May creatures all abound
In weal and peace; may all
be blessed with peace always;
all creatures weak or strong,
all creatures great and small;
creatures unseen or seen,
dwelling afar or near,
born or awaiting birth,
may all be blessed with peace!

Just as with her own life
a mother shields from hurt
her own, her only, child,
let all-embracing thoughts
for all that lives be thine.

Excerpt of a Buddhist hymn
from the Sutta Nipita

The Mekong River
An unknown and
threatened kingdom

Living Waters
Conserving the source of life
The Mekong River

An unknown and threatened kingdom

The Mekong River valley is steeped in history and mystery. Along its course one finds living evidence of the history of the region, from the Kingdom of Siam to the Vietnam War; from the placid lives of Buddhist monks to traffic in heroin and tiger parts.
In and around the river, 60 million people depend on fish and other resources in the river system for most of the protein in their diets. These people use the river and its tributaries as arteries of transport and sources of water for cooking, cleaning, sanitation, and irrigation. The rhythm and timing of floods signal to neighbouring communities when it is time to plant rice and harvest fish. The rivers are like teachers to local children who learn to play with and relate to life in the rivers.

The river system on which these animals depend is extremely dynamic in nature. It is the seasonal and spatial variation in flows, from trickles in the headwaters to flood torrents below, that drives the impressive productivity of the Mekong River system. Floodplains, wetlands, and running water work together to keep the life cycle intact, allowing adult fish access to the floodplain wetlands where they were born in order to produce the next generation.

In spite of growing population pressures on the watershed and water quality of the Mekong, the River has largely escaped the wholesale alterations of landscape and flood patterns that have decimated the natural biology of many of the world’s rivers.

But the Mekong has long been viewed as the foundation of economic growth and prosperity in mainland Southeast Asia, becoming the focus of often inappropriate water resource development projects. 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.
Examples of Dams planned or constructed in the Mekong Basin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Dam</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Area (to be inundated)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Manwan</td>
<td>Completed in 1996</td>
<td>311ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dachaoshan</td>
<td>Completion scheduled for 2000</td>
<td>653ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shaowan</td>
<td>Designed in 1999; awaiting construction start in 2000.</td>
<td>2,364ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuozadu</td>
<td>In early phase investigation and planning</td>
<td>2,400ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Stung Kamchay</td>
<td>Earliest possible implementation year is 2005</td>
<td>2,050ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stung Manam 2</td>
<td>Earliest possible implementation year is 2005</td>
<td>2,550ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sambor</td>
<td>Earliest possible implementation year is 2014</td>
<td>87,900ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>Nam Ngum</td>
<td>Completed in 1971</td>
<td>846,000ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nam Leuk</td>
<td>Completed in 1999</td>
<td>1,300ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nam Theun 2</td>
<td>Completion expected in 2005</td>
<td>45,000ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy</td>
<td>Land preparation initiated in late 1990s; project currently stalled</td>
<td>3,800ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Pak Mun</td>
<td>Completed in 1994</td>
<td>6,000ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rasi Salai</td>
<td>Officially opened in 1994</td>
<td>8,000ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Yali</td>
<td>Completed in 1996</td>
<td>6,450ha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the water resource development projects proposed for the Mekong River basin has the potential to damage the ecology of both river and forest ecosystems, with most of the benefits accruing to people outside of the basin – a very different population from the Mekong communities who will bear the brunt of the costs.

The Alternative-Design for Development in the 21st Century

Since the first plans to build dams and change the region’s natural landscape were formulated, many more sustainable technologies for achieving energy, food production, flood damage reduction and commercial transport have emerged, with greater benefits to the surrounding communities. Some alternatives include:

**Managing consumption.** Thailand and China both operate extremely successful energy efficiency programmes that reduce demand for additional power generation. Investments in these programs will increase economic productivity per unit of energy expended.

**Diversifying agriculture.** The production of a variety of plant and animals can be designed to mimic natural ecosystems. The result is improved nutrition for local people, less reliance on volatile commodity markets and a healthier environment.

**Natural flood damage reduction.** Methods include floodplain restoration, watershed management and flood warning and evacuation systems. These all allow the rivers to continue to provide natural benefits, such as fish production and floodplain fertilization; they are also generally much less expensive than dams and dykes.

**Renewable Energy and Natural Gas.** Natural gas and biogas, solar and wind energy are proving to be better for the environment and more beneficial to rural communities. As the cost of these technologies comes down, they are outcompeting conventional energy sources.
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.

WWF International
Avenue du Mont Blanc
1196 Gland
Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 364 9027
Fax: +41 22 364 0526
TDAwater@wwfnet.org
www.panda.org/livingwaters

WWF Indochina Programme
53 Tran Phu Street
Ba Dinh District
Hanoi – Vietnam
IPO Box: 151 Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: +84 4 733 8387
Fax: +84 4 733 8388