

Navigation Project Threatens Livelihoods, Ecosystem

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Destruction of rapids on the Upper Mekong River

Blasting of rapids for a planned shipping channel on the Upper Mekong River threatens to undermine people's livelihoods and destroy the complex river ecosystem. The project has been a key component of the Greater Mekong Subregion Program since its inception.

Background

The Upper Mekong Navigation Improvement Project, funded by the Chinese government, is part of a grand scheme to allow large ships to freely navigate from Simao, China to Luang Prabang in Laos. The first stage of the project would destroy 11 major rapids and 10 scattered reefs along a 331-kilometer section of the Mekong from the China-Burma border to Ban Houayxai in Laos. Two rapids have already been blasted along the Lao-Burma border. The second and third stages would involve further channelization of the river. This paper focuses on the impacts of the first stage of the project.

Environmental Impact Assessment "Fundamentally Flawed"

Despite the project's potentially far-reaching impacts, a thorough and careful examination of its impacts has not been conducted. The navigation project's environmental impact assessment (EIA) is "substantively inadequate and in many places fundamentally flawed," according to a December 2001 study sponsored by the Mekong River Commission. The EIA "appears to be based on little more than speculation, subjective judgments, or unsubstantiated research" and "pays scant attention to the downstream environmental, social and economic impacts." The authors specu-

lated that the countries that will benefit the least economically may “bear the greatest burden of the environmental and social costs.”

Blasting Will Impact Fisheries and Villagers

The destruction and blasting of rapids, shoals and scattered reefs may have widespread ecological impacts along the entire length of the Mekong. Rapids and reefs comprise some of the most productive riverine habitats, serving as vital breeding grounds and safe haven for fish and other forms of aquatic life, including plants such as Mekong seaweed (kai). Blasting the rapids and reefs could jeopardize the survival of rare species such as the Mekong giant catfish. The reefs also play an important role in producing oxygen, reducing pollution and aiding in decomposition of vegetation.

Because of their high productivity, islets and rapids are a source of food and income for fishermen who rely on the river for their livelihoods. Although the EIA failed to examine the relationship between local people and rapids, baseline surveys conducted in Thailand show that local people rely on plants and fish that live in the rapids. Blasting of the rapids would threaten the income and food security of villagers living in the area.

Governments, Local Groups Express Concern

The project has encountered considerable concern and resistance. On July 31, 2002, the Thai government suspended blasting of rapids in its navigable section of the Mekong due to concern over the project’s impact on the Thai-Lao border. Thailand will not resume clearing of rapids and shoals until border demarcation with Laos is resolved next year. Senators from Thailand have also voiced reservations about the project and called for serious and careful study of the project’s environmental impacts.

The Lao government has raised concerns about the project’s impacts on fisheries and the environment. Somphong Mongkhonvilay, Lao Minister to the Prime Minister’s Office, has called for a cautious approach and further study of the

project. Joern Kristensen, CEO of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat, has stated that “no further [stages] of this project should be permitted until a comprehensive EIA is completed to international standards.”

Villagers from the Chiang Khong area submitted a petition on July 31, 2002 to the Thai government demanding a halt to the project and calling for full information disclosure. Another petition, signed by 76 organizations from 25 countries, was submitted to Mekong governments in July calling for a halt to the project until comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments are conducted.

Impacts on Cambodia and Vietnam

While the navigation project directly affects people living in China, Burma, Laos and Thailand, it is also likely to have impacts on people in downstream countries. Cambodian and Vietnamese officials have raised concerns that the project could alter water flow, cause riverbank erosion and increase pollution when navigation accidents occur. The project could affect fisheries by destroying spawning grounds for fish that live in Cambodia and Vietnam but migrate upriver to lay their eggs. Increased trade could also hurt small producers who are unable to compete with imports from China. Despite these potential impacts, people in Cambodia and Vietnam have not been consulted.

Call for Halt to Project Until Studies Completed

Given the impacts outlined above, the Burmese, Chinese, Lao and Thai governments should stop all work on the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project immediately and ensure that comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments are conducted that will examine potential impacts along the Mekong, from China downstream to Cambodia and Vietnam. In addition, the Asian Development Bank, as a leading promoter and facilitator of the Greater Mekong Subregion initiative, should urge the affected governments to suspend the project until these studies are completed.

For more information:

Cocklin, Chris and Monique Hain, “Evaluation of the EIA for the Proposed Upper Mekong Navigation Improvement Project,” Prepared for the Mekong River Commission – Environment Program, December 2001. This study and two other critiques of the fisheries and hydrological aspects of the EIA are available online at www.irn.org.

“Draft Preliminary Impact Assessment on Navigation Channel Improvement Project of the Lancang-Mekong,” Prepared by Southeast Asia Rivers Network – Thailand chapter and Project for Rivers and Communities – Chiang Khong, May 2002. Available at www.searin.org.



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