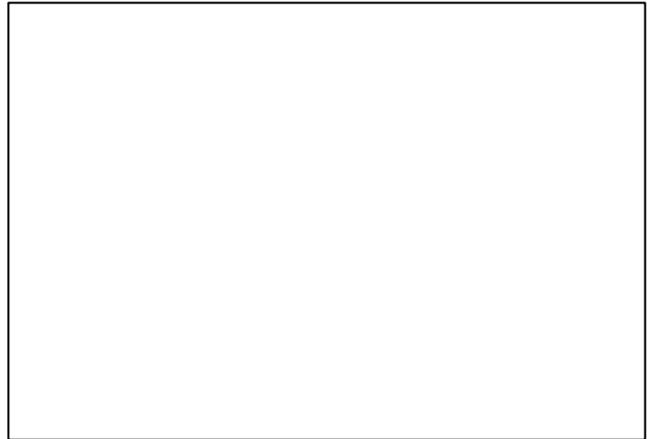
Mr. Somboon: It will be all gone! No more livelihoods! We will have nothing to rely on. Imagine if we cannot go fishing in the river, what can we do?

In our area, there are two spots of rapids that will be blasted. These rapids are in the middle of the river and are places for fish habitat and shelters. In the dry season, when the water tide is low, local fishers could stand on the rapids and fish there.

Mr. Humpaeng: Life is getting more difficult. We used to be able to earn up to 20,000 baht from fishing in a month, but now even 1,000 baht is hard to get. People now have to try to make a living in many ways. Some people have started to grow fruit trees but they are also facing difficulty in finding water sources for their orchards.

Mr. Thongpan: This is the same situation with every family. If the rapids blasting project is implemented, our main concerns are that the fish and sources of food will disappear.

We also know some Laos people on the other side of the border who are fishers. They now know about the project and they said that it's good that the local people in Thailand are protesting. They cannot protest because the political situation of the two countries is different. So they want us to voice our concerns because it could also help them.



Mr. Humpaeng: *"I would like to ask the government to review this project because it would affect the local people's livelihoods along the Mekong River."*

Mr. Bounsaw: We have heard that they are planning to explode no less than six areas of rapids. We only heard about the plans to explode the rapids when we had a meeting in the village temple with a group of senators at the end of June this year.

My heart stopped when I first heard the news about the plans to explode the rapids. At first, I felt such pity for the

their communities and leave their homes to find work in the urban areas or in Bangkok because they cannot maintain their lives as before. Our government has signed an agreement with China without taking the livelihoods of local people into account.

How is your group working with local communities to prevent this project at present?

We are now trying to inform as many local people as we can. Local people have agreed that we must do something to express our concern to the government and the public. More than 7,000 local people signed a petition to the Senate Subcommittee on Environment and invited the Senators to visit the area and listen to our concerns. The senators responded that they are very concerned about this project; this project would have potential harmful impacts that need to be carefully reviewed. We are now organising forums for village leaders to share and exchange opinions and plan approaches to halt this project.

Article 59 of Thailand's Constitution states that a person shall have rights to receive information, explanation and reasons from state agencies before the government gives permission for any project that could affect the quality of the environment or life. Also, local people have the right to express their opinions on such matters in accordance with the public hearing procedures.

In addition, Article 46 of the Constitution states that Thai citizens have the right to conserve or restore their customs, local knowledge, and culture of their community and participate in the management, maintenance, preservation and exploitation of natural resources and the

environment. But local communities have found it very difficult to seek information about this project because this project is tied with the Joint Economic Quadrangle Cooperation Programme. The dredging of the waterways and the blasting of the rapids is not mentioned; only beautiful words such as "development of waterways for trade and tourism" are used.

Moreover, the dredging of the waterways and the removal of the rapids will also change the velocity of the river flow and could change the section of the country's boundary that is presently demarcated by the Mekong River. Article 224 of the Constitution states that the Parliament must approve treaties signed with other countries or international organisations that could affect Thailand's territorial rights and obtain the approval of His Majesty the King. But so far it seems that the Thai government is not concerned about the change to Thailand's territorial boundaries.

If you have an opportunity to talk to the policy makers of these four countries, what would you say?

I think the leaders of these four countries who make decisions as well as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have to re-think about the benefits that the project will provide and the disaster that it will bring. These people claim to provide a better life to the people and reduce poverty. But if you think carefully, is this project really going to reduce poverty or create more problems? They cannot see only the one dimension of money but should also look at what nature is already providing to the local people and will continue to provide for many generations.

