

Fast Facts and Figures about the Mekong River

- **The Mekong is the tenth-largest river in the world, and the longest river in Southeast Asia.** It is home to unique, rich and abundant natural resources including critically endangered species such as *Pangasianodon gigas*, the Giant Mekong Catfish, and *Orcaella brevirostris*, the Irrawaddy Dolphin. There are over 20,000 plant types and over 850 species of fish in the Mekong River Basin, which drains a total land area of 795,000 km² from the eastern watershed of the Tibetan Plateau to the Mekong Delta.
- **The Lower Mekong Basin's economy is facing rapid growth.** Nearly seven million people live in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), which is experiencing fast population growth. The result is an increasing pressure on natural resources for irrigated agriculture, urbanisation, industrialisation, electricity and food production. Against a backdrop of rapid regional economic growth and governments' plans for the region's greater connectivity to boost trade and the economy, many people still live in impoverished conditions with limited access to clean water and sanitation, employment opportunities and often lack sufficient food or electricity. Extreme poverty is evident in many geographic areas. In parts where poverty is reduced, social gaps and inequality are still widespread.
- **Deep pools in the Mekong River can be up to 90.5 meters deep.** Pools or deep pools are natural depressions in the bed of a river. They occur at regular intervals along most rivers and exhibit many forms including shallow, long depressions in wide alluvial channels and deep, short depressions in bedrock-influenced rivers. Along the Mekong and many of its tributaries, pools provide an important dry season refuge for a number of important Mekong fish species and a spawning habitat for some species. The distribution of deep pools is thought to have had an important influence on the evolution of the three geographically distinct migration systems in the Mekong.
- **The Lower Mekong Basin inland fisheries is the world's largest fisheries, with an estimated yield of 4.4 million tonnes per year** and a total value of US\$17 billion. More than 40 million people (two-thirds of the population of the LMB) are actively involved in fisheries. Fisheries provide between 50-80% of the animal protein for the basin's population. They account for 18% of Cambodia's GDP and contributes more to the country's economy than rice production. In Lao PDR, the fisheries value is equivalent to nearly 13% of the country's GDP. Although proportionally less significant to the national economy, the Mekong fisheries sectors in Thailand and Viet Nam add well over US\$5,500 million to their GDP each year.
- **Average consumption of fish and other aquatic animals is nearly 63 kg/caput/year, well above the world average of 19 kg/caput/year.**
- **The Mekong has become one of the most active regions in the world for hydropower development.** More than 6,400MW (megawatts) of hydropower capacity have been installed on tributary systems of the LMB in the last 20 years. The full hydropower potential of the LMB alone is 30,000MW with about 25% of that developed to date. In much of the Mekong Basin, electricity consumption is less than 5% of that in the industrialised world.

Projects representing a further 5,300MW are under construction on the LMB tributaries. Eleven potential hydropower projects located on the Lao PDR, Lao PDR-Thailand and Cambodia reaches of the mainstream; two are currently under construction and others are at various stages of study by private developers under agreements signed with Member Countries of the Mekong River Commission (MRC).

- **The Mekong River has provided a means of transport for thousands of years.** Within the LMB, the Mekong River and its major tributaries are navigable during the high-water season (about eight months of the year), with the exception of a 14-km section just north of the border between Cambodia and the Lao PDR – the impassable Khone Falls.
- **Today, inland water trade along the Mekong continues to grow** with an estimated 450,000 tonnes of cargo transported annually between China and Thailand. In Viet Nam's Mekong Delta, almost 70% of goods, such as rice, construction materials and consumables, are transported by water. In Lao PDR, smaller vessels are primarily operated to transport agricultural products and construction materials to and from areas which are only accessible by river. Inland and sea-going vessels are operated from Phnom Penh Port in Cambodia, as well as in Viet Nam's Delta.
- **Rising temperatures and unpredictable rainfall are bringing drought to some areas and flooding to others.** Globally, the last decade was the warmest on record. Studies forecast average annual rainfall to increase 120mm. Rises in sea level rise are increasing saltwater intrusion to fragile ecosystems and farmland in the Mekong Delta, a main food production area of the region. The world's oceans are rising by an average of 3mm per year, threatening to inundate about a third of the Mekong Delta this century and damaging agriculture productivity and potentially displacing millions of people.
- **The average annual cost of the repercussions of floods in the Lower Mekong Basin ranges from US\$60 to 70 million**, while on the positive side of the ledger, the average annual value of flood benefits is approximately US\$8-10 billion. The basin is vulnerable to several climate change impacts that include a predicted mean temperature rise of approximately 0.8 degrees Celsius by 2030, as well as a regional increase in annual rainfall of 120mm.
- **About 60% of the LMB comprises tropical lowlands where most people live**, and where extensive and diverse aquatic habitats support a wide range of species which are caught and cultured.
- **With a quarter of the Lower Mekong Basin population living below the poverty line, agriculture is usually one of the first options for raising living standards**, improving livelihoods and mitigating poverty. It is one of the main sources of food and income for approximately 60% of the people in the region. Farmers in the Mekong River Basin produce enough rice to feed 300 million people per year. Although domestic food demand will augment particularly in Cambodia and Lao PDR, it is expected that food from agriculture can meet the need in the medium term. However, ensuring food for all will become a challenge at local levels due to flooding or poor road networks and postharvest infrastructures. Thailand is likely to continue to be a major rice exporter, but Viet Nam is likely to require much of its current export surplus for domestic consumption.

- There are more than 12,500 irrigation sites, including small and large scales of irrigation schemes, in the LMB. Less than 10% of the total agricultural area is irrigated during the dry season. **Diversifying crops is a potentially beneficial strategy for improved agriculture.** Because many high-value crops require less water than rice, growing other crops can improve the productivity of water. This can also help to cope with the increasing demand for food and to expand the farmers' sources of income. Paddy fields produce food, but they also provide other useful functions including flood mitigation, groundwater recharge, river flow stabilisation, capture and re-use of irrigation water, erosion control, and microclimate regulation. Diversification may also include the combination of agriculture and fisheries and further integration of livestock.

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