

# Watershed

People's Forum on Ecology

Burma, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Vietnam

## Watershed

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**Cover Photograph**  
*Karen family gathering forest  
products in Thung Yai Naresuan  
Wildlife Sanctuary, Thailand  
Project for Ecological Recovery*

**Back Cover Photograph**  
*Logging operations  
in Koh Kong province,  
Cambodia  
Mang Channo*

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# UNDP: What do you mean by sustainable development?

by

Witoon Permpongsacharoen

**M**y understanding of the concept of sustainable development - the main goal of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) - is that it arises from panic about the environmental crisis which increasingly threatens the existence of humanity.

Whether the problem is tropical forest destruction, global warming or rivers drying up, the crisis has prompted a search for the cause.

Today, a growing number of people recognize that, in many parts of the world, the environmental crisis arises from the 'success' of development strategies which place emphasis on intensive exploitation of natural resources for economic growth, without considering the impacts on the environment and society.

One example of unsustainable development which environmentalists often raise is the construction of large dams, particularly because their environmental and social impacts are clear and far-reaching.

For many years, nearly 40 in fact, UNDP has been associated with the planning of large dams in the Mekong River Basin through its support for the Mekong Committee, presently made up of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam.

Much of the planning for these projects is based on very dated concepts of development. Certainly, there was not as much environmental understanding and awareness 40 years ago as there is today. Nor was there the popularization of the term sustainable development.

Having reviewed the old plans, I can say with absolute confidence that the kind of development originally proposed by the Mekong Committee could never have lived up to the standards recently set by the UNDP for sustainable development. If the old plans had been implemented, thousands of hectares of primary forests would have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of village people would have been displaced from their land. All diversity of life and cul-

tures within the river basin would have been affected which, as the record in Thailand shows, has not often been for the better.

But since the Mekong development project was never implemented, I feel that we are still fortunate because it is not too late to change the direction of development towards ecological sustainability and social justice.

Today, the UNDP is encouraging governments all over the world to change their direction towards a sustainable approach, which includes careful planning and cooperation among countries, to ensure development which is environmentally friendly and socially just.

Personally I am excited and pleased to see these changes in direction and look forward to seeing some practical outcomes.

This year the efforts of the UNDP were successful, we are told. Government representatives from the four Mekong countries signed the *Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin*.

The agreement contains 5 articles addressing environmental, ecological, social and sustainable development concerns.

Finally, many people thought, now development plans for the Mekong River Basin would be overhauled to fit with the new direction towards sustainable development.

But my question then and now is what changes will be made to transform the old proponents and plans into a model of sustainable development. Can it even be done?

Since the agreement was signed, I know of the following changes:

- ♦ The principle of consensus among countries has been replaced by the principle of sovereignty. In other words, each of the member countries now

has the right to undertake projects within their territory, which may or may not affect the Mekong, without seeking approval by consensus with the other countries.

♦ Names have changed. The Mekong Committee is now the Mekong River Commission. Its new logo says, “for sustainable development.”

♦ A citizen of Japan was appointed head of the Mekong Secretariat, reportedly in the hope that he would attract funding to the Commission from Japan and the Asian Development Bank.

♦ The original plans for a series of large dams on the Mekong have been 're-engineered' into a series of 9 to 11 “run-of-river” large dams.

♦ Many groups are using every available forum in Asia, and creating new ones, to lobby for financing and construction of large dams within the Mekong River Basin. The Asian Development Bank and the Japanese government are lobbying for investment by the private sector, the Thai govern-

ment has signed an agreement to buy hydroelectricity from Lao PDR, and consulting firms, construction companies, public utilities and financial institutions from an array of countries are seeking opportunities in Mekong dam-building.

When I consider these changes, I begin to feel uncertain. Is there some misunderstanding about the concept of sustainable development which both the UNDP and the newly-founded Mekong River Commission claim to uphold?

And I wonder whether my hope for change - for a process of development that emphasizes participation and the demands of local people who, everywhere and every day, depend upon Mekong ecosystems for their means of livelihood - will be disappointed or not.

What I see from the new trend in cooperation between the lower Mekong countries (which may soon be expanded to include the upper Mekong Basin as well), the UNDP, ADB, World Bank and donor governments, and the dam industry, is a development blueprint based on the economic and industrial growth of Thailand and the expansion of business opportunities for these same players.

UNDP, is this your idea of sustainable development?

## Cambodia's forests sold to Asian timber barons

**D**espite a log export ban in April this year, the Royal Cambodian Government has granted massive logging concessions to foreign companies. The contracts, mainly with Malaysian, Indonesian and Thai companies, are exempted from the ban as 'masterplans' for 'sustained yield' management are to be prepared by the companies, according a Ministry of Agriculture press statement.

In September, Panin, an Indonesian firm, won the largest deal for 1.5 million hectares (ha) in Rattanakiri province, which has the largest tract of primary forest left in the lower Mekong Basin. Samling, the Malaysian logging giant, recently signed a contract for a 0.8 million ha hectare concession covering five provinces. A further eleven concessions - including one for 0.5 million ha - have been approved, while twenty-one other companies have applied. Sources in Phnom Penh report that concessions to date total up to 35 per cent of

Cambodia's remaining forest - 3.75 million ha.

Cambodian forestry officials are worried by the deals, as the contracts break forestry department regulations. Currently, the forestry department allows one tree in every three with a circumference of 60 centimetres or more to be cut, while the new contracts allow companies to log every tree with a circumference of more than 40 cm. Under Samling's contract, the company need only replace each tree it fells "if natural regeneration does not occur."

After the Panin deal was announced, Environment Minister Mok Mareth said he did not trust any logging company 100 per cent and believed that, "...if we are lacking in our control, destruction will occur." King Sihanouk of Cambodia also criticised the deals, saying, "If this deforestation does not stop, Cambodia will be, alas, a desert country."

Sources: *Bangkok Post*, *Phnom Penh Post*

national biodiversity conservation area and a controversial resettlement plan have made the World Bank reluctant to insure the project. (See *Watershed* Vol 1 No. 1, "Nam Theun II power deal signed" for environmental and social impacts.)

Leuane Sombounkhan, Vice-Chairman of Lao PDR's Committee for Planning and Cooperation, said Vientiane remains confident that the World Bank will support the project. "They have requested further project studies. This is a good sign that they are still willing to support the Nam Theun II project," stated Leuane.

In response to the Lao government's request for assistance with Nam Theun II, World Bank officials visited Lao PDR for ten days in November 1995. A press release issued from the World Bank's office in Bangkok, October 30th, said: "The World Bank has outlined to the Lao PDR government a number of steps which would need to be taken to prepare the proposed project to acceptable standards, as outlined by the World Bank's Operational Directives, before the World Bank Group could consider any form of financial assistance. These steps include detailed studies by independent professional groups on the environmental and social implications of the proposed investment, on possible alternative projects, and on the macroeconomic impact of the investment. The studies would examine the facts, the option, the benefits and costs of the project and what might be done to mitigate any negative consequences. The Bank will make no decision on whether to support the proposed project until it is completely satisfied that the project is economically sustainable and environmentally sound."

Sources: *AP Dow Jones*, *The Nation*, *Radio Australia*

## Nam Theun II: "Cracks in the dam"

**T**he World Bank is hesitating to support the US\$1 billion Nam Theun II dam in Lao PDR, causing investors to doubt the project's future. On October 19th, one of the companies involved, Ital-Thai, said it has delayed the start of construction and may decide to abandon it altogether. "We have to make a decision by the end of this year whether to proceed," Ital-Thai Finance Vice-President Chachai Chutima said.

Construction was due to have begun this season, but environmental concerns raised by the World Bank forced the delay, stated Mr Chachai.

On October 24th, Transfield, the Australia-based company with a 10% share in Nam Theun II, stated, "Without a

guarantee from the World Bank, it will be very difficult to secure financing that will enable the project to get off the ground." Transfield's Hans-Gerd Fisher said that private lending institutions want the World Bank's guarantee as insurance against political risks before developing the 681 megawatt dam. Those that have shown interest in the project include Britain-based Barclays Bank, Societe Generale of France and Germany's Deutsche Bank.

If the World Bank refuses to act as guarantor, the Nam Theun II project will be in trouble, Fisher stressed. Project Development Group (PDG) representatives went to the World Bank's headquarters in Washington to attempt to secure the insurance, but international concerns about the damage to the Nakai Plateau

## Lao Dam Deal at Risk, Thai Electricity Demand Falling

In July, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) revealed that Thailand's demand for electricity by the year 2000 is 7,000 megawatts less than it originally forecast. The Thai newspaper *Prachacha Turakij* called the news a "serious blow to the rewards on investments of the independent power producer (IPP) investors... In the case of Lao PDR, where EGAT has an agreement with the Government of Laos to purchase electricity from an installed capacity of 1,500 megawatts by the year 2000, EGAT will now purchase only 50 per cent of the amount."

EGAT's announcement coincided with negotiations between Lao PDR and EGAT on the price per kilowatt/hour (kWh) of electricity generated by the

Houay Ho hydroelectric project and which country's laws would be applicable to the project. Separate negotiations about governing law for the Nam Theun-Hinboun and Nam Theun II projects were also on-going.

The dispute over which country's law would govern the Houay Ho power purchase agreement arose when EGAT insisted on Thai laws. Lao PDR stated that the agreement should be governed by Lao law as the project is in Lao PDR. In October, following months of refusal, EGAT accepted the compromise offered by Lao PDR - that the agreement be governed by British law.

With the legal dispute resolved, EGAT and the consortium constructing Houay

Ho (South Korea's Daewoo Group, Loxley Plc of Thailand, and Electricite du Lao) agreed that the purchase price of electricity from the project would be US\$0.0422 per kWh. But only two weeks later, the Daewoo-led consortium shocked EGAT by demanding a price of US\$0.0435 per kWh.

"We honour whatever we've agreed to - unless there's a good reason to change the terms of a contract," said Preecha Chungwattana, EGAT's General Manager, "We've certainly never done that before."

According to the Bangkok Post, EGAT's "reaction could sink the US\$120 million project...if no compromise can be reached."

Sources: *The Nation*, *Bangkok Post*, *AP-Dow Jones*.

*Loggers make the most of the forests soon to be drowned  
in the reservoir of Houay Ho dam, Lao PDR*

## When all dams fail - propose another dam

**R**ecent flooding in Thailand is renewing calls by Thailand politicians to build the Kaeng Sua Ten dam in the province of Phrae. Proponents say that the dam would reduce flooding. Village people in the project area, academics and NGOs say the 72 metre-high dam will not solve flooding, will drown 6,500 hectares of forest in the Mae Yom National Park and force up to 2,500 families from their homes.

Since 1987, when Kaeng Sua Ten was approved 'in principle' by the cabinet of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, strong opposition from village people, student groups, academics, and NGOs has stopped the project from going ahead.

The Thai government requested funding from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, but both declined involvement because of Kaeng Sua Ten's impacts on the environment and public controversy about the project.

Now, faced with increasingly intense public debate about Kaeng Sua Ten's potential benefits and negative impacts, the National Environment Board (NEB) has established a committee to study the project. In December, the NEB will advise the Cabinet of Ministers whether the dam should be built.

Village people and NGOs are concerned that the NEB committee is under pressure by high-ranking politicians to approve the project. In September, Agriculture Minister Montri Pongpanich, stated that, "I will fight to have the dam for the sake of more than 30 million people who have been affected by floods and drought over the years."

Pisit na Pattalung, Secretary-General of Wildlife Fund Thailand, asks, "If the existing thirty-nine large dams cannot prevent flooding, would the fortieth dam be able to do so?"

*"The natural flow of the river must be conserved,"  
Sanit Kantacha, Songkhram River.*

## Fishers Meet in Northeast Thailand

**I**n August, more than 100 fishers, women and men, from all over north-east Thailand (Isan), met for the first time in Khong Chiam, a small town on the banks of the Mun and Mekong rivers, to discuss the state of their rivers and strategies for conservation and management.

Fishers from the Mun River described the drastic reduction in their fish catch following the construction of the Pak Mun dam in 1991, and their efforts to receive cash compensation for the destruction of fisheries and fishing-based livelihoods caused by the dam.

Pong River fishers explained how they are still trying to come to terms with the destruction of the river's fish population three years ago when, in the space of a few days, hundreds of tons of molasses poured from the Khon Kaen Sugar Mill into their river, causing massive fish kills.

"On that day, our lives changed forever," said a man from the Chi River, where fisheries were also destroyed by the molasses spill. Since then, the government's attempts to clean the river by dredging has further degraded the river and fish

habitat.

Ten people from representative fishing communities along the Songkhram River, the largest Mekong tributary in Thailand which has not been dammed, held lengthy discussions with Mun River fishers about their experience and visited the Pak Mun dam and its fish ladder. Songkhram fishers expressed concern about the effects of dam construction on their river, as proposed by the Department of Energy Promotion.

On the final day of the 3-day meeting, attended by fishers, academics, and NGO field workers, it was proposed to set up a committee of fishers to represent the interests and concerns of small-scale fishers throughout the region. Participants agreed that further meetings were needed to determine the exact details of the committee, but the aim was clearly articulated by Songkhram River fisher Jit Yasuphan:

"In this meeting, we have made many friends and learned much of the experience of fishers with dams. Now we must work together to make our voices heard so that there will still be fish in the rivers of Isan, and so that there will still be fishers too!"

*Editor*

Overall I like the idea of a magazine particularly in terms of the countries which are the focus of *Watershed* - as a People's Forum on Ecology focused on Burma, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. In general, though a lot is put out it is very difficult to come across good published material from within the region relating to ecology and environment. I am sure *Watershed* will go a long way in filling that gap.

I thought it may be good to make a few critical remarks also. The way in which the magazine is organized in terms of News and Updates, Forum, Features, Report, Community Voices, the contribution on the Pak Mun Dam is really good, the idea of making people speak and put their views across rather than we as activists becoming their interpreters is very important. The latter has been one major problem of ecological and environmental activism in the region where too often activists are interpreting people instead of creating conditions enabling people to speak.

Please make sure that you always have a Forum section, because it ensures that 'we', meaning environmental activists, would like to encourage debate and not put across monolithic views. I know it is difficult to get the 'establishment' to speak and enter a debate, particularly on environmental/ecological matters, since they would rather go on their own unaccountable and undemocratic ways, than be open to debate and criticisms. Yet we have to keep trying in the interest of our responsibility to create a larger democratic view *vis-a-vis* people.

As for the Features section, overall I am very happy with what has been pre-

sented in the first issue. Please, however, avoid using pseudonyms unless for some very genuine reason you want to protect the identity of someone in his or her interest.

The only last thing I would like to say is to ensure that your journal comes out as regularly as it is promised, although I agree that is the most difficult aspect of running a journal. However, a journal's credibility depends not only on what it contains and how it is presented, but also in its sustainability in terms of regularity of publication.

I wish you all the very best in your efforts and for my part I hope I can spread the news of your journal to help you reach a wider audience.

*Lawrence Surendra*  
*Madras, India*

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*Editor*

Thank you very much for putting me on your mailing list, enabling me to receive the first issue of *Watershed*. I think the periodical is an excellent idea and I am happy to support it.

I have a close personal attachment to the Mekong River as I was posted as a Peace Corps volunteer for 2 years in Nongkhai in 1970, followed by a 3 year assignment in Vientiane with USAID. It did not take me long to fall in love with the Mekong and its people.

Your publication is excellent and very timely. The accelerated development being promoted by regional and international lending institutions, often without proper regard for the environmental

impacts of that development, is indeed unfortunate and somewhat frightening. In addition, given the sad history of private sector disregard of environmental impacts of their investments and the willingness of financial institutions to support those investments, the Mekong, its flora, fauna and inhabitants can only suffer. I am very pleased that you and your excellent publication will help to monitor developments and keep concerned people informed of the consequences of those developments. Perhaps working together we can help bring more rational and sustainable development to the Mekong basin.

*Anthony M. Zola*  
*President, MIDAS Agronomics*  
*Bangkok*

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*Editor*

Greetings from Singapore! Congratulations for coming up with *Watershed*! I read your journal from a colleague of mine and I find *Watershed* very relevant to my work as Supervising Science Research Specialist in the Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources.

*Engr. Corinthia Naz*  
*National University of Singapore*

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*Editor*

Your *Watershed* mag is fabulous - I read it cover to cover. Maybe in the mag, you could give addresses where to send "I do not agree..." letters - e.g. I would like to write and say, "Don't build this damn dam!"

Be cool - revolution until victory -  
*Fr. Joe Maier*  
*Bangkok*

The Editor welcomes letters and comments from readers. Please send letters to:  
The Editor, *Watershed*, TERRA, 409 Soi Rohitsuk, Pracharajbampen Rd,  
Huay Khwang, 10320 Bangkok, Thailand

In April 1995, more than 10,000 village people, including ethnic minority groups, living in northern Royal Forestry Department. The evictions are part of the Forestry Department's plans to increase

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## "It is only we village people who are supervising the conservation of the forest..."

*Watershed talks to Thaweesilp Srireuang and Pati Jorni Odecho, leading members of the Northern Farmers' Network (NFN) of Thailand. Formed in January 1995 in Chiangmai with member communities throughout the four large river basins of northern Thailand, the NFN links forest-dwelling communities - especially those with community forest practices - towards strengthening local community control over the use and management of natural resources.*

**C**an you explain the difference between the state's protected forests and the community forests that villagers are conserving?

The purposes of conservation are not different. But there is a difference regarding use. In the protected areas (PAs), villagers are not permitted to enter and gather forest produce. But in the forests conserved by communities, villagers receive the benefits of the forest not by destroying the forest, but by using it in ways that are regulated by the community.

Some of the forests we are conserving are areas of National Forest Reserve that were once logging concessions. But it is only we village people who are supervising the conservation of the forest. The forest is recovering because it is given a helping hand by our community, which established a forest management committee. In the PAs, we are not sure to what extent villagers would be allowed to take care of the forest although we are certain that we have the capacity to conserve the forest while also receiving its benefits.

When there is forest destruction by outsiders, villagers work together to prevent it. Villagers have no problems with forest management or conservation, but our work is made difficult when outsiders destroy our forest.

***When the next village generation grows up, they will study in schools or outside and go to work in cities and in indus-***

***try. Even if they come back to the village, will they take up agriculture?***

The situation of industry taking away the villagers cannot go on forever. Rural communities cannot trust the rice granary in the front of the house alone but also need to store rice in the backyard. The "backyard" is the villages of the country. If there are three young people in a family, usually one person will decide to stay on in the village, while the other two will leave to find work. The one person in the village continues the traditional community customs of understanding and living with the forest.

Some people say that when young people leave the village they lose their knowledge, that they become like those who destroy the forest. This is not possible, because if we continue to live with the forest, to always depend on the forest, we cannot be separated. The people who live with the forest still depend on the wood of the forest for house construction. This helps the forest and the people live together.

***So there is a difference between community beliefs and the laws of the state?***

Beliefs are constant values. The laws come afterwards. PAs are declared mostly in watershed areas where hilltribes are living, and a large forest area is declared for conservation.

.....continued on page 10



Thailand, rallied in Chiangmai to protest against their forced eviction from protected areas by the protected areas in Thailand from 15 per cent to 25 per cent of the country's total territory.

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## "We do not want to have people living in protected areas as they disturb the forest..."

*Watershed talks to Sathitya Sawinthorn, Deputy Director, Royal Forestry Department (RFD), from the RFD's Office for Reforestation and the Office for Conservation, responsible for community forestry activities.*

**W***hat do you think of the proposals of village people and NGOs that village communities should be given the rights to manage forests located within protected areas?*

Generally, we do not want to have people living in protected areas as they disturb the forest, because the protected areas are reserves for water and the natural environment. By nature, people and forests can live together and it is done in other countries. But people in other countries throughout the past 50 years have experienced what we are experiencing now. In the countries of Europe, there is only planted or man-made forest and very little natural forest. Giving the people the opportunity for participation is very important, but they must first become educated. In Thailand, 60-65% of the people are still farmers who use forest areas for their living, the majority do not have land of their own.

We could allow people to live with the forest, but who will guarantee that the forest they are given will have more trees on it or that the environment will be made better for the country? Therefore, we must consider this carefully. I think that if there are to be community forests in protected areas, academics must supply information that clarifies how it will be possible. There must be documents to provide to administrators so as to ensure that community forests in protected areas

will be checked and controlled.

Presently, we have a plan to have forest covering 40% of the country's land area, of which 25% will be protected areas and 15% will be economic areas. The economic areas are being made available to the private sector for reforestation. Part of this area is also given to the Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO), while another part will be given to people to rent from the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) for planting trees. For the latter part, the RFD will provide financial incentives and seedlings. The majority of seedlings will be native tree species. This plan that we are promoting should ensure that there will be more private forest. The area would cover one million rai throughout the country, with the individual

.....continued on page 12

*Pati Jorni Ordecho addressing a village rally in Chiangmai; the rally was organised to protest the plan to evict villagers from protected areas*

.....continued from page 8

Although the villagers know nothing of the law, they are informed that the area is a national park and people have to be evicted. Village people do not understand what is happening when a "park" is declared for conservation. But we do understand that a "park" is an area for conservation that only views the land and the trees. It makes the villagers feel uncomfortable that the forest area is not of the village but of the state.

***RFD officials say modernization - roads and cash crops - cannot be stopped and that a fence should be built around the forest and the people moved out so that the system of modern technology does not destroy the forest.***

This is true only in some cases. At the same time, the state never tries to prohibit modern technology but actually gives away forest areas for mining concessions which destroy more forest than the village people could ever have used. Mining requires a large workforce of people who have previously never lived nor had a relationship with that forest. They will destroy anything in order to build their houses and hunt the forest animals.

The state's forest conservation policy based on the resettlement of forest-dwelling villagers has clearly failed. State reforestation projects often take over village lands and then resettle villagers. The state promises resettlement sites in the classified economic zone. But in reality, the resettlement sites provided by the government are not suitable for farming.

For example, in the case of Pa Chor village\*, if the people had been allowed to stay, they could have lived with and conserved the forest. But instead forestry officials moved the village people down from the upland area to three or four new

\*In 1994, 8 ethnic minority Jin Hor, Leesor, Yao and Lahu communities were evicted from the Doi Luang National Park and resettled on forest reserve land in Ban Pa Chor sub-district, Lampang province, northern Thailand. Each evicted family received a 1,600 square metre house plot and 1.6 ha of upland for cultivation, much of which was unsuitable for farming. A cash payment of US\$200 was paid to each family as compensation when the roads, water supply, electricity and school promised by forestry officials were not provided.

resettlement sites, which has resulted in the destruction of forest. The resettlement site was inside the Jae Son National Park and the villagers were told to clear hundreds of hectares of forest for farmland.

The Land Development Department insisted that the resettlement site was good for farming although the area was mostly rocky soil and therefore unsuitable for agriculture. And when the villagers cannot farm, it is like killing the villagers.

***How many of the original Pa Chor people now remain in the resettlement site and what about compensation or support for the resettled villagers?***

Resettlement leads to the breakup of families. Not able to farm, the family members separate to look for work and money. About 168 Pa Chor families have moved out to look for work in the cities, which means only half the original number of resettled families remain in the site. Each family got 2000 Bt. for one month to build a new life. Villagers were not allowed to go back for their harvest. But after the protests in Chiangmai in April 1995, it looks more likely that the villagers can go back to their original homes and farmlands.

The RFD may be proud of its resettlement project but it has only increased other problems for government agencies. For instance, in the Pa Chor resettlement case, there was increase in child prostitution and many hilltribe villagers were forced to work under exploitative wages.

***In resettlement sites, the RFD wants to promote different income-generation activities for villagers instead of agriculture which it terms as old-fashioned and claims other activities like ecotourism can be undertaken. Do you think these alternatives to farming are feasible?***

We accept that there are many livelihood alternatives. But villagers do not have to give up farming completely. Tourism is viewed as the source of gold for the country but we must see whether it can be a secure means of livelihood for the villagers. Not every villager can work in ecotourism - basically, villagers will have

### ***Upland Karen woman collecting fuelwood in a community forest***

to rely on agriculture. I've done ecotourism for six years and haven't benefited much. Depending only on tourism is impossible, in the same way that doing agriculture in the traditional ways is often no longer possible. Ecotourism and other activities can only play a small role - the main thing is how can villagers use, protect and manage the forest. Villagers still rely on forest products and there are many different frameworks for living by not destroying the forest.

***What about villagers who practise farming patterns inappropriate for natural ecosystems?***

The state must support the villagers to change and adapt to more sustainable farming patterns. At the same time, we must control the external processes leading to forest destruction and not just resettle the villagers. Why do villagers plant cabbage? Because the state promotes cash crops in the highlands. Why do villagers use pesticides? They are made to buy them from the cities. Therefore it is not right to blame the villagers without looking at the causes behind forest destruction.

***What do you think about the RFD's argument that villagers cannot stay in protected forests because the increase in their population will destroy the forest. Also that it is difficult to control villagers inside PAs who clear large areas for agriculture?***

The Karen village of Nongtao in Chiangmai province is a good example; 87 years ago, there were about 30 families, now there are nearly 100 families. However, the area which our grandparents preserved as watershed forest is still being maintained by our community.

Contrary to the belief that increased population leads to a decrease in forest area, the rotational farming area has decreased while the preserved forest area has increased, because the forest-dwelling communities know how to adapt to the changing relationships of natural resource use and evolve mixed agriculture systems. If villagers have a clear land-use framework with regard to forest and agricultural areas, then they can utilise the land more efficiently without encroaching on sensitive areas. If the RFD can change its role from that of evicting villagers to supporting their livelihoods, the villagers can adapt to live in the forests.

***The RFD states that the people who can live in the forests must be educated and at present most villagers are not educated enough to conserve forests.***

The RFD works on forest issues but does not know how villagers live in forest areas and use their local knowledge in using and protecting forest areas. The RFD can only view villagers living in forest areas as destroyers. Official authority

over the forests rests with the state but the villagers know more about forest protection than the RFD.

The Director of the Watershed Conservation Division of the RFD said that the Community Forest Act (CFA)\* cannot allow occupancy of villagers inside PAs. He also said that if the RFD allows people in the north to live in PAs, the RFD officials will have no work left to do. Clearly, the RFD does not understand the meaning of "community forests". Community forests means communities who conserve their specific community forests, not the whole forest area in the north.

The RFD director asked how it is possible for people who have no knowledge about forests to propose a community forest law? This clearly indicates that these officials have never visited the villages and do not know these communities even exist. Even the marking of PA boundaries has never included surveys of existing village settlements. Then problems arise when they enforce the National Parks Act and the Wildlife Conservation Act. The declaration of NPs overlapping village areas creates problems for the villagers which are largely the RFD's fault. Community forests and local conservation predated the declaration of NPs, so the RFD conclusion that there was no former village occupation of PAs is incorrect.

***The RFD has discussed setting up areas on the boundaries of PAs called 'buffer zones', where they can control and take care of the villagers and forest. Is this a solution in your view?***

Most of the areas required for buffer zone or areas near PAs are already occupied by villagers. So the resettlement of villagers from the PAs into these areas always creates conflicts with the previous occupants. And when the RFD says that the buffer zone areas are unoccupied, this obviously indicates that these areas are uninhabitable which is why no one lives there. Moreover, the buffer zone areas often do not have any forest remaining for village use which makes it difficult for the resettled villagers.

***The RFD states that it is not responsible for agriculture, only for forests.***

Yes, the RFD is responsible only for forests. So it undertakes reforestation by planting rows of pine trees.

We told the RFD officials that the pine tree plantations are not ecologically suitable for the upland watershed areas. But then they ask us where did we study that we can teach them about ecology?

*\*for more on the CFA, please see page 13*

.....continued from page 9

plots of private forest not exceeding 50 rai, because if we give more than 50 rai of land, environmental groups will accuse us of working to benefit capitalists.

If we are to allow community forests in protected areas, we have to understand that the objective of the protected area is for recreation, not for wood. There must also be conditions so that the community forests will not frustrate the RFD officials attempting to do their work.

***Does the RFD have research or have RFD officials ever done field work to determine the actual means of livelihood of village people living in the forest?***

On the question of whether the RFD has basic understanding of the situation of village people in the forest, I will speak frankly. It is not that we look down on them, but we feel that the knowledge of local people is not sufficient towards understanding the public good. They work all day so they can eat, they have no firewood so must cut trees within the protected area because it is convenient. However, it is good that NGOs have proposed the idea of community forests. The RFD does not object to this idea one hundred percent, but it must be understood to what extent it is actually possible.

***This indicates that the RFD disagrees with community forests in protected areas?***

No. You must see the reasons. We can have community forests when we are ready. But are village people prepared or do we educate the people first, in order to give the people familiarity with trees and forest conservation?

***If village people propose a plan for the management of forest to the RFD, can the RFD accept it?***

We have plans already. Village people can propose the use of the benefits of land, to rent areas of land for agriculture.

***But those are in Zone E [Economic] areas, not Zone C [Conservation] areas, is that correct?***

We cannot give land in Zone C areas, even if it is for security or development measures.

***But there are still mining operations within Zone C areas are there not?***

Those are continuing concessions which we are not able to halt since they were approved prior to the Cabinet resolution in 1982 restricting mining in watershed areas. We will coordinate with other agencies regarding the use and management of natural resources.

***What do you think of the policy of expanding protected areas to overlap community forests and farmlands of rural communities which has been creating many problems at present, in particular leading to the resettlement of those communities?***

We think that to protect natural resources we will need to see what laws have the authority to best protect natural resources. We must also look at how much forest it is necessary to conserve. The National Park Law of 1965 and the Wildlife Conservation Law of 1963 are the most effective at the moment.

***In the Forest Conservation Law, such as the National Park Law of 1965 and the Wildlife Conservation Law of 1963, the use of protected areas by government agencies for dams and roads is still permitted?***

Not really, except for requirements concerning national security. Or for the benefit of the people.

***Apart from a law and order approach, does the RFD see a way of solving the conflicts between the state and the local people regarding PAs?***

Yes. There is a way where the state and the people can meet halfway. For example, the case of Phu Lang Ka National Park in Nakhon Phanom. During the Khor Jor Kor project (*for more details, see PAs-Thailand article, page 14*), the government planted trees on 3,000 rai of farmers' land. After a year, there were problems with the villagers and the RFD decided to cancel the reforestation project. The RFD degazetted about five square kilometers as a buffer zone surrounding the NP for the villagers. Thus, if there are areas outside the NP as in this case, the RFD is willing to degazette because we think that it is difficult to retain control over these village areas used for agriculture. But it is not appropriate for human settlements. If villagers are allowed to settle there, it is difficult to control them as we cannot maintain a 24 hour supervision of their activities.

***Can you explain the meaning of controlling the villagers?***

Assume the village is located in the centre of the PA. We cannot control the villagers from expanding their farmlands. Villagers may easily walk long distances of even up to ten kilometers and clear the forest for growing corn and it is not possible for us to investigate. But in the case of buffer zones, there is no problem since we can revise the PA boundaries if we view that it is necessary to degazette the area from the NP.

For example, in the case of the Phu Phan NP in Sakhon Nakhon, the RFD degazetted a 100 km long and 1 km wide area for the villagers because they insisted that they were original inhabitants in the area since 1963 while the NP was declared only in

1973. From ground-level evidence and aerial photos, we could ascertain that the villagers were prior inhabitants since 1963. The area forms a buffer zone between a NP and forest reserve and then the RFD does not have to look for resettlement sites for villagers. It is extremely difficult to find a vacant resettlement site for them outside the PAs, and if we cannot do this, the villagers will return to clear the forest.

When the Khao Laem NP in Kanchanaburi was declared, there were many villages who were prior inhabitants. But we could not degazette these areas because we were in a hurry to declare the NP and decided to solve the problem of villager dwellings later. But after the declaration of the NP, the officials had to enforce the NP Act by restricting the village use of forest which led to village protests. So a committee was established to consider which areas could be degazetted. Meanwhile, complications arose in the negotiations for allocating areas for villagers with some villagers using the opportunity to clear forest areas and insisting that they had lived there previously. This slowed down negotiations and so far only up to 1,000 rai has been degazetted for 20-30% of the families. The remaining villagers have protested at Government House a couple of times.

***If the RFD had surveyed and degazetted the village areas before the declaration of the NP, could these problems have been avoided?***

At that time we were in a hurry. We were not prepared to spend time surveying individual villages in the area. We accept that this has caused difficulties for the villagers. We should have done more ground-level surveys. Since 1992, however, plans for protected areas gazettment have to be approved by the National Parks Committee. If there are villagers found in the area, the Committee will not give approval until the problem of village settlements is resolved.

***If that is the case, why did the Doi Phukha NP overlap community forest and the Silalaeng village in Pua district in Nan province?***

We are trying to survey and delineate these village areas. In practice, if the villagers intend to live peacefully as agreed, and take care of themselves, the RFD is satisfied. In this case, there are problems because the RFD wants to preserve the forests while at the same time, the villagers also want to conserve the forests.

One could ask whether it is possible to use the National Reserve Forest Act without the NP Act in order to allow the continued existence of villagers? The answer is no. One has to empathise with the RFD also. If there is a way to conserve the forest area, we need to use the political approach as a

means, but with the legal approach as the fundamental basis. In my opinion, however, if villagers want to conserve forests, we have to look at the facts from the local areas rather than the technical documents. This will help our decisions.

***Presently, what is the status of the RFD's draft Community Forest Act ?***

The draft has passed the Legal Affairs Committee which has forwarded it to the Cabinet. The Cabinet has suggested that the RFD draft also incorporate the draft of the Local People's Community Forest Act. There should be a seminar to discuss this issue.

***What are the conflicts between the two versions?***

The problem is that the NGOs want community forests even inside the protected forest areas. But we are concerned that the community forests can change, for example if the local leaders are replaced, if the community organization is weakened, or if the community forests are used for other purposes. Therefore the RFD is looking at the National Reserve Forest Act to see if it is applicable to the community forest areas. Therefore, it will be some time before the Community Forest Act can be passed.

***Do you think that the existing forestry policy, especially in relation to local people, is sufficient or needs improvement?***

The forestry policy of the Agriculture Ministry has a target area of 40%, of which 25% or 88 million rai is "conservation forest". This is the principal plan which the RFD has to implement. In the Eighth National Social and Economic Development Plan (1997-2001), the RFD has three major components. First, a conservation plan where 25% forest area is protected. Second, promotion of private sector investment in reforestation of the 15% of "economic forest", because in the next 5-10 years, Thailand must be self-sufficient in wood and not rely on imports. Therefore, we have to motivate the private sector to join us in reforestation. Third, research to support conservation and reforestation plans.

***There seems to be a deadlock. The RFD says that the villagers must respect the forestry profession while the villagers say that the RFD must respect the villagers' livelihoods?***

Both sides learnt from different methods. The RFD learnt about forests from books studied inside classrooms. The villagers have learnt from everyday experience. The RFD sees only the timber not the people. But the villagers view the forests both in seeing how the forests can survive and how the people can survive with the forests.

# Redefining Conservation: A critique of protected areas in Thailand

*Pinkaew Laungaramsri and Noel Rajesh describe the state's approach to conservation - and its failure either to protect forests or to support local communities' livelihoods.*

*To believe that we can grant genuine self-determination to nature, let its wilderness be wild, without dis-inhabiting our story of power and domination, even in its most generous liberal form, is bad faith.*  
Thomas H. Birch<sup>1</sup>

In April 1995, over ten thousand forest-dwelling people, including ethnic minorities, from all over northern Thailand rallied to protest against their forced eviction from protected forest areas.

The planned evictions are an attempt by the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) to implement the Thai government's 1992 National Forestry Policy to increase protected areas from 15 per cent to 25 per cent of the total land area in Thailand.

In Thailand's north, 1,760,000 ha of land classified as national reserve forest is to be annexed to 40 national parks.<sup>2</sup> Current forest area legislation prohibits people from living and farming inside national parks and other protected areas. Consequently, thousands of rural people in these areas face eviction.

The week-long protest in Chiangmai ended after the then-Agricultural Minister Prachuab Chaisarn met the villagers and accepted their demands to halt the evictions and establish a committee to look into the issue. The protests mark the first time that many northern Thai and ethnic minority communities came together to resist state centralization of forest conservation and management.

More importantly, the protests represent a growing resentment towards the government's protected area policy which

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denies the commitment of rural communities in the use and protection of forest areas.

This popular resentment stems from the fact that over three decades of the state approach to "conservation" through the notion of "protected area" has excluded and often forcibly displaced forest-dwelling communities, resulting in impoverishment, fragmentation of culture, undermining of traditional systems of conservation, and increased forest encroachment and degradation.

A critical examination of the concept of protected areas, as well as the contribution of today's network of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and other 'protected areas' to the conservation of natural resources, is clearly needed. To do this, it is necessary to situate the concept of protected areas within the socio-political context of Thailand where modern forestry practices dominate the definition of forest use and conservation.

## Constructing Conservation

While British commercial forestry influence in Thailand around the turn of nineteenth century determined concepts of forest management, the concept of conservation has been imported from the United States.

This began in 1955, when two groups of Thai bureaucrats, forestry academics, engineers and policy makers visited the US sponsored by the US-Thai Cooperation Program<sup>3</sup>. The first group went to the Tennessee Valley Authority, the interstate water resources development agency, to learn about American technology for development of natural water resources by building hydroelectric dams.

The second group went to visit Wyoming, the state where the first modern model of national parks, Yellowstone, is

## Evicted and fenced out

Within the national network of forest reserves, which include conservation areas and land classified as degraded or economic forest, an estimated 1.2 million families - or about 20% of the rural population - live, farm, and, in some cases, even pay land taxes.

Officially, however, these people are classified as illegal squatters and encroachers even though many hundreds of communities were settled in these areas long before they were declared as national forest reserves.

The enforcement of the state conservation policy has led to the routine displacement and forcible resettlement of hundreds of these village communities. The evictions are often accompanied by the official clearance of forests for houses and farming sites for the resettled villagers.

One of the most ambitious, and disastrous, programmes ever launched in the name of conservation in Thailand was the Land Distribution Programme for the Poor Living in Degraded Forest Reserves which came to be known by the Thai acronym *Khor Jor Kor*.

To be implemented jointly by the RFD and the Internal Security Operations Command, the plans called for the resettlement of 10 million people living in national forest reserves.

The army's Deputy Supreme Commander at the time, Major General Vimol Wattanavanit, called it "... a response to the national forest policy, ... [whereby] forests in the country will be saved and expanded."

Starting in 1991 in the Northeast, the RFD and the army targeted 352 forest reserves, totalling an area of 2,200,000 ha which would require the removal of 250,000 families.

After the resettlement, the RFD planned to lease nearly 3,000,000 ha of forest land to Thai and foreign companies for fast-growing plantations of eucalyptus under the auspices of the 'commercial reforestation' policy to provide raw material for the country's pulp and paper industry.

Communities were to be resettled on land that totalled only one quarter the area they had been farming. Most of

the cultivable land was already owned and farmed by other communities.

During the first few months of *Khor Jor Kor*, forestry officials accompanied by heavily armed soldiers tore down houses, threatened and beat up villagers, and forced them to abandon their homes and crops only weeks before harvest.

"They [the authorities] threatened to tear down our houses if we refused to sign documents agreeing to the relocation. They said that they would seize all our homes and arrest us," claimed 45 year-old Pon Khamdee, assistant headman in Ban Don Srakarn village, to journalists who visited the relocated villages.

Resettlement sites were mostly on barren land with ramshackle housing and without clean water and basic facilities. Delays in the distribution of new farmland meant that the villagers quickly exhausted the meager cash compensation (Bt.2000/US\$80) and food rations which consisted of one and a half sacks of rice and 10 year-old canned fish.

Then in April 1992, the army made an ironic blunder. To provide land for 600 families moved out of a forest reserve, the Army cut and burned 640 ha of prime forest in the Tablan National Park in Nakhon Ratchasima province. As well, a 14 kilometer road was constructed and villagers were reportedly advised to destroy the forest as quickly as possible so that it qualified as degraded.

A few weeks later, the Army cleared another 80 ha of prime forest land in Phu Paan National Park in Sakhon Nakhon for allocation to 35 ousted families; it also cut new roads and began logging operations. The RFD explained that a "routine adjustment" had been made to the park boundaries so that the area in question was no longer within the national park.

By this time, village people throughout the Northeast were protesting the programme and, faced with mounting public criticism of the Army's heavy-handed treatment of villagers, *Khor Jor Kor* was eventually canceled in July 1992.

located. Since then, hydroelectric development and protected area management have paradoxically come together in the same package in Thailand's national development plans.

In 1959, following a request by the Thai government, the Switzerland-based International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) sent Dr. George Ruhley of the US National Park Service to assist the RFD in selecting suitable protected areas and to offer advice concerning laws to constitute and administer them.

Guided by the American framework of Yellowstone, specific types of natural forests and ecosystems were selected as "untouched wilderness" where human use was strictly prohibited. The legal mechanisms for enforcing conservation were legislated: the Wildlife Conservation Act, 1960 and the National Park Act of 1962.

Subsequently, Thailand's first national park, Khao Yai, located in northeast Thailand, was officially created on September 18, 1962, followed by the first wildlife sanctuary, Salak Phra, created on December 31, 1965.

Since the early 1970s, the US model of protected areas has come to represent forest conservation in Thailand, supported financially and technically by international agencies including IUCN, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Assistance for International Development (USAID), and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

The American concept of 'protected areas' initially emerged as an environmental ethic where humans allowed the free self-determination of nature; for Thailand, the concept has come to represent a means to enable the country to board the ship of western civilization. Indeed, Dr. Boonsong Lekhakul, the father of the modern conservation movement in Thailand, cherished this idea throughout his lifetime:

The establishment of the Wildlife Conservation Law and national parks in Thailand has shown the world that Thai people have gone beyond the savagery of people who are aware only of food for the stomach, to the era of civilization. It is time now to know of the food for eyes, for ears, and for the brain.

Motivated by their desire to enhance progress and civilization, state officials, allied with forestry technocrats and conservation groups, have shaped forest conservation within Thailand. Protected areas are therefore valued not so much for natural ecosystems but as part of the new technology necessary for the modernization of the country.

Natural ecosystems have become classified into a monolithic

form of "national parks" (*Uthayarn Haeng Chart*) and "wildlife sanctuaries" (*Khet Ruksa Phan Sat Pa*), to be protected for the aesthetic, educational, and recreational needs of the urban-educated public.

As described by a National Park Committee member in August 1995:

We need to focus on the Thai who comprise the core group of people, that is, the educated. I believe that almost 100% see the importance of national parks. On the contrary, villagers who are close to the national parks do not accept the idea of parks. Urban people whose livelihood does not rely directly on the national parks tend to appreciate the beauty and aestheticism of national parks more than village people.

Thailand's protected area laws have given precedence to urban demands while ignoring the fuel, fodder and subsistence needs of the hundreds of rural communities living inside forest areas who depend on the diversity of natural resources and ecosystems. Subsequently, the protected area system denies the existence of diverse local definitions and practices of forest conservation found throughout the country.

Closely related to this dominant notion of forest conservation is forest degradation. On the one hand, protected areas emphasise the marking of boundaries for certain types of forests while neglecting other important natural ecosystems. At the same time, although set up to halt forest destruction, the demarcation of protected areas has failed to stop state-sponsored dams, logging and roads destroying forests within their boundaries.

### **Selecting Pristine Nature: The Hierarchical Division of Forests**

The RFD's model of protected areas is based on the definition of the IUCN Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas:

Relatively large areas which contain representative samples of major natural regions, features or scenery where plant and animal species, geomorphologic sites, and habitats are of special scientific, educational, and recreational interest. They contain one or several entire ecosystems that are not materially altered by human exploitation and occupation. The highest competent authority of the country having jurisdiction over the area has taken steps to prevent or eliminate as soon as possible exploitation or occupation in the area.



But not every type of natural forest has come under the protected area system. Nor have all diverse ecological systems and distinctive fauna and flora been granted equal status within the national park system. The process of selecting national parks in Thailand is based on two main interpretations of protected areas: outstanding natural elements, mega fauna and large forest areas are given importance; national parks are distinguished by their natural characteristics then

assigned value and ranking. Some forests are given superior value, while some ecosystems are completely set apart from protection.

Presently, Thailand's 81 national parks and 37 wildlife sanctuaries comprise mostly large mountainous forests, beaches and islands, which are valued highly for tourism and the conservation of large mammals.

## Ethnic Minorities and Forced Evictions

In north Thailand's upper mountain regions, ethnic minorities have been subjected to numerous resettlement schemes over the years which are aimed, in part, at conserving the upper watershed forests, and which usually result in the impoverishment and break-up of communities.

For example, in 1986, the RFD moved about 900 families of Akha, Mien, Lahu, Mon, and Karen out of the forests of

Thai newspapers reported that logging companies were inside the park logging in collusion with the park chief.

Research conducted one year later indicated that the number of resettled families living at the resettlement site had dropped from 900 to 500 families. The study also found that without cultivable land, crops and forest resources, and with little or no money, many resettled villagers were forced into begging and prostitution. Many villagers migrated to the cities in search of work, while others moved further away in search of upland forests suitable for agriculture.<sup>9</sup> And the case of Klong Lan is no exception, but despite the dismal record of forced resettlement in Thailand, the RFD once again renewed its efforts to resettle people in late 1994.

In order to achieve its policy aim of increasing protected forest cover to 25 per cent of land area, the RFD focused on the forests of northern Thailand that remain outside the protected area system. Over 5,000 people have been evicted so far and there are plans to remove up to 1.5 million people from 13 protected forests in seven northern provinces.



*Area of Jae Son National Park cleared for ethnic villagers resettled from upland protected areas*

Kampaengphet Klong Lan NP, established in 1982.

After the move downhill, police blocked the roads to prevent villagers from returning to the park to harvest their crops. Although promised rehabilitation, villagers discovered that the resettlement site did not have any housing, water or other facilities and villagers were forced to live in makeshift shelters.

The district officials initially distributed food, but even that was stopped after three months. At the same time,

In April 1995, the protests by nearly 10,000 villagers in Chiangmai forced the RFD to postpone its plans. Demands by villagers and non-governmental organizations included: rapid implementation of development projects and aid for the 5,200 people already resettled; degazetting of community forests out of the protected area system; cancellation of land titles that are held by land developers and outsiders; and the immediate implementation of the "Local People's Community Forest Act" which would increase local community control over the use and management of natural resources.

With the exception of Tho Daeng wetland forest in Narathiwat province in south Thailand, established under royal patronage as wildlife sanctuary in 1993, none of the ecologically significant wetland forests, including mangroves, lowland riverine and seasonally flooded forests, have been classified as national parks.

This has been the case even after 1989, when the government banned logging concessions and increased the number of national parks from 57 to 79. In fact, the felling of mangrove forests to make charcoal was exempt from the logging ban. In addition, nearly 200,000 ha of mangroves have been destroyed to make way for shrimp farms over the past three decades.

A forestry official, former chief of one of Thailand's wildlife sanctuaries, explains why wetlands have never ranked highly with the forestry department's protected area system:

There are two main reasons why wetlands and lowland riverine forests have been neglected by the national park technocrats. First, these areas are not large; most of the mangrove areas distributed along the coast are viewed as trivial and unimportant. Second, and most important, they are viewed as lacking in the scenic value desired for tourism compared to the natural dryland forests.

It can therefore be argued that establishing the protected areas system is a process where natural ecosystems are viewed not in terms of local community benefits or ecological significance, but in terms of economic value as a tourist destination. Mangrove forests, on the other hand, are assigned productive value for charcoal and shrimp farming.

This differentiation of natural ecosystems brings other problems. National parks based on the notion of natural uniqueness has often led to the creation of 'green islands' surrounded by a much larger deforested area.<sup>4</sup>

By drawing a boundary around the national parks, the authorities regard the forest beyond the park boundary as land

unqualified for protection by the National Parks legislation. In the absence of local community rights to the surrounding forest, these areas are often illegally logged then cleared for other purposes.

This 'green island' effect is evident in the case of Khao Yai, Thailand's first national park, which is now surrounded by an array of resorts, golf courses, and industrial agriculture estates which adversely affect the ecological integrity and wildlife of the forest.

Apart from the fact that forests outside protected areas have been destroyed or degraded, it is questionable whether or not park boundaries have actually protected the natural ecosystem within them. Indeed, what is often obscured by the image of conservation is that one of the functions of protected areas in Thailand is to support the country's economic development.

## Protecting forests for development

Originally, Thailand accepted the IUCN definition of protected areas as areas which are "not materially altered by human exploitation and occupation, and where the highest competent authority of the country has taken steps to prevent or eliminate as soon as possible the exploitation in the area."<sup>5</sup> This definition is based on the premise that protected areas are wilderness that can be preserved untouched and undisturbed. But this premise has largely proven to be a



*Animals drowning in the reservoir of Chiew Larn dam are rescued by forestry officials*

myth.

Since 1960, the government has approved mining operations, the construction of dams and military security roads, and pharmaceutical research by private companies inside national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and protected watershed areas throughout the country.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the construction of six large dams in Thailand inundated more than 200,000 ha of forests - all within areas classified as 'protected'.<sup>7</sup> One of these, the Chiew Larn dam in Surat Thani province flooded 16,080 ha of forest ecosystem within the Klong Saeng Wild-

## Buffer Zones

Over the last several years, Thailand's Royal Forestry Department (RFD) and forest conservation groups have attempted many different technical approaches to conservation in order to deal with the sensitive issue of rural communities living and farming in reserve forest areas.

The latest experiment is the "Conservation Area Protection, Management, and Development Project" which was proposed in March 1994 to protect two adjoining wildlife sanctuaries in western Thailand.

With financing from the World Bank (US\$35 million loan) and the Global Environment Facility (US\$ 25 million grant), the project is to be implemented by the RFD.

The five-year project aims to "link conservation forest management with local social and economic development" in the areas surrounding Thung Yai Naresuan and Huai Kha Kaeng (TYN-HKK) wildlife sanctuaries, which are part of almost one million ha of forest straddling the Thai-Burma border.

The TYN-HKK sanctuaries have been designated as a UN World Heritage Site because of their extraordinary biological diversity of flora and fauna owing to their location at the conjunction of three vegetation zones - the Indochinese, the Sundai (Malayan) and the Himalayan.

If the project goes ahead as planned, an estimated 9000 people in the area face either resettlement or restrictions in their use of forests, since the project proposes a five kilometer buffer zone that will expand the existing protected area by 800 square kilometers.

According to the project documents prepared by Midas Agronomics Consultant Company for the World Bank, buffer zones are defined as designated land "in order to relieve pressure on the protected area caused in part by increased migration into forests and by population expansion of farming communities along the edges and within the protected areas."<sup>10</sup>

The GEF-World Bank project calls for an area "at least 5 kilometers from the boundary of the protected area, and consisting of 2 sectors: an inner buffer zone of 2 kilometers, immediately adjacent to the protected areas, that should be free of human occupancy, and an outer buffer zone, where strict land use management would allow some human occupancy." The project proponents view the

thousands of villagers living in and around the sanctuaries as the principal threats to the forest and its biodiversity. The report states:

"a crucial assumption of the project is that the vast majority of buffer zone residents harm the PAs [protected areas] because of economic needs and inadequate knowledge of the consequences of their actions;" also "with more stringent restrictions on villagers' access to forest products and with the ending of further encroachment of forests for new farmland, alternative, non-agricultural sources of income are required."

Referring to "eco-agricultural income generation," the plans call for tree crops, woodlots, agroforestry, reforestation, and training in the repair and service of motor and mechanical devices.

Since the project was announced in 1994, it has been criticized by non-governmental organizations working with local people in the area, academics, forestry officials and environmental groups.

NGOs say that the project proponents unfairly target small-scale farmers and indigenous forest dwellers, while ignoring activities far more destructive in the area, such as logging by Thai companies inside Burma, proposed construction of dams and roads, mining and tourism development.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, logging concessions and the influx of loggers and logging trucks adjacent to the protected areas has resulted in disruption of animal movements and habitat, illegal logging, poaching and trading in wildlife and rare plants extracted from the protected area.

The TYN/HKK ecosystems are also threatened by the proposed Mae Wong hydroelectric dam which, if completed, would flood nearly 1,500 hectares of teak forest and rarely found lowland riverine forest in the Mae Wong National Park along the eastern border of HKK.

Environmental groups and academics have pointed out that the proposed buffer zones, with emphasis on resettlement and placing restrictions on local people's forest use, are likely to worsen conflicts between villagers and the forestry department, and actually increase illegal logging and poaching by outsiders.

life Sanctuary and Khao Sok National Park, destroying the habitat of 338 species of wildlife, 14 of which are endangered and 32 threatened.<sup>8</sup>

This contradiction of conservation and development within the protected area system cannot be understood without understanding the politics of resource control in Thailand.

Large dams, “security” roads, tourism and commercial pharmaceutical research are not considered by the authorities to be a disturbance to forest ecosystems because they are for

setting up a designated area at the edge of the protected area in which communities will be allowed to live.

But buffer zones lead to the expansion of protected areas, increase restrictions on local forest use, and reinforce the green island model, where degraded lands surround core areas of forest. This technical fix is failing to alleviate the problems inherent with protected areas and has often been challenged by the local people who are affected most by this concept. (*See box: Buffer zones, page 19.*)

The current National Economic and Social Development Plan (1994-1998), sets targets for increasing the area of protected areas, while also proposing more forest-destroying dams, diversion and irrigation schemes. This plan continues to provoke conflict throughout Thailand between state authorities and communities living with forests.<sup>11</sup>

### Redefining Conservation

The immediate impact of the establishment of a protected area is to negate local conservation initiatives and practices often in existence long before the advent of the protected area system.

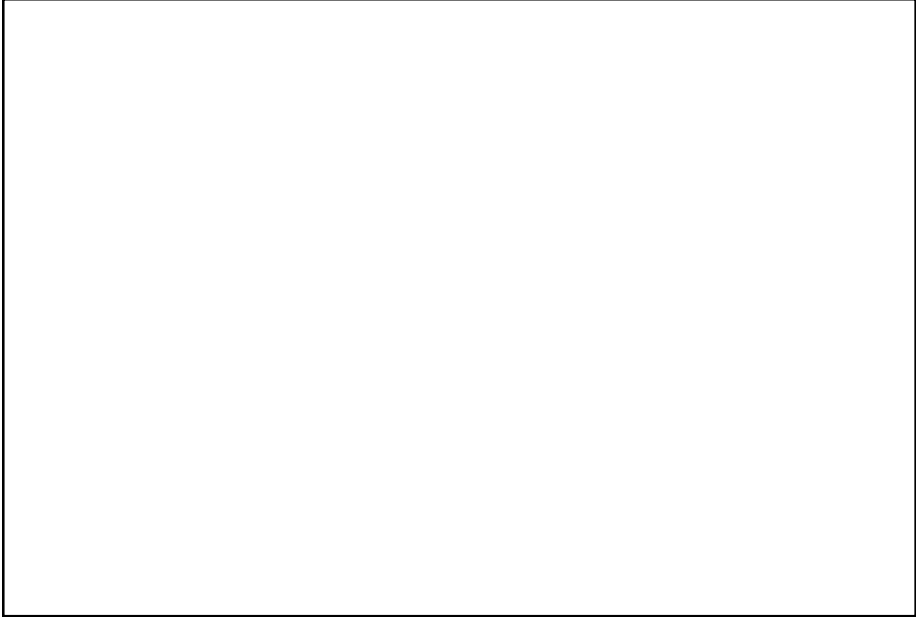
Local stewardship of the natural environment, a strong spiritual identification with land and natural elements, and customary land tenure have subsequently been

outlawed, village inhabitancy prohibited, and access to natural resources prohibited or severely limited.

The making of protected areas has, therefore, brought with it a boundary often perceived by the local people as unjust. Despite the fact that many communities have traditionally used the forest areas for livestock grazing, cultivation, hunting and traditional rituals, the legalization of the State’s territorial control over protected areas has labeled these local activities as poaching, encroachment and destruction.

The prevailing attitude of forestry officials towards local communities is showed by the chief of Klong Wang Chao National Park in Tak province in north Thailand:

The best way to safeguard the forest is to relocate them all and allow the authorities to manage the for-



***Northern villagers protest against eviction from protected areas. The banner reads "Stop resettlement of people from forests. Pass the Local People's Community Forest Act."***

national benefit and provide revenue. On the other hand, agricultural communities and their subsistence use of resources are generally viewed as a threat to protected areas.

What is denied is the livelihood needs of local communities which are considered unproductive and in competition with other uses. So not only do park authorities tend to dismiss the validity of local livelihoods inside park borders, but they use eviction and resettlement as a means of protected area management.

In recent years, conservation authorities have devised the buffer zone concept to protect the core pristine forest by zoning an area at the edge of the protected forest for use by communities resettled out of the core. One aim of a buffer zone is to reduce opposition to eviction by local people by

est... This is necessary because [we] must preserve and rehabilitate the forest which has been destroyed by these hilltribes.

Such a perception of conservation not only rides roughshod over the cultural and emotional attachment of local people to their place and denies the customary land right of local people, but also uproots entire local societies and their relationship to the natural environment.

Forest is not just a biological resource but is often centuries-old home to communities. In many cases, eviction does not simply mean resettlement, but the permanent deprivation of ancestral lands.

The past record of protected area establishment has pointed to its limitations to support local participation in the protection of forests towards benefiting local livelihood needs. The problems of the protected area system, however, cannot be viewed merely as a failure of park management by Thailand's forest bureaucracy. It requires critical reexamination of the continuing failure of the protected area system to protect and increase the country's forest cover while at the same time provoking widespread conflicts in rural areas between local people and the State over the use of forests.

The crisis of forest conservation in Thailand does not require more techniques to fence off forests, but an end to the current State monopoly on conservation towards supporting local community beliefs and means of conservation.

There is a growing village and national-level movement for increased recognition of the hundreds of local community efforts to conserve and manage forests. The Local People's Community Forest Act has been drafted, following a six-year nation-wide process of discussions involving local communities, non-governmental organizations, lawyers and academics, and calls for increased local community rights to use and conserve natural resources.

Local movements have also led to demands for a redefinition of conservation based on the local ecological and cultural context of forest management.

One northern villager in the movement describes this meaning:

Our community has lived peacefully with the forest. We never thought that forest is money, is a resort, or is a golf course. Even the terms "economic forest", "degraded forest" or "conservation forest" do not fit with our community forest. The meaning of forest for us is sacredness. Forest gives us food, water, and shelter. In the forest, there are spirits, our ancestor's

spirits and gods. Our conservation is tied up with agricultural livelihood and spirituality. For me, I do not know the forest in which human beings cannot live and must be removed. In fact, what became the protected areas have been the forests that we people have long preserved.

On a deeper level, conservationists such as the Karen elder Ne Tue, who lives in the forest known to outsiders as Thung-Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, are calling for a renewed spirit of conservation which cannot be maintained by the power of authority or urban tourists.

In the words of Ne Tue,

What is needed here is not development. Nor will any legislation be the answer to our forests. Only when people from outside are no longer greedy, regain their morality, their dharma, and their spiritual awakening that forests can sustain their lives.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Thomas Birch, 1990. Dept. of Philosophy, U. of Montana. Professional concerns include environmental ethics and the philosophy of ecology. He has served as a member on the Sierra Club's National Wilderness Committee.
- 2 Thailand's 1964 National Reserve Forest (NRF) Act declares all forest land as belonging to the state that can be either reserved for economic use or classified as protected areas including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and watershed areas.
- 3 After the Second World War, American interest in SE Asian economies grew as a direct result of attempts to halt the so-called influence of communist Indochina.
- 4 Ghimire, B. Krishna. "Parks and People: Livelihood Issues in National Parks Management" in *Thailand and Madagascar; in "Development and Environment: Sustaining Nature"*, Dharam Ghai (ed), Institute of Social Studies, U.K.: 1994.
- 5 International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). *Standards and Nomenclatures for Protected Areas*. IUCN, Morges, Switzerland: 1969.
- 6 Northern NGO-COD letter of concern on the ethnobiology research undertaken by the British-based Foundation for Ethnobiology, with Karen villagers, to seek access and information on medicinal plants. Richemonde Ltd., the project sponsor, is a Thai subsidiary of Meet Hennessey Louis Vitton, a Paris-based luxury goods manufacturer with strong financial interests in plant breeding and cosmetics.
- 7 Tuntawiroon, N. and Samootsakorn, P. "Thailand's Dam-Building Programme Past, Present and Future" in *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams, Vol. II: Case Studies*, Edward Goldsmith and Nicholas Hildyard (eds), Wadebridge Ecological Centre, Camford, U.K.: 1986.
8. Sueb Nakasathien. *Report on the rescue of wildlife from the Chiew Larn reservoir*: 1987.
- 9 Chapavit Ketmanee. "Study on Resettled Communities of Klong Lan NP". Bangkok: 1987.
- 10 Midas Agronomics, Ltd. *Conservation Forest Area Protection, Management, and Development Project*, eight-volume pre-investment study. Bangkok: Global Environment Facility (GEF): 1993
- 11 Project for Ecological Recovery (PER). September 1994. *Protecting Thailand's Biological Diversity: A discussion paper on Thailand's "Conservation area protection, management, and development project"*. Bangkok.

# A "shopping list for donors": Mekong River Commission launches 1996 Programme

**T**he Mekong River Commission (MRC), formed last April, is requesting over US\$90 million from the international donor community to launch its programme for 1996, while the rules for the diversion and use of Mekong waters are still nowhere in sight.

With its new mandate and the *Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin*, the Bangkok-based MRC Secretariat has published the *Mekong Work Programme 1996*, with a total of 62 projects, in preparation for an international donors conference - the first in several years - in Ho Chi Minh city on 22-24 November. Bilateral funders from thirty countries as well as multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the ADB are expected to attend the meeting.

Gearing up for donor support to the MRC, the UNDP is facilitating the creation of a Mekong donors 'consultative group', which would act as liaison between the donors and the MRC.

In charge of proposals for Cambodia is Khy Taing Lim, newly-appointed as the Vice-Chairman of Cambodia's National Mekong Committee. "We will present the Work Programme of 1996," Khy Taing Lim told the *Phnom Penh Post*, "and then it's up to the donors to pick up the projects they want to include in their budgets. We can call it a shopping list because now we have already identified the priority projects."

With a programme budget of US\$40 million in 1995, granted mainly by the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Australia, the Programme is designed to support the planning, development and financing of hydropower, irrigation, flood control and navigational infrastructure within the lower Mekong basin.

Mekong mainstream dams remain a priority for the Mekong River Commission. At the November donors meeting, the Commission is seeking funding for pre-feasibility studies of Sambor dam (3300 Megawatts [MW] in Cambodia, Ban Koum dam (2330 MW) on the Thai-Lao border, and Don Sahong dam (240 MW) in southern Lao PDR.

Khy Taing Lim, who is currently "on leave" from Canada's hydropower giant Hydro-Quebec, told *Watershed*, "We've had the plan [for mainstream dams] since 1957: the engineers' dream we can call it - though now it has been revised and is called the run-of-river scheme."

## Basin Development Plan

A sub-committee is presently working on the Basin Development Plan which 'aims to assist in the development of the Mekong River basin...to accelerate interdependent sub-regional growth, create an atmosphere which is conducive to large-scale investment and establish a firm foundation for sustainable development in the region', according to the *Mekong Work Programme 1996*.

The US\$3.2 million plan will take the member countries two years to complete, possibly with the assistance of the Australian consultants Murray-Darling Basin Commission. The thirteen-member team responsible for the plan includes an expert from the UNDP.

## Mekong Council Meets in Phnom Penh

In August, the political and legislative arm of the MRC known as the Council held its first meeting in Phnom Penh to approve its rules of procedure and discuss the Commission's direction for 1996.

Council members from both Cambodia and Vietnam reiterated their concern about the potential downstream impacts of Thailand's Mekong diversion project, Khong-Chi-Mun, which is already under construction and requires the diversion of the Mekong into hydroelectric reservoirs and irrigation schemes in Northeast Thailand.

But Cambodia's Permanent Secretary to the National Mekong Committee, Sin Niny, told *Watershed* after the meeting that he was reassured by progress made on the matter. "Of course there are some problems, which Cambodia was very, very worried about, for example the Khong-Chi-Mun project," he

said, “but our Thai partners stated very clearly that we can discuss and negotiate to solve these problems.”

While not opposing the plans outright, Sin Niny says “If Thailand wants to implement more activity, they should submit this to the Commission.” The project, estimated to cost US\$40 billion if completed and scheduled to be implemented over 42 years, is not included in the Commission’s 1996 Programme.

Thailand’s Yingphan Manasikarn, Minister of Science, Technology and Environment, backer of Khong-Chi-Mun and also head of the Thai delegation to Phnom Penh, was quoted after the meeting in the Thai-language business daily, *Poojadgan* (The Manager), saying, “the Khong-Chi-Mun project is one which we have implemented already, and therefore it is not necessary to notify the Commission if we are going to divert water from the Mekong River for our benefit.”

In October, shortly before the Commission meeting in Ho Chi Minh, Thai delegate to the MRC Prathet Sutabutr of the Department of Energy Promotion - which is in charge of the Khong-Chi-Mun project - told Bangkok reporters that the Thai government would notify the MRC about two other projects which affect Mekong tributaries - Kok-Ing-Nan and Laem Takong.

“However,” he said, “this is a voluntary act. It should not be seen as a precedent which we will have to follow for every project approved before the [April] treaty was signed,” referring to Khong-Chi-Mun. Prathet noted that Lao PDR is also developing many projects on Mekong tributaries, and is curious to see whether it will notify the MRC about these projects.

### **Japanese Engineer Appointed as New MRC Chief**

The Council meeting appointed Yasunobu Matoba of Japan as the new Chief Executive Officer of the MRC Secretariat, which made front-page news in Thailand. *Poojadgan* re-

ported: “The four Mekong countries announced that a Japanese will be the CEO of the Mekong River Commission in the hope of attracting more than US\$4.2 billion in financing from Japan’s Overseas Development Agency and Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund for 13 important projects, permitting Laos to build hydroelectric dams and Thailand to implement the Khong-Chi-Mun and Kok-Ing-Nan [diversion] projects.”

Upon his appointment, Matoba, an irrigation dam engineer who has worked for the World Bank, Japan’s Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund, and JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), told Bangkok’s *The Nation*, “In Japan, the Mekong River is famous for its hydropower generation potential”.

*"One day my neighbours and I were harvesting rice in the fields when a lot of water started flowing into our fields. Almost all of our rice production sank under water," - Uthai Buaphan of Dong Dang village. Rasi Salai dam, Khong-Chi-Mun diversion project, Phase 1.*

### **Damming the Mekong Mainstream**

Shortly after the Council’s meeting in Phnom Penh, *Poojadgan* ran a front-page spread on the 11 Mekong mainstream dams, adding Khong-Chi-Mun and Kok-Ing-Nan, reporting that, “the meeting recognised various projects that...will occur in the Mekong basin, that relate to the mainstream of the Mekong river and its tributaries.”

The paper also quoted an unnamed Vietnamese delegate, “It is certain that the 11 hydroelectric projects and the two other  
*(continued on page 26)*

# PREVIEW OF THE MEKONG

## 1996 WORK PROGRAMME SUMMARY

Total number of projects seeking funding: 62  
Total cost of programme: US\$93,354,550

## MAJOR PROGRAMMES

### **Preparation of the Mekong Basin Development Plan** **Cost: US\$3,250,000**

"...a blueprint to identify, categorize and prioritize the projects and programmes to seek assistance for and to implement the plan at the basin level." "The BDP...will identify the driving forces which will accelerate interdependent sub-regional growth, establish a firm foundation for cooperation and sustainable development, and create a new environment which is conducive to large-scale investment." *Timeframe: 24 months*

### **MRC Programme for Fisheries Management and Development Cooperation** **Cost: US\$15,431,000**

"A sustainable high production in the future and a high economic output for the fisherfolk may be ensured by managing the effort in the capture fisheries, and monitoring the external factors which may influence the productivity and growth of the species." *Timeframe: 3 years*  
The two projects with the largest budget are:

#### ***Management of Reservoir Fisheries in the Mekong Basin***

"Reservoir fisheries may be an area where an important potential exists for increasing the total fish production by careful management and possible release of juveniles of selected species." *Timeframe: 3 years*  
*Cost: US\$3,491,000 (funding secured from Denmark)*

#### ***Assessment of Impact of Water Management on Fishery Resources***

"...as fish depend upon the natural resource regime for migration and reproduction, this [nutritional and economic] resource may be adversely affected by water resources management measures." Main outputs include "preventive or corrective measures developed to lessen or mitigate un-wanted side effects of water management activities." *Timeframe: 3 years*  
*Cost: US\$ 2,438,000 (seeking funding)*

### **Environment Programme** **Cost: US\$9,676,000**

"The objective of the proposed basin wide 'Environment Programme' is to integrate environmental issues at all steps of the project cycle in the development of the Mekong River's water and related resources." *Timeframe: 36 months*

## **Mekong Mainstream Dams**

### **Sambor Reappraisal** 3,300 MW People evicted: 5,120 Area flooded: 880 square km\* **Cost: US\$910,000**

To assist Cambodian authorities in deciding "whether the socio-economic and environmental impacts to be caused by the Sambor project and the recommended mitigation measures including the resettlement and community development are acceptable and manageable."

*Timeframe: 18 months*

### **Ban Koum Prefeasibility Study** 2,330 MW People evicted: 2,570 Reservoir: 50-150 km long\* **Cost: US\$800,000**

"...the 1994 study estimated that over 20,000 people would be displaced and some 9,000 hectares of swamp and lowlands affected. A relatively lower pond water level combined with low dikes and drainage should be studied to minimize the relocation of population and land acquisition."

*Timeframe: 18 months*

### **Don Sahong (Khone Falls) Prefeasibility Study** 238 MW People evicted: estimated none Reservoir: 4.5 km long\* **Cost: US\$600,000**

"The Don Sahong run-of-the-river project would supply low cost power for development of southern Laos as well as for export to Thailand."

*Timeframe: 15 months*

\*Source: *Mekong Mainstream Run-of-River Hydropower*, Acres International Ltd and Compagnie Nationale du Rhone, Mekong Secretariat, Bangkok, December 1994.



# WORK PROGRAMME 1996

## HYDROPOWER, IRRIGATION AND FLOOD CONTROL

### Mekong Tributaries

#### ♦ Nam Theun Basin Integrated Development Planning (Lao PDR)

**Cost: US\$717,000**

"Water resources development on major sub-basins such as Nam Theun will bring benefits to the riparian countries of the lower Mekong basin. In the case of Nam Theun, hydropower is by far the most important potential of basinwide dimension..." *Timeframe: 12 months.*

#### ♦ Development Plan of the lower Se Bang Fai basin (Lao PDR)

**Cost: US\$942,000**

"The ongoing electrification in the basin now makes irrigation development possible...provided that floods can be effectively controlled." *Timeframe: 24 months.*

#### ♦ Development Plan of the Stung Battambang and Stung Mongkol Borey River Basins (Cambodia)

**Cost: US\$630,000**

"The growing demand for electrical energy in the coming years due to economic change calls for development of the two river basins." *Timeframe: 24 months.*

#### ♦ Sekong-Sesan Integrated Hydropower Development Planning (Lao PDR, Vietnam)

**Cost: US\$879,000**

"The Sekong and Sesan rivers are the major tributaries of the Mekong River and possess considerable hydropower potential of some 4,000 MW..." *Timeframe: 18 months.*

#### ♦ Prefeasibility, resettlement and environment studies of Pleikrong Hydropower Project (Vietnam)

**Cost: US\$550,000**

"To ensure an environmentally sound and economically viable development of the economically feasible Pleikrong hydropower project." *Timeframe: 18 months.*

#### ♦ Nam Tha Hydropower Prefeasibility Study (Lao PDR)

**Cost: US\$350,000**

"The development objective of the project is to construct a large hydropower project on the Nam Tha..." *Timeframe: 8 months.*

#### ♦ Prek Thnot Multipurpose Project (Cambodia)

**Cost: US\$3,235,000**

"Preparatory work for tendering the construction of the Prek Thnot dam and powerstation. Resettlement plan for villages affected by the Prek Thnot reservoir and environmental mitigations and monitoring."

According to the *Mekong Work Programme 1993*, the dam will flood an area of 256 square km and displace 11,000 people. *Timeframe: 22 months.*

#### ♦ Nam Ngum Integrated Development Planning (Lao PDR)

**Cost: US\$754,000**

"Nam Ngum is well endowed with hydropower potential far exceeding the in-country power demand in the foreseeable future." *Timeframe: 12 months.*

#### ♦ Nam Beng Water Basin Resources Development and Management (Lao PDR)

**Cost: US\$560,000**

"In the short-term, the Action Plan is likely to focus...on small-scale development, while making provision for...medium to large-scale development projects in the longer term." *Timeframe: 12 months.*

#### ♦ Diversion Plan from the Mekong River to Sirikit Reservoir (Thai/Lao border)

**Cost: US\$620,000**

"The water in the Sirikit reservoir has been decreasing year by year resulting in serious water shortage and crisis." *Timeframe: 8 months.*

#### ♦ Kamchay Hydropower Project Prefeasibility Study (Cambodia)

**Cost: US\$610,000**

"The urgent demand for electric energy to supply the southern provinces of Cambodia and Phnom Penh in particular calls for the utilization of the Kamchay River's hydroelectric potential." *Timeframe: 8 months.*

*Source: All information, unless otherwise noted, from the Mekong Work Programme 1996, MRC Secretariat, Bangkok, September 1995.*

large projects of Thailand [Khong-Chi-Mun and Kok-Ing-Nan] will create environmental impacts that cannot be avoided. But if it is possible to find alternatives in place of some of these projects then they should be considered to be of priority importance.”

Two weeks later in Cambodia, the *Phnom Penh Post* headlined a story, “Tonle Sap Wonder under Threat: Plans to dam the Mekong causing widespread concern,” based on an interview with Cambodia’s Environment Minister, Mok Mareth, who is acting Chairman of the Cambodian National Mekong Committee (CNMC). “It is most dangerous if we still have this idea of building dams across the Mekong River,” said Mareth; “We would gain electricity and quick economic income...but only for a short time because after that it would change our natural environment.”

Citing the proposed Sambor dam in Cambodia as an example, Mareth said the profit would cover only the short-term economic and social losses caused by the project. “My personal viewpoint is we should not support the building of dams across the Mekong River,” said the Environment Minister.

Not all members of Cambodia’s Mekong Committee share Mok Mareth’s opinion, however. Deputy Prime Minister Ing Kiet, who is currently Chairman of the MRC, said shortly after the August meeting that dam projects should be studied. “If we don’t have energy, how can we develop our country? If Sambor dam can be built, we will have the possibility of selling electricity to Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.”

## The Rules of Diversion

Over the next three years, the MRC Secretariat is hoping to spend US\$2.7 million to prepare the rules for water use and inter-basin diversion.

The objective, according to the 1996 Work Programme, is to ensure that “the waters of the Mekong River system [are used] in a reasonable and equitable manner in their respective territories” by drafting rules for use and diversion and setting up a network for river monitoring.

To date a sub-committee has been formed, its terms of reference prepared by the Secretariat, to do the tasks originally outlined in the April agreement:

- establish the time frame for the wet and dry seasons;
- establish the location of hydrological stations, determine and maintain the flow level requirements at each station;

- set out criteria for determining surplus quantities of water during the dry season on the mainstream;
- improve on the mechanism to monitor intra-basin use;
- set up a mechanism to monitor inter-basin diversions from the mainstream.

Earlier this year, Sin Niny, Permanent Secretary of the CNMC, expressed his concern to NGOs about Cambodia’s comparatively disadvantaged position in the MRC; not having been a member since 1975 and having suffered 20 years of war, Cambodia has had great difficulty drawing up a national programme within the Commission’s timeframe.

Sin Niny points out that there is a lack of expert technicians with a good command of English in Cambodia, which is essential for negotiating with other Mekong countries and particularly for working out the content and interpretation of the MRC Agreement articles. He also says that Cambodia is at a disadvantage in monitoring the Mekong flows, rainfall patterns and so on, as almost all former hydrology stations have been destroyed due to war - only six are functioning where 30 are required.

## The Rules of Engagement

In response to NGO concerns over transparency and participatory process in the new Mekong River Commission, Chief Executive Officer Matoba said to a Bangkok reporter, “I think there are some limits when it comes to inviting non-government organisations or private groups to participate in the meetings of the Joint Committee or the Council. We do invite representatives from embassies and private organisations. But we cannot invite everyone.”

Meanwhile, one of the MRC’s largest funders, the UNDP, has made assurances that they are doing everything in their power to ensure sustainable development at the MRC. In a letter to the *Phnom Penh Post*, the UNDP stated, “We are maximising our ability to influence the member countries to fully embrace the concepts of sustainable and participatory development”. However, invited by *Watershed* to clarify how it was encouraging participation, UNDP Phnom Penh officials refused to be interviewed and did not respond to repeated correspondence.

*Sources: Phnom Penh Post: 11-24 August 1995, October 20-November 2 1995, August 25-September 7, 1995; The Nation: 5.9.95; Poojadgan: 4.8.95; Mekong Work Programme 1996, MRC Secretariat, Bangkok, September 1995 (draft); Bangkok Post: 26.9.95.*

**Protected Areas in the Region.**

*Watershed* gives an overview of current thinking and practice in protected areas planning in Lao PDR, Burma and Cambodia

# "There must be participation of village people": Planning forest conservation in Lao PDR

*Watershed speaks with Chantaviphone Inthavong, Director, Centre for Protected Areas and Watershed Management, Department of Forestry, Vientiane*

***Could you please explain the meaning of classification of forests in the Lao PDR?***

The government sees the necessity of regulating forest land use, as some areas must be protected for water sources, wildlife, and maintaining the balance of the environment.

In the national plan, 17 million hectares of forest - 7% of the country's total land area - has been divided into three categories: *pa pongan* or protection forest covering 9.5 million hectares; *pa sanguan* or conservation forest, 3.5 million hectares; and *pa palit* or production forest, which covers 4 million hectares. For the conservation forests, the two categories are *ba bongan* meaning forest area that is reserved for protection of water sources, sloping areas and border security, and *pa sanguan*, or conservation forest for biological diversity, wildlife, scenery, natural sites, and scientific research.

***What kind of assistance does the Department of Forestry receive from various organizations?***

World Conservation Union [IUCN, formerly known as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature] assists with surveys and establishing a system for selecting areas to be proposed to the funding agency, SIDA [Swedish International Development Agency], and determines the appropriate management system for the conservation forest.

By 1992, 33 areas were selected, based on several major criteria: the area must include at least 40% forest cover; it must be an area of biological diversity representative of the bio-ge-

ography of the country; and must have a minimum size not less than 50,000 hectares. These are criteria used by IUCN.

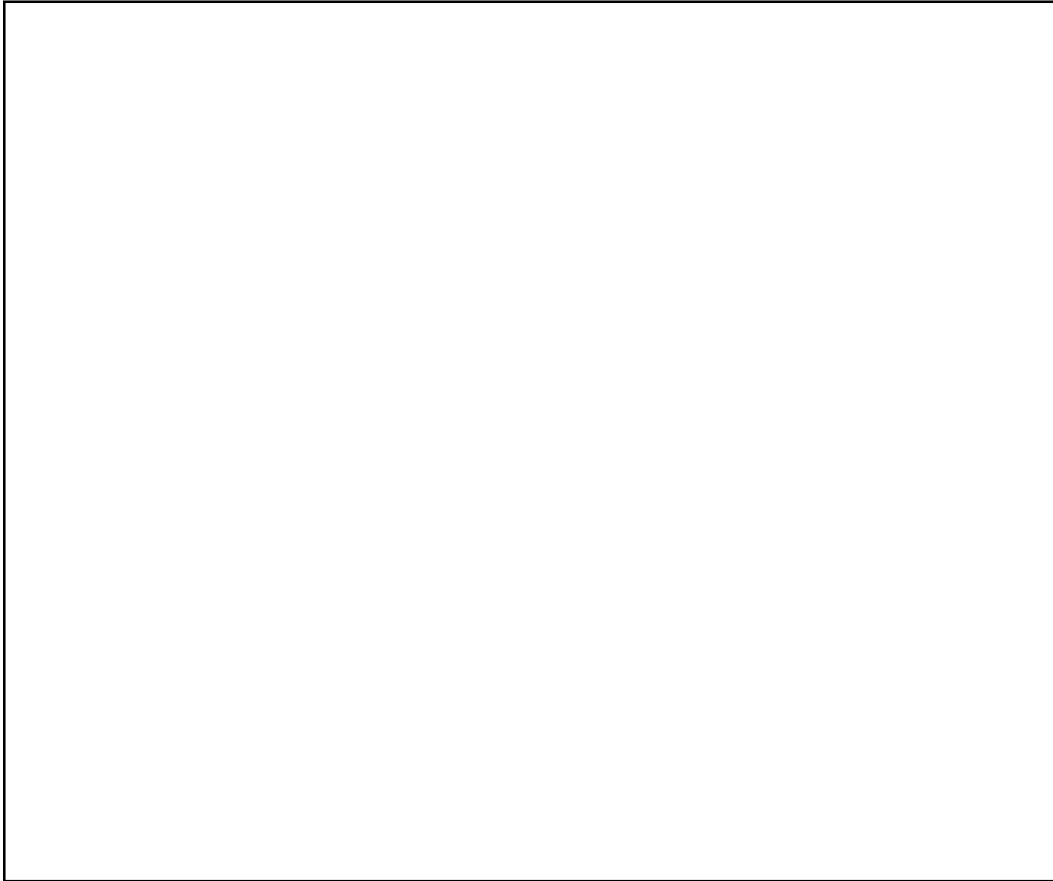
In 1993, the 33 selected conservation forest areas were reduced to 17 priority sites. The government has also included two areas, making a total of 19 areas. However, the demarcation of conservation forest areas is only preliminary. We have not yet looked into the conditions of communities or people living in these areas.

The government also asked SIDA to assist with planning the management of some conservation forest areas and announced a Decree for Approval of National Bio-diversity Conservation Area Status, known as Decree 164. At present, the work on conservation forest areas is occurring in 5 of the 19 areas. The Lao PDR government is requesting assistance from many other organizations, including the Global Environment Trust Fund [World Bank] and AusAid [Australia].

***Please describe on-going work and the trends for the future.***

At present, we are assessing previous work, having meetings and seminars for evaluation, and inviting representatives from the five conservation forest areas to determine the direction of practice.

From the evaluation, we have concluded that: (1) in establishing conservation forest, we must attempt to balance the needs of the government to use the area and the need for natural resource conservation, and; (2) protected areas management is not just about drawing lines between core areas and buffer zones.



*Selling vegetables collected from a community forest area,  
Khammoune province, Lao PDR*

***How is work in the protected areas progressing?***

One major problem is the management plan. It is still conceptual, written by experts, consultants or academics in Vientiane. This plan is handed over to the field official who is the implementer, and who is also a forest guard, while central agencies help with training for information collection, map making, and organizing meetings.

Such activities have been implemented in some areas since the end of 1992, but they have not been successful. This is because the plan was formulated in the central level of government. The collection of information was undertaken by people who did not fully understand the detailed objectives of the work. Officials could not formulate a detailed plan by themselves and did not have the budget to support the provincial and district levels, or village people, directly.

The work at every level of forest conservation management must be comprised of sustainable land settlement also. Officials often say that shifting cultivation in conservation areas

must be absolutely stopped in order to conserve the forest and water source. Moreover, forest conservation management, defined as work including participation of people is not yet understood by government officials, the majority of whom still have the idea that the forest belongs to the government and that people only have a right to gather forest products — the kind of right which already exists and is therefore unavoidable.

In reality, we cannot continue to work in such ways. Although Lao PDR is a small country with a small population, people are living all over the

country. A number of them live in conservation forest areas. Since the government doesn't have an adequate number of officials or budget to thoroughly take care of forests, we still need people to help us take care of our common property. Let them be in charge of forest conservation in the country. The people understand this role.

***Please clarify the government's concept regarding provision of rights to local people over their forests, and how is the term "rights" defined?***

The government's way of thinking is that village people have the right to live within the conservation forest area. Resettlement of people will only be done in cases of necessity. The government believes that if there is resettlement, village people must be provided with an alternative enabling them to have normal or better lives.

***Then what is the difference between allowing village people to use their own forests and conservation forest areas?***

The difference is the use of forests in a conservation forest area. If a survey finds that the area is important wildlife habitat for endangered animals, village people must understand and accept resettlement. But in many cases, there may be unavoidable problems with village people. For example, village people clearing increasing areas of forest means that it is necessary to stop or reduce [such activities].

However, conservation forest management must improve to suit the actual use of forest resources by village people. For example, in the management of sloping areas, village people know the gradients in the area and whether such a line can be used as a standard [for determining land use of the sloping area].

***And the difference between conservation forest at the village level and conservation forest by the State?***

The present direction is towards regulations created by village people, approved by all members of a village, as well as between village communities. These villages will then forward their conservation forest regulations to the district for improvement and approval by the district as part of the district's conservation forest management. Some villages may have more strict regulation than that of other areas or at the national level.

***To do that will require much time. What is your working method for the initial phase?***

It is necessary to have conservation forest regulations that arise from the local level, the villages, for every conservation forest area and each locality. For those areas that do not yet have their own regulations or are incapable of creating them, in the meantime they might need to use the general regulations from the central government. At the moment, such regulations are in the form of a decree. But in the future, if there is to be improvement of legislation regarding conservation forest, I think I want to see legislation incorporating the conservation of forests and wildlife together.

***What is the future direction of the work?***

We would like to work towards decentralization, with districts having the main responsibility, so that work could be undertaken quickly, with the technical research division of the Centre only the support unit or the facilitator.

In the future, forest conservation regulations should be flexible. In the Centre, we try to organize annual meetings for staff from each forest conservation area and the Centre staff to evaluate and improve working methods. Some might say this type of work uses much time, but I think that if we are too rushed, the work may not have quality. At the same time, if we are too slow, there will be no conservation forest left to be managed.

***It is our understanding that the criteria for selection of conservation forest areas, such as those regarding wildlife or plant species, is a foreign concept in the interests of outsiders. Is this type of concept compatible with the actual situation in Laos?***

We still have a limited number of experts, so it is necessary that experts and academics, such as zoologists, from abroad come to help us. But that is a means to receive basic information. Such recommendations or information must be considered within the local context. If there is conflict we need to consider it case by case. At the moment, I think our working approach is not biased between the interests of plant and wildlife conservation and the concept regarding

people. If you look at some of the conservation forests where we are working, we have set up a prohibited area in which there are no human settlements or agriculture activities, so we think that we can enforce strict regula-

tions. But that doesn't mean that in 3.5 million hectares of conservation forest throughout the country we are able to enforce such regulations.

At the same time, village people sometimes already have their own regulations. For example, in the forest areas where spirits are present, hunting animals and cutting trees is strictly prohibited. This is a good thing. Previously, our officials did not understand and lacked knowledge with regard to acquiring information or the opinions of village people. Therefore, there should be training for field-level officials so they can have more understanding and ability.

***Please explain the meaning of 'buffer zone' that would possibly be implemented.***

My understanding of the term 'buffer zone' is that it is a universal term. We do not know how this would work in Lao PDR. The areas that we presently classify as conservation area comprise two main management areas: (1) 'prohibited

forest' [in which all human activities are strictly prohibited], and; (2) 'controlled forest' in which some activities are permitted on a use or seasonal basis. We hope that the many conservation forest areas in which we are working will gradually become areas of 'prohibited forest'. But we need to look at the conditions of local people first. The 'controlled forest' areas are those with restrictions on activities — gathering of forest products is allowed but not the cutting of trees, but selective cutting of trees or seasonal hunting may be permitted.

But in the two types of management areas there is no commercial logging. However, village people may be permitted to cut trees for household activities, such as construction or repair of houses. There must also be some areas which need to be strictly preserved, without allowing any type of use.

***Do you think that the above-mentioned concept of conservation forest area is consistent with some aspects of the State's development policy? If so, how?***

The objective of forest conservation management is to serve the well-being of the country's people, and to also serve the government's long-term national plan for economic development. Therefore, I can say that the creation of conservation forests is one aspect of the government's development policy. For established conservation forest areas, as well as those being planned, we need to incorporate the needs of every sector. We may have to allow the use of some areas, meaning that we would lose some small areas, especially in the areas where people have settled previously or in the areas needed to be used for other development - which is better than trying to keep the whole thing and in the end having nothing left.

For such an objective, the government of Lao PDR requires various necessary and accurate information to determine what we can lose and what we can not. This Centre is in charge of research studies, findings, information and making recommendations to

the government pertaining to such issues. Presently, the need for this type of information has increased greatly, and exceeds the capability and budget of the Centre.

***What are your expectations of the various funders for the future?***

From now on, we will divide the funders to take responsibility for specific areas. Consequently, we hope to have a 'Trust Fund' to assist with the problem of budget shortages in the long-term. This will help the management of conservation forests in the next phase go more smoothly. This idea has received interest from the various funding agencies.

Regarding coordination, it would be perfect if the major funders coordinate with NGOs and support the staff from the local level. This will reduce costs and help them understand the context of the local, while the central administration, like the Forestry Department, will be the coordinator.

We would like each funding agency to assist in the whole cycle of the work and at every level, from the central to the local and village level, not just assistance with certain aspects. If not, then there must be greater cooperation between each project. Regarding the writing up of plans, the people should be those who write plans, and there must be participation of village people in the creation of plans for natural resource management.

***Rapids and forest along the Theun River,  
upstream of the Nam Theun II dam site***

# Protected Areas Systems in Burma: Forests under the gun

There are 5 National Parks and 16 Wildlife Sanctuaries in Burma, covering about 1 per cent of the country's total land area. According to a report by the Tropical Forest Programme of the World Conservation Union (IUCN), "The present coverage of protected areas in Burma is by far the lowest in S.E. Asia and is totally inadequate for purposes of biological conservation...[T]he reserve forests are all subject to exploitation of timber and other forest produce, including wildlife." Due to decades of civil war and military government, an accurate appraisal of the forests has not been possible as vast areas of the country are not accessible for surveys or research of forests and declared protected areas.

The limited information available suggests that Burma is being rapidly deforested. In 1960, approximately 50 per cent of the country was under forest, and Burma's Ministry for Forestry contends that this amount of forest cover has not changed in the past 35 years. Independent observers put forest cover at about 30 per cent and decreasing rapidly. UNDP and FAO estimated that in 1975 average destruction of forest was about 1,250 square kilometres per year, but only five years later, this rate had increased to 6,000 square kilometres per year. In 1992, the NGO Rainforest Action Network reported that the average area of forest destroyed in Burma had increased to between 8,000 and 10,000 square kilometres per year - one of the highest national rates of forest destruction in the world.

Since 1988, when the SLORC declared itself Burma's government, forest destruction has accelerated rapidly, with SLORC signing its first commercial logging contracts allowing cross-border timber exports to Thailand and China. By 1989, companies from Thailand alone had received over 40 logging concessions located along the Thai-Burma border, most of which were in the control of ethnic minority groups defending their territories against the SLORC military. In the early 1990s, SLORC also signed logging concession and joint-venture timber processing contracts with logging companies from South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore. Meanwhile, ethnic minority groups such as the Maung Tai Army of Shan State and

the Karen National Union, under increasing pressure from the SLORC military, also engaged in logging to fund arms purchases so they could defend their territories.

Independent observers have been scathing in their criticism of logging by Thai companies in forest areas controlled by the SLORC. In 1994 Martin Smith, a journalist and specialist on Burma, observed, "Though Lt.-Gen Chit Swe, Minister for Forestry, has claimed that these new border concessions account for only 2.6 per cent of Burma's total forest reserves, it is precisely in these remote and previously undisturbed border regions that many of the most ecologically-important reserves still remain."

Although there is little, if any, indication that the SLORC is determined to protect Burma's forests and wildlife habitat, the same can not be said for one of the ethnic minority groups attempting to defend its territory, people and forests from SLORC.

In 1982, the Karen National Union established 11 wildlife sanctuaries within its territory. In southern Burma's Mergui-Tavoy District, the Karen Forestry Department has set up the Ka Ser Doh and Ta Naw Tha Ri wildlife sanctuaries, the former covering an area of 420 square kilometres and the latter an area of 2,250 square kilometres. However, the Karen's efforts to conserve these, and other, ecologically-important forest areas, have been extremely hampered by years of war and logging by Thai companies.

*Traditional logging in the mountains of eastern Burma*

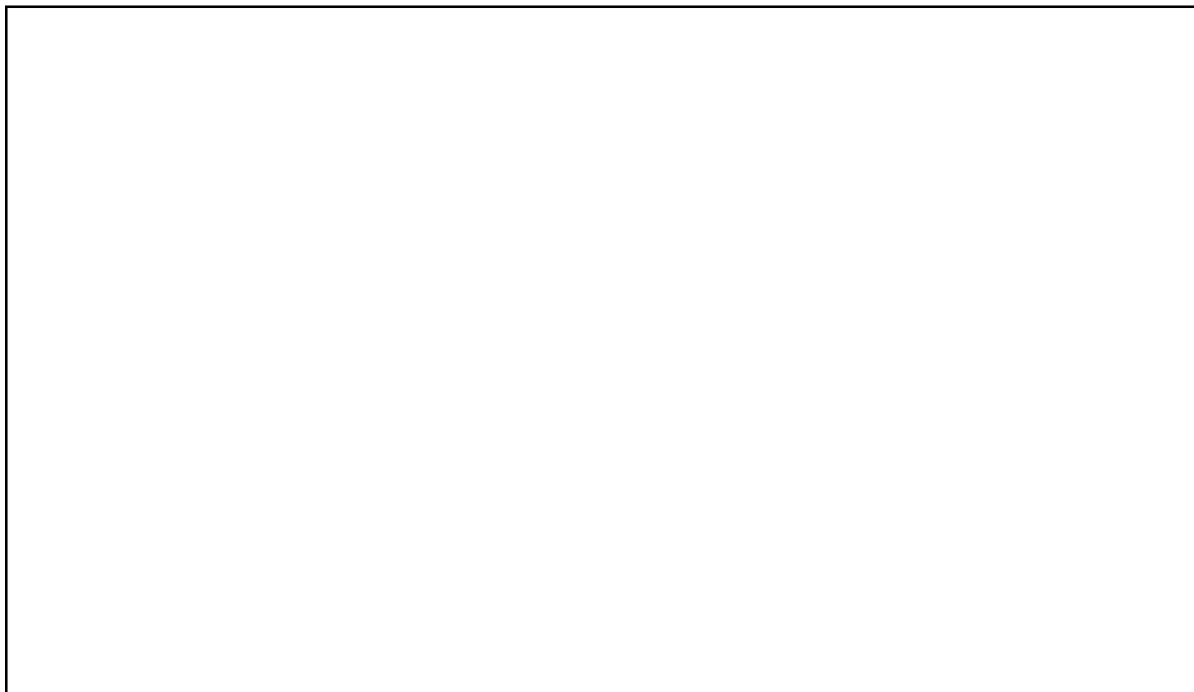
# "We don't want to copy any one system": Drafting protected area law in Cambodia

*Shortly after his coronation in 1993, Cambodia's King Norodom Sihanouk decreed 3,327,000 hectares of forest as protected areas to be managed by the newly-formed Ministry of Environment. In October of this year, Watershed spoke with Environment Ministry officials Chay Samith, Vice Director of the Department of Nature Protection and Conservation and Yem Sokhan, Senior Officer of the National Park and Wildlife Office, about the protected areas system in Cambodia.*

***Why does the Ministry of Environment regard national parks as important for Cambodia?***

*Chay Samith:* First of all to protect the forest from destruction. If we don't protect those areas suggested by the King under Royal Decree, they will be given out as concessions. And secondly to protect the biodiversity of Cambodia's forests. If we don't protect these areas, many animals will be-

come endangered or even face extinction, such as the rhinoceros or the kouprey. We don't know much about these species, but we have found footprints of the kouprey and think these animals still exist in Rattanakiri and Mondul Kiri provinces. These forests the east Cambodia are very beautiful: it is still primary forest, with many species of birds and wildlife.



*Staff of the Ministry of Environment talk to villagers in Cambodia's first national park - named after King Sihanouk*



***Earlier this year, Preah Sihanouk National Park was officially established as the first of seventeen proposed national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Can you say what progress has been made?***

*Yem Sokhan:* We have not yet been able to determine the border of the park clearly and are still negotiating with the provincial authorities. But we would like to create a core zone, general conservation zone and buffer zone (according to World Conservation Union (IUCN) definitions). There are five villages in the park; in preparing the plan for the park we visited all these villages, selecting and interviewing priority families. The villagers collect products from the forest, but this doesn't do much harm. But this should not be allowed in the core zone, though we cannot stop them doing this immediately. We hope to create an alternative by improving the villagers' socio-economic standing through a rural development programme, for example by community forestry in the buffer zone.\*

***Has the experience with protected areas elsewhere influenced how you are establishing national parks?***

*CS:* In our Department many people have gained experience from visiting neighbouring countries, so we hope to have an integrated approach. We don't want to copy any one system, but try to learn from others experiences and adopt what is suitable for the current situation in our country. We do not want to take our law from Europe, but from Asia, from the Asian experience. Also, we will need our neighbours' cooperation in declaring our national parks, as many are on the borders - with Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam.

*YS:* The main influence on our draft protected areas law has been the IUCN, similar to the management plan which was prepared in Lao PDR. But we do want to combine different ideas.

***At what stage is the current legislation regarding the protected areas in Cambodia?***

*YS:* We don't yet have a law to create national parks. What we have is King Sihanouk's Royal Decree of 1st November 1993 (*The Creation and Designation of Protected Areas*, which designated 23 areas as national parks, protected landscapes, wildlife sanctuaries and multiple-use areas). We are in the process of drafting a law to submit to the National Assembly. However, the Assembly must first pass the general environment law to give the new Ministry of Environ-

ment its legal mandate, which will be the basis then for other laws.

You see the Ministry of Environment is still very young; it has been in existence for less than two years. Whereas in the past, protected areas were created and regulated according to forestry laws, now it has become the responsibility of the

Environment Ministry to create and implement a law which can set the objectives of each park separately.

***Your department presently plans to create two national parks in Rattanakiri Province,***

***where the logging company Panin has just been granted a 1.5 million hectare logging concession. How do you think the parks will be affected by such deals?***

*CS:* At the moment the investment companies wanting to log or start a plantation are required to pass their proposals through the Ministry of Environment, and we can see that there is no threat posed by them at present to the areas already declared by Royal Decree. Nobody should interfere with areas under Royal Decree, everyone should respect this. There is some illegal logging and hunting still in these areas, but it is only on a very small scale.

***In Thailand recently, the government's plans to evict people living in forests designated as protected areas have caused a lot of controversy. What do you think about this?***

*CS:* We have heard about what is happening in Thailand. But in Cambodia, it is a different situation. First of all, there are very few people in the areas proposed for protection, so there should be no need to move them out of the forest. We can help to educate them about the national park, and let them work there. Most of the villagers already make a good living from hunting, but we can also employ them to work as rangers or guides as they know the area in terms of wildlife, land and forest best. We have already implemented this plan in Preah Sihanouk National Park where villagers are now working as rangers. We hope to have the same model elsewhere.

\* According to an IUCN proposal for the management of Preah Sihanouk National Park, community forestry in the buffer zone could follow the example of a 'joint forest management agreement' signed recently between the Cambodian government and communities in Takeo province. In return for assisting natural forest to regenerate, villagers received user rights to the land for a period of 60 years.

# "I don't want to sell my land"

*A song children sing nowadays in the streets of Phnom Penh goes “lok srey chaul bar” - “selling farmland to go to the bar”. As foreign companies rush in to Cambodia, factories and offices sprawl further out of Phnom Penh, and farming communities face the pressures and temptations of selling their land. Last month, Watershed visited the village of Kokroka, just 15 kilometres outside Phnom Penh, with members of a Khmer student group who recently joined villagers in planting 1,000 trees on lands around the village temple, and talked with farmers about this trend and the changes in Cambodia in recent decades.*

***How has land ownership in your village changed over the last thirty years?***

During the *Sangkum Rastry Niyum* [Sihanouk regime] in the 1960s, the land was divided amongst families. Generally this land was inherited from parents and grandparents, but also if people had money they could buy land. Some people also were landless, and had to rent land from the rich to grow rice. Then under Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge collectivised everything, including communities and land.

During the Hun Sen regime in the 1980s, villages became communes, and people had to do everything - growing rice and eating - together. This was very difficult as there was too much to look after so people didn't take care. Also, every village had a duty to sell rice to the government, which paid a lower price than the market. This State-controlled system was enforced in villages all over Cambodia. After a few years of this, the villagers had a meeting and we decided that we would return to caring for our own fields. And when government representatives visited the village, we agreed to pretend to follow the communal system, still farming and eating together.

Finally, in 1987-1988, the State allowed people to own land again. The land was given free and there were no taxes. But if your family has grown since then, you have no right to more free land. This is all the land we own today.

***How has the environment around your village changed over the years?***

Before, during the Sihanouk regime, there was a lot of forest in our village, though only a few very big trees. But there was plenty of thick and tall bamboo, which we used to make ladders to climb the sugarpalm trees.

But then after Pol Pot time, people returned to the village and cut down the forest; nobody cared for it anymore - anyone could use it so nobody took care of it.

Before Pol Pot time, the river would flood its banks and bring rich earth and many fish. But the Khmer Rouge blocked the flooding with a dam, so now the soil is poorer quality and there are not so many fish. Sometimes we use chemical fertilisers and pesticides on our land now, though the poorer people still collect cow manure to fertilise their crops.

***Villagers of Kokroka: Mrs Yim Sum, Mr Phan Am (headman),  
Mr Khiov Sam, and Mr Kroch Eur***

Now we can grow about as much rice as we did in Sihanouk time, but the last two years have been very difficult and no-one had enough rice. First insects came and ate the grain from the rice plants, then we had problems with drought and floods. I hope this year we will have enough rice, but it's too early yet to predict.

***How do you celebrate the rice harvest in your village?***

We have many festivals in the year - mostly Buddhist festivals - but the one connected with farming in particular is after harvest time.

It's called *Da Bat Lian*, *Da* meaning to call the monks to give a blessing to the people. We harvest the rice around the end of January or early February, then celebrate *Da Bat Lian* in March.

After the harvest, we thresh the rice and clean the grain stores, then it is time to celebrate. All the villagers meet together to decide what to do for each year's festival: which food to eat, if we will have dancing and so on. If last year we ate *ban chao* (rice pancakes), this year maybe we will have *num banchok* (Khmer noodles). Every household prepares the food and brings it to the *wat* (temple). The monks eat first and then all the villagers together; and sometimes we invite people from other villages to join us. That night the monks give a blessing to the people, telling them if they are good then they can expect good luck and happiness, and they also advise the people on how to be good.

***A lot of land near your village has recently been sold. Do you know who has bought the land, and what do you think about selling yours?***

People in the next village have sold all their land to a company; you can see the white stakes in the rice fields which mark out sold land. I don't know which company it is, but I think they want to build factories on the land. There is a chain of three or four people in buying the land: the company contacts one person who has a friend in the village, who has another friend who knows who in the village needs some money and wants to sell their land. This means that the villagers who sell don't know the company directly. The middlemen get a percentage of the price of the land. As soon as a villager sees others selling their land, they also often want to sell.

For now, these villagers can stay on their land and farm it: the government told the company that until they use the land, they must let people grow rice. Nobody knows when the company will come to claim their land and build the factories.

***What do you think will happen to the villagers after the company claims their land?***

The villagers will have big problems. Maybe they will be able to get a job in the factory - but the factories use modern machinery and don't need so many workers. And the villagers have no skills: all they know is farming, because they never did anything else in their lives. They will have to buy food when they can no longer grow their own rice.

All they have is the money they got for their land. But most of them are spending their money quickly, so that in three or four years there will be nothing left. What will they do then?

[Headman Phan Am] For me, I think long term. I don't want to sell my land, because my land gives me rice, and I love farming rice. Of course I would like money to be able to buy things, but then my future would be uncertain. How do I know if I would find a job? And if I sell my land, what will my children and grandchildren have in the future?

Noone in this village has sold their land, because they see what is happening in the next village. Sometimes, in fact, villagers from here buy land from surrounding villages and turn to rice paddy.

***What effects do you think the Pol Pot time had on your community?***

Before Pol Pot time, people were very polite in our village and were always helping each other. Buddhist teachings at that time had a very strong influence on people, helping them to be good and do good. But the Pol Pot time was very bad. Everyone had to leave the village and work in other parts of the country. The morality of people was affected very badly. People's minds and characters changed, people couldn't talk to each other any more because there was no trust. One person would think they were stronger than another. For example, during Pol Pot time, young people would spy on others - even their parents. Afterwards, the young people stayed like this, it became a habit, and the old people were afraid. Maybe half the people changed in this way.

Now it's becoming better again - people can talk to each other again and cooperate together. But I still think it was better in the Sihanouk time - people had better conduct.

I hope in our village things will continue to get better and better. But this depends on society, the economy and on changes in politics: if we have a stable government. Cambodia is changing quickly. I hope this will bring benefits for the people.

*Thanks to Venn Taroeth, Sith Samath and Auv Sophiak of Culture and Environment Preservation Association (CEPA), Phnom Penh for their assistance.*

# The legacy of savage development: Colonisation of Vietnam's Central Highlands

*The forests and ethnic minority upland communities of Vietnam's Central Highlands share a common history of exploitation by colonial administrators, dominant ethnic groups and development experts. Chris Lang describes the challenges confronting ethnic minority communities and the threats to their forests and rivers in the past and present.*

**T**he Central Highlands of Vietnam, or *Tay Nguyen* in Vietnamese, comprises the provinces of Kontum, Gia Lai, Darlac, and Lam Dong, and covers an area of approximately 55,000 square kilometres adjacent to the Lao PDR and Cambodia borders. The region includes the upper watersheds of the Sesan and the Sre Pok rivers, both of which flow through Cambodia to join the Mekong.

In the Central Highlands there is an extraordinary mix of cultures, languages, farming techniques and wildlife, as well as the largest area of forests remaining in Vietnam. To give some idea of the cultural diversity, in the immediate vicinity of Kontum town live the following minority groups, each with their own language, culture, religion and livelihoods: Bahnar, Jarai, Rengao, Sedang, Jeh, Todrah, Monom, Halang, Katua, Kayong, Takua, Cua, Hre, and Duan.

The traditional architecture of the villages is superb. The Bahnar for example construct huge timber houses, with the living accommodation raised on stilts and vast tiled roofs providing shady verandahs. Fruit trees grow

in plots in the village and meticulously tended vegetable plots are close by, grown for subsistence and for sale in local markets. Village women return from the forests carrying rattan bags full of fuelwood on their backs. Water is collected from bamboo gutters served by streams next to the village. Traditionally, highland people have had trade links with the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese), Lao, Thai and Chinese. Wet rice is grown in fertile valley bottoms, dry rice in hillside forest clearings, and the remainder of what people need is gathered from the forest.

*Chris Lang is a member of Britain's Earth Action Resource Centre, currently studying forestry at the Oxford Forestry Institute. This year he spent four months working at a forestry centre in Vietnam.*

*Traditional basket weaving in Bahnar village*

## French Colonialism

During the colonial period, the French generally referred to highland people as *les mois* (savages) until Leopold Sabatier, a minor colonial official in Kontum, and later *resident* in Darlac, introduced the term Montagnards (highlanders or mountaineers) in the 1920s.

Early French missionaries in Kontum province had little success in converting the Montagnards, beyond some Bahnar and Rengao groups outside the capital. They regarded the Montagnards as violent, unpredictable and not capable of development and civilization, and promoted instead the migration of Kinh to the highlands, as they were regarded as loyal, reliable and more easily converted to Christianity.

Anthropologists such as Oscar Salemink of the Netherlands explain the French attitude towards the Montagnards as a product of the social evolutionary theory which was current in Europe in the 19th century. Based on the 'survival of the fittest' principle, the French believed that the Montagnards had been forced to retreat before more civilized races (the Kinh), and because the Montagnards were incapable of further evolution they would in time be replaced by the Kinh. One dissenter from this theory was Leopold Sabatier, who, as French *resident* in Darlac from 1923 to 1926, studied one Montagnard group, the Rhade, in particular - their language, laws, customs and political system - and argued, contrary to conventional wisdom, that they were as amenable to colonial rule and education as the Kinh.

Sabatier codified and wrote down Rhade law. Salemink describes how Sabatier transformed a Rhade ceremony into the *palabre du serment* to exhort obedience to traditional law (as interpreted by Sabatier), to the village heads (selected by him) and to the French, among other things. Sabatier also proclaimed himself an expert on Rhade history and protector of their culture, in tune with the will of Rhade ancestors.

As long as the Montagnards were ruled by the French and protected from exploitation by the Kinh, Sabatier believed the Montagnard culture would not die out. Ironically, he was sacked for this in 1926 whereupon his successor proceeded to open up the area for rapid economic development and Kinh settlement.

French anthropologists since Sabatier's time have produced similar codifications of Montagnard law - a research activity that was popular well into the 1960s, while French missionaries have produced much of the anthropological research on the people of the Central Highlands. Such research continues to influence development in the Central Highlands even today.

Under colonial rule, the French confiscated land traditionally used by Montagnards and cleared large areas of forest to establish plantations of rubber and coffee for export. As the rubber industry boomed, private colonists as well as large European enterprises such as Michelin moved into the highlands, displacing the Montagnards, then employing them to work on the plantations.

Some groups, such as the Rhade, tried to resist the expansion of rubber plantations and refused to work on the rubber plantations.

This conflict and the lack of willing labourers prompted many rubber concessionaires to pull out. By 1929, with the global economic crisis, the price of rubber fell and the clearing of forest for new plantations all but stopped. In Darlac, for example, only eight of the over one hundred original bids for land survived for any length of time.

Rubber production has since fluctuated with world rubber prices and was set back during the war years when millions of rubber trees were destroyed.

## The Vietnamese Economy Opens

Since the opening of the Vietnamese economy, however, new joint ventures as well as new markets in Malaysia, India, and Taiwan, replacing old markets in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, are driving the expansion. By the year 2005, the government plans to more than triple the area of rubber plantations in the Central Highlands, from 200,000 to 700,000 ha.

In an interview with the *Bangkok Post*, Deputy Director of the state-owned rubber company in Darlac, Nguyen Khanh Phung, describes their work:

In the early 1980s, ethnic minorities, the majority of inhabitants here, mostly practiced slash and burn agriculture. When we tried to settle them down and introduce rubber trees many of them were not convinced. But thanks to our propaganda, serious plantation began in 1986 and some of those trees have started to yield.

The government is also promoting the clearance of forest for coffee plantations - as did the French - and, similar to rubber, production continues to fluctuate with world prices. Between 1984 and 1987, for example, 1 kilogram of coffee was worth 20 to 25 times that of 1 kilogram of rice, so coffee planting in Kontum and Darlac provinces expanded. But by 1992 the price had fallen to about three times that of rice; no new

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## State policy to manage forests in Vietnam

by

Georgina Houghton

*"Forestry policy in Vietnam is based on the principle of sustainable development reflected in the organic relationship between the sustainability of environmental and forest ecosystems and socio-economic conditions. In this context, the role of people living in the forestry areas will be regarded by the Government as a motivating force in order to achieve a balanced relationship between. . . improved living conditions of the people and the need for biodiversity conservation and development of forest resources in Vietnam."* Nguyen Quang Ha, Ministry of Forestry, Vietnam, 1995.

Significant changes occurring within the forestry sector in Vietnam are a reflection of the political, economic and social transition in the country and have dramatic implications for the local management of forests and other natural resources, as well as rural development in general.

Currently, forests and forest land (logged-out and re-growing forests, cultivated and uncultivated lands formerly under forest cover) constitute about two-thirds of Vietnam's total land area and are home to some 24 million people from 50 ethnic minority groups. Increasingly some forestry professionals view forestry as a component of rural development in which technical concerns take second place to issues of food security, sustainable farming systems and environmental protection.

This change of focus has already created space for the development of more participatory methods of resource management and land-use planning in Vietnam.

However, present development priorities and centralized decision-making in Vietnam present obstacles to the translation of progressive forest policies into local practice.

At present, official statistics indicate that the area of forest, including plantations, in Vietnam is about 9.3 million hectares, while area of forest officially categorized as 'rich and medium quality' and 'conifer' forests is put at about 1.4 million hectares, or some 4 percent of land area. Over 11 million hectares is classified by the

Ministry of Forestry (MOF) as 'wasteland' and 'denuded hillsides'.

In an attempt to deal with the steady loss of forest cover, the government has issued a series of decrees in the past five years. These decrees seek to establish a legal framework for the gradual decentralization of control over forests and forest land from the central government to more local-level institutions, including farming households.

These decisions have provided a framework for the establishment of an extension network for agriculture, forestry and fisheries (Decree No 13-CP, 1992) and the provision of credit to rural households to develop a rural economy geared to various agroforestry models (Decree No 14-CP, 1993). Another decree issued in 1992 (Decree No 327, CT) provided for the establishment of a national programme for upland development through policies on the re-greening of degraded hills, rural credit, the utilization of uncultivated lands, alluvial flats and waterways for the production of industrial raw materials, and to promote the adoption of fixed cultivation practices by minority communities.

The current MOF classification of 'forestry land' and 'forestry land without forest' and attempts to prioritize types of uses has, however, generated conflict. Approximately 4 million hectares of highland areas are actually swidden areas lying fallow, and according to communities living in these areas, they have farmed this land for generations. The government classifies these lands as 'unused' or 'not yet used' and local forestry authorities consider that this land should be 'converted' to forest.

In an attempt to resolve these conflicts, the government issued another decree in 1994 (Decree No.02/CP) approving the long-term allocation of forest land to various organizations, including farmer households, for 20 and 50 year periods for forestry-related uses. In combination with the Land Law (1993) — which guarantees the right to use, inherit, sell, transfer and mortgage land — the 1994 decree allows the transfer of state-owned land to be allocated to farmers and forestry workers for the development of social forestry.

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*Georgina Houghton has worked on social forestry issues with researchers at the Institute of Science Management in Hanoi.*

Decree No.02/CP is based on the government's assumption that existing state-controlled forest management cannot protect watershed forests as long as upland communities remained dependent on shifting cultivation and continue to suffer food deficits.

The government is now allocating forestry land either for protection of existing forest by paying farmers annually or for managing both plantation and natural forest, and carrying specific harvesting rights or, in the case of what is officially classified as 'bare lands', for subsidized tree-planting programmes. In both cases, uncertainty of long-term land tenure and lack of adequate subsidies has discouraged the majority of households from participating.

The decentralization of authority from the central government to provincial authorities has not been accompanied by increased distribution of the national budget. As a result, provinces now have to raise their own revenue if they want to subsidize tree planting. In addition, while the 1993 Land Law entitles people to own land, the law also explicitly empowers provincial authorities to determine land use, and to allocate and con-

fiscate land accordingly. At the provincial government level, these factors are responsible for actions to increase production of commercial crops, including industrial tree crops, and is often done at the expense of subsistence economies of minority communities.

Land allocation in Vietnam's rural areas is proceeding very slowly, apparently regardless of economic incentives. Despite drastic reform of the state's legislation for management of forest lands, it is still largely a top-down process geared to reaching quantitative targets rather than the voluntary involvement of farmers throughout the planning and allocation process. Local forestry officials assigned to conduct the process often lack sensitivity to customary land use arrangements, while local people are skeptical about a procedure which appears to offer them little but increased obligations to the state. This is particularly so where farmers have been growing staple crops on their land for generations without state sanction and which, once that land is officially 'allocated', becomes subject to taxation and increasing regulation by the state, which specifically prohibits shifting cultivation.

*Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) for social forestry  
activities in Da Bac District; Hoa Binh province*

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plantations were developed and some plantations were deserted. With the current upswing in world prices, coffee plantations are expanding once again. Last dry season, 5,000 hectares of forest were cleared for coffee in Darlac province alone. The dense forest along roads leading to Ban Me Thuot, the capital, has been cleared and replaced by settlers and coffee plantations.

## Highland Colonization

Since the early French missionaries, populating the high-

In the US-Vietnam war years that followed, about 200,000 Montagnards were killed and large areas of forest and farmland were obliterated by bombing and defoliants. In total, about 85 percent of the highland population were forced to move from their villages because they were declared free-fire zones.

When the war finished in 1975, the victorious government leaders in Hanoi ordered the resettlement of millions of Kinh into the highlands as part of the government's New Economic Zone strategy.

Like the French and South Vietnamese before them, the Hanoi-based government believed that economic development in the highlands would be spurred by the settlement of Kinh. Kinh migration to the Central Highlands was also encouraged by the Vietnamese government for reasons of national security. During the 1980s, the Montagnard independence movement (FULRO - French acronym for the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races), founded in 1964, expanded its military operations along the border. Between 1975 and 1983 FULRO was gradually forced into hiding in Cambodia until 1992, when the last FULRO arms were handed over to the UN peacekeeping mission, under the Cambodian peace agreement.

### *Bahnar village near Kontum*

lands with Kinh people remains a cornerstone of development policy in Vietnam. Right up to independence, French administrators recommended moving Kinh from certain overpopulated and poor districts of the north and centre. Once they (Kinh) are settled in the highlands, states one report, "...these people will form the nucleus of future Vietnamese populations in the Southern Montagnard Countries."

After World War II and the defeat of the French in 1954, the US-backed South Vietnamese government, under President Diem, decreed all land in South Vietnam as Sovereign Territory. This effectively dismissed all Montagnard claims to land and, in 1955, when President Diem ordered thousands of Catholic refugees from the North to settle in the Central Highlands, these settlers could claim traditional Montagnard land for farming. As a Vietnamese news magazine reported in 1960, in an article entitled "New Highway Turns Forests Into Farms", the clearing of forests and migration was facilitated by construction and upgrading of roads into the highlands.

Many of today's key positions in party and state within the Central Highlands are held by people from Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces of northern Vietnam where the Communist party was formed in the 1930s. Such people regard a bureaucratic career as a way out of poverty, just as in the days of the mandarin, and are renowned in Vietnam for their scholarly tradition and loyalty to the Hanoi government.

With the large-scale migrations of Kinh after the war, much of the Montagnard land was taken over by cooperatives, particularly fertile valley bottoms which were suitable for wet rice cultivation; and in the highland forests, land left fallow by the Montagnards was often claimed by Kinh settlers.

The Vietnamese government also initiated its programme of Fixed Cultivation and Settlement, which forced Montagnards out of their old villages and into Kinh-style settlements. Now living in small brick houses, constructed on the ground,



arranged along a road, with fenced farming plots adjacent to the houses, many Bahnar people living in the new villages near Kontum lament the loss of their openly traditional homes where the extended family lived under the same roof.

Clearly, the aim of this programme is to assimilate the Montagnard into mainstream Vietnamese society.

### **Internal Colonialism**

Anthropologist Grant Evans describes the post-1975 Vietnamese policy in the Central Highlands as 'internal colonialism', referring to the Kinh migrations and exploitation of resources, and control and subjugation of the Montagnards.

Granted, the new land law decreed in 1988 which allowed farmers to hold legal title to their land and to some extent recognizes customary land rights is an improvement, but there has been no compensation for Montagnards whose land was confiscated by settlers since 1975.

The development approach has not fundamentally changed from French time and has taken the form of production of export crops such as rubber and coffee, tree plantations to feed the international demand for paper and pulp, and large scale irrigation largely for wet rice production by Kinh.

The Chairman of the People's Committee of Kontum Province, Nguyen Thanh Cao, writing in *Business Vietnam* (1993) describes Kontum as:

...a province full of potentials but due to lack of investment capital, low quality infrastructure, meagre workforce, deficiency in skillful workers and specialists, the exploitation and use of provincial potentials are very limited.

*Business Vietnam* includes a list of potential investments appealing for aid or investment in Kontum and Darlac provinces. Thirty-eight projects are listed, requiring an investment of US\$120 million. All are proposed by and overseen by state organizations. To date few have gone beyond feasibility stage. For Kontum, projects proposed include a 12,000 ha eucalyptus plantation for pulp (US\$12 million), a 40,000 m<sup>3</sup>/year timber processing factory for export (US\$10 million), a pine resin processing factory (US\$1 million), sugar cane plantation and processing (US\$2 million), and the general development of hotels and tourism. The list for Darlac includes coffee production for export (US\$3 million), 10,000 ha of rubber plantation (US\$13 million), a rubber processing plant (US\$2.4 million), a plantation, logging and timber processing

project for export (US\$25.5 million), and 15,000 ha of eucalyptus plantation (US\$18 million).

Quite apart from its investment policies of 1993, the Vietnamese government had begun to voice its concern about deforestation, often referring to this as the most serious ecological problem in the country. Officially between 1975 and 1991, logging and reforestation was controlled by state-owned forest enterprises. With the influx of Kinh settlers in the highlands, logging accelerated and the area of land traditionally left fallow by the Bahnar reduced. Montagnards who traditionally did not sell timber saw the Kinh logging and their forests disappearing so they too began to fell timber in order not to be left empty handed.

Rather than examine policies and trends accelerating the clearing of forests for short-term economic gains, both government officials and Hanoi-based forestry researchers blame nomadic tribes in remote areas for the problem.

### ***The logging yard of the Import Export Company of Kontum***

With economic reform since the late 1980s, state companies are now being privatized and, generally, there has been an expansion of logging operations and related forest industries - often without benefit to the highland communities. Montagnards are now officially discouraged from building their large traditional timber houses because the government considers that they consume too much timber; meanwhile state enterprises are felling and processing large volumes of timber for export each year, often in cooperation with private foreign investors.

The Ea Sup Forestry Agriculture Union, for example, has joined with the Korindo Group of Indonesia to produce 50,000 m<sup>3</sup> of wood for export each year. Kontum's Import Export

Company is now processing 40,000 m<sup>3</sup> a year of timber most of which, according to Nguyen Quoc Trong, the company director, is exported to Thailand, Taiwan and Japan.

### **Drought**

The clearance of highland forest is believed to be responsible for changes in the rainfall patterns in the area as well. Last year, for example, the dry season lasted for five months, compared to a normal dry season period of three to four months.

As of March 1995, over 530 dams and reservoirs in Darlac province alone were reported to have dried up, according to *Vietnam News*. The Ea Nao reservoir, which has is designed to supply 10,000 m<sup>3</sup> water per day to Ban Me Thout, ran dry.

Roughly 2-3,000 ha of rice were destroyed, coffee output is expected to drop by 40%, food prices increased, cattle died, and outbreaks of diarrhoea, a serious health risk, are widespread. In many places wells have had to be dug deeper by 50 m to reach water.

### **Irrigation and Hydropower**

Current development plans for the highlands include irrigation and hydropower development. Three river basins are currently under study as potential sites to exploit.

One of the first dams to be constructed in the Central Highlands is the Ea Sup lower dam, on a tributary of the Sre Pok River, in turn a tributary of the Mekong. Before its construction in the early 1980s, approximately 35 kilometres from capital Ban Me Thuot, population in the area was very low, and consisted almost entirely of Jarai and other Montagnards. Large numbers of immigrants from the north of Vietnam arrived, partly to construct the dam, and, since the dam was completed, more people came to take advantage of the irrigation scheme. By 1993, only 18% of the population were Montagnards.

The lack of water in Ea Sup and other reservoirs during the dry season followed by damaging floods in the rainy season, has prompted calls for more dam building to regulate and store water in the drought months and hold back destructive floods which are becoming more frequent with the destruction of forests.

One proposed project, the Upper Ea Sup, aims to provide irrigation of 8,210 hectares, hydropower, drinking water supply, and a reduction of flooding and soil erosion. Mirroring earlier policies of assimilation of the Montagnards, a Mekong Secretariat study on this project done in 1994 states that the area is being developed for redistribution of people from the densely populated northern area of Vietnam. According to the study, the population in the area is expected to increase to 33,444 by the year 2000, up from 4,100 in 1984, as a result of this redistribution.

*Construction site of the Yali Falls dam*

## THE YALI FALLS DAM PROJECT

- ◆ The Yali Falls dam, currently under construction, will be Vietnam's second largest hydropower dam (700MW)
- ◆ By damming the Sesan river, the largest eastern tributary of the Mekong, its reservoir will flood the traditional lands and villages of 7,400 Jarai and Bahnar people.
- ◆ Financing for the US\$1.025 billion project comes from Russia and the Ukraine after it was rejected by the World Bank, reportedly on the grounds that the resettlement programme did not comply with Bank guidelines, and also that the Bank was not involved at an early enough stage.
- ◆ Yali Falls and other potential dam sites in the Se San basin have been studied over the past 30 years by Mekong Secretariat consultants from Japan (Nippon Koei), Sweden (Swedpower) and Switzerland (Electrowatt).
- ◆ The most recent assessment of the project was done by Electrowatt in 1993 which recommends new Kinh-style settlements for the displaced communities and a 'comprehensive package' for developing 'settled agriculture'.
- ◆ Electricity generated by the dam is intended to feed the 1,500 kilometre transmission line running from the Hoa Binh dam (1,920 MW) in north Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh city in the south. Electrification of villages affected by the project is not included, according to Electrowatt's report, which states: "It is not envisaged that minority villagers will take immediate advantage of home electricity because the cost in relation to current income may prove prohibitive."
- ◆ The impact of damming the Sesan on downstream waters and fisheries in Cambodia and the Mekong Delta has not been studied nor have Cambodian authorities been consulted. Since construction began, fish stocks have dropped downstream in Cambodia, according to reports from local communities to Khmer students on recent research visits to Rattanakiri province, where most people rely on fish for a large proportion of their protein.
- ◆ An estimated labour force of 10-20,000 will be required during the 4 to 6 year construction period. This will cause an enormous increase in the consumption of timber for firewood, as well as timber for the construction of houses and the dam itself. The EIA points out that the influx of construction workers could lead to a substantial amount of illegal hunting in the Mom Ray nature reserve, and states that "the general pressure on wildlife habitats, protected or not, will increase as a consequence of this project."

The Mom Ray nature reserve, nearby the Yali Falls dam, is the habitat of some of the most rare and endangered animals to be found in Vietnam, reportedly including kouprey, tigers and elephants.

### *Project Specifications*

**Province:** Gia Lai

**River:** Sesan

**Catchment Area:** 7,455 km<sup>2</sup>

**Reservoir:**

Storage capacity - 1037 M m<sup>3</sup>

Reservoir area - 64.5 km<sup>2</sup>

**Inundation:**

Agricultural land - 1,500 h

Forest - 1,700 h

**Affected population** - 7,400

**Dam:**

Type - rockfill

Max height - 86 m

Crest length - 1,400 m

**Installed Capacity:** 700 MW

**Total Estimated Construction**

**Cost:** US\$1.025 billion

**Construction Period:** 6 years

*(Source of Information: Mekong Secretariat & Power Investigation and Design Company, Vietnam, quoted in Subregional Energy Sector Study for Asian Development Bank, compiled by Norconsult International, 1994)*

The Upper Ea Sup project includes the conversion of over 7,000 hectares of forest to agriculture. The study describes forest in the area as "broad leafed deciduous trees which have very little economic and environmental value", and the problems of loss of habitat on wildlife are dismissed: "Wild animals and birds in the area will move to other forests". The expected increased use of pesticides and herbicides with the

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*...we must eat a bitter  
fruit and say it is sweet...*

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supply of water for irrigation will cause water pollution and ecological imbalance, as well as contamination of ground water systems. Fish

stocks will be damaged and a source of protein will be lost to villagers. As far as project-affected people: "...preparing other job opportunities for these people is advisable."

In general the cultural impact on minorities appears not to be an issue for the Korean Rural Development Corporation, the consultants responsible for the feasibility study:

Minority groups will be affected greatly in their lifestyle, livelihoods, or habitation. The special provision should be prepared to succeed their traditional behavior, social organization, and cultural and religious practices. There is no place of aesthetic and scenic beauty, sites of historic and religious significance, etc. which will be destroyed by the project.

Independent of nearly twenty years of studies commissioned by the Mekong Secretariat, the Institute of Water Resources Planning and Management (IWRPM) of the Ministry of Water Resources in Vietnam completed their own three year study on the development of the Upper Sre Pok basin in 1989. In addition to the Upper Ea Sup, the IWRPM scheme consists of 12 projects covering a total irrigation area of 47,100 ha and a generating potential of more than 500 megawatts (MW). Danish consultants COWI-Kruger, are working on phase III of a feasibility study of these 12 dams.

For the Sesan river basin, six large hydropower dams are proposed which, if built, would flood more than 400 km<sup>2</sup> of fertile valley bottoms, much of which is currently under cultivation by both Kinh and Montagnards. Despite the fact that the projects have been in the pipeline for over 30 years, the local population remains largely unaware of the scale of the development proposals.

The first dam on the Sesan, the Yali Falls dam, is currently under construction (See box, page 43). According to Electrowatt of Switzerland, the company responsible for the

project's environmental assessment, some villages were contacted about the project in 1987. But Bahnar villagers visited by the author this year have described the consultation process as propaganda from a government official. They were not sure whether their village would be flooded, and felt powerless to influence the decision makers behind the dam construction. They used a traditional saying to describe their current predicament: "...we must eat a bitter fruit and say it is sweet."

As another era of development in the Central Highlands rapidly unfolds, this time guided by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Bangkok-based Mekong River Commission, questions as to who benefits remain. In the words of one Bahnar villager, "If we Montagnards want to develop today, we have to do so as another culture. We have to follow their ways, and develop like they have. Why can't we develop as Montagnards?"

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# Community Aid Abroad: "Challenge and seek to change"

*The government and trans-national corporations of Australia have become prominent investors in large infrastructure development in the Mekong regions. But while Australian-funded dams are making headline news, Australian NGOs such as Community Aid Abroad (CAA) are supporting Australian people and local communities with the objective of working "in partnership with people to build a fairer and more environmentally sustainable world." CAA describes its views and objectives to Watershed.*

## **What is Community Aid Abroad (CAA)?**

Community Aid Abroad is a democratically-run, independent, community-based Australian organisation. We promote social justice and the alleviation of poverty by providing funding and other support to local development initiatives both overseas and in Aboriginal Australia, and through our campaigning, education and advocacy work on issues relating to development.

## **What are the aims of your organisation?**

Our central aim is to work in partnership with people to build a fairer and more environmentally sustainable world.

## **Do you have a mission statement or philosophy on development?**

Central to CAA's philosophy on development is a recognition that poverty and social injustice have their roots in exploitative and unsustainable economic structures; CAA therefore works to support and participate in coalitions and alliances that challenge and seek to change these structures, while at the same time promoting viable and sustainable alternatives. CAA defines development as:

*the process by which individuals identify themselves as a community and work to expand the capacity of that community to equitably share and expand its resources for the benefit of all its members. The development process will inevitably depend on the community collectively acquiring the necessary knowledge, power, values and organizational skills not only to accomplish the above goal but to ensure it is not achieved at the expense either of other communities or of the environment.*

## **What is your role in Australia?**

With a support base of some 400,000 people across Australia, CAA groups, over 180 in all, bring together local people with common interests - social justice, development and di-

verse cultures. They form the grass-roots of CAA and aim to inform themselves and their community about CAA's concerns as well as raising funds for projects of their choice or working on a campaigns issue. CAA has an annual turnover of AUD\$18 million about half of which is raised through fundraising in the Australian community and the other half funded by the government aid bureau, AusAID.

## **How do you view the role of your organisation in the region?**

In addition to supporting community-based development projects in many countries of the region, CAA also seeks to facilitate dialogue between community groups and larger institutions, governments and Australian companies influencing development in the region to ensure that the increasing trade and investment by Australia in the Asia-Pacific region occurs in ways which assist and not undermine economic and social development for the people of those countries, particularly the poorest.

## **Where and when did you start working in the region?**

**Vietnam:** The Australian Freedom from Hunger Campaign, since merged with CAA, began working in Vietnam in 1989 in Xuyen Moc, the easternmost province where many people do not have enough fertile land, are malnourished and vulnerable to diseases. Without mosquito nets, people become afflicted with chronic malaria and weakened to the point where they cannot cultivate even the smallest plots of land, becoming further malnourished and prone to disease. To try and break this cycle, a micro-credit scheme was established in order to generate some income, improve their level of nutrition and be able to pay for medical treatment when necessary. With small, low-interest loans, families previously near destitution have lifted themselves out of poverty in a very short time - many others are still struggling but have made progress. This is developing a sense among the poorest and most marginalised people that they can achieve real change in their material circumstances.

Much of Ba Ria-Vung Tau province, 120 km southeast of Ho Chi Minh city, was a 'free-fire' zone for years during the war, suffering defoliation and almost complete depopulation. Those who settled there after 1975 and who continue to migrate from the overcrowded north, face some of the most difficult living conditions in the country, where soils in the forest clearings are poor and malaria is rampant. Here CAA is working with a team of Vietnamese health workers and community organisers on a primary health care program.

**Cambodia:** Water is the key to life, in whatever environment we live. In Cambodia this is even more inescapable than elsewhere, as up to half the surface of the country is submerged beneath inches or feet of water for months of the year. For millennia, farmers have shown great ingenuity in using the bounty of the Mekong system to grow a multitude of rice varieties and an extraordinary diversity of crops uniquely adapted to the many variables of soil and water. Twenty years of war have taken their toll, however. Invaluable species were lost, people were driven from their traditional lands and forced into farming methods which showed little respect for their accumulated wisdom. The Pol Pot regime launched a series of disastrous mega-projects in irrigation which caused not a huge rice surplus but mass starvation. The approach of subsequent governments and the international donor community have also emphasized large-scale infrastructure, maximum irrigation and technical innovation, whether or not these have been suitable to local conditions and needs.

Over the last few years it has been possible for NGOs in Cambodia to work with local village communities. Along with local government officials, CAA has been talking directly with farmers in some of the poorest areas of the country, and listening to what their priorities and perceptions are in order to support initiatives that can help these communities regain control over water and land resources. The programme works with the Cambodian Department of Hydrology, and is helping to promote an integrated and participatory approach to the development of irrigation and clean water facilities throughout the country.

**Lao PDR:** About 150 km north of Vientiane, where the main highway enters the steep mountains which unfold all the way to the border of China, is the district of Vang Vieng. Although originally mostly populated by lowland Lao rice farmers, many minority groups, including Tai Dam, Khmu and Hmong, settled into the area 18 or more years ago, fleeing fighting and bombing in Xieng Khouang province, across the mountains to the northeast. The increased pressure on limited land areas caused by resettlement have caused both food security problems and environmental degradation.

CAA began working in Vang Vieng district in 1989, initially focusing on the construction and rehabilitation of small-scale irrigation schemes. Not only did these irrigation projects

*In Vang Vieng Province in Vietnam, CAA works with farmers  
on dry season crop diversification*

contribute to greater self-sufficiency in rice, but were also effective 'entry-points' into other community development activities such as strengthening community institutions (e.g. water user groups, rice banks and village development committees) agricultural diversification and women's income generation through traditional skills such as weaving and natural dyes. CAA now also works on similar projects in the remote districts of Saravan and Sekong in southern Lao PDR. The CAA team currently consists of one expatriate and ten Lao development workers.

*In the next issue of Watershed we will profile the Australian hydropower company HECEC, who have recently expanded their operations to Lao PDR. This move follows massive local opposition to their proposed Franklin dam in Tasmania, and coincides with their contracting with the Lao PDR government to build the Sekaman I dam, which, if buildt, would be the the largest dam in Southeast Asia when finished.*

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write my stories, and I can tell about what I saw in Thailand. I was born in Phnom Penh, and as a teenager under the Khmer Rouge regime lived in Kompong Cham province. Afterwards I came back to Phnom Penh to study; at school I was always interested in journalism, but I had no skills. You see in Cambodia we have no journalism colleges - even now. So I began writing for a newspaper straight after finishing school.

It was a state newspaper - *Pracheachon* - so it was impossible to criticise the government. I was responsible for writing about the rubber plantations in Kompong Cham. I was there many times and saw the really bad conditions for the workers - their rations were cut, there was corruption, for months the workers received no salary and they couldn't do anything about it as the company was owned by the state. I felt that this was very unfair so I wrote up the story and the editors said: OK it's a good story but unfortunately we can't publish it. There were many occasions like that. So I quit *Pracheachon* and started working for an NGO. You see I was disappointed because with my writing I was doing nothing for the people.

Then I started with the *Phnom Penh Post* in 1992. I began by writing about social issues; now also I cover environment stories. I found it was very different to writing in Khmer. Sometimes with Khmer newspapers the story is not comprehensive, not balanced - they just talk to one person and publish it. With the *Post*, I can write the story in a lot of detail from many sources. Some journalists just sit in Phnom Penh and phone government ministers to get the story, but I can go to the area, get the details, the pictures and many sources to make the story.

Now, in Cambodia, the government is taking the experience from other countries like Malaysia, where there is no freedom of the press. Under the new press law, the government can sue a paper or arrest journalists to silence criticism, in the interests of 'national security and stability'. Already many papers have been taken to court and suspended. Now when I try to talk to the officials about political issues they say "why are you so negative?" But all we do is tell the truth: we do not favour any party, we do not favour the government, we are independent and I tell them this.

Last year, a journalist wrote a story concerning illegal logging in Kompong Cham province. The journalist was killed shortly after, but the judges released the military officer whom the journalist had accused of corruption. I have been threatened too. Last time I went to Koh Kong to cover logging, one official was very worried about what I would write, so he got someone to call me up very often when I got back to Phnom Penh, asking me what I would write.

But if I have the truth then I can write. It's not a problem for me. I make the choice.

Democracy includes freedom of the press. The government wants to impose limits on press freedom and this means limits on democracy. It's difficult to define democracy - we have democracy at the moment because we have a multi-party system, we have a National Assembly - so this is one kind of democracy. But it's limited in some ways. For example, within the National Assembly, it's very hard for people to criticize the government. The Chairman of the Human Rights Commission in the National Assembly, Khem Sokha, used to talk a lot about human rights problems, but he received so many threats that now he is almost silent.

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....I think it is not too  
late for  
Cambodia...

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I hope by writing about the environment and about social issues, I can help to make the government more responsible. But sometimes they simply do not care about our writing, or sometimes they do respond, but by jailing the journalist - not a good reaction!

But at least the people know.

For the future of my country, I don't want to see bad things. We had too much suffering for 20 years. I just know that I don't want to see corruption. I don't want to see destruction.

*Mang Channo's award-winning photograph of logging operations in Koh Kong province can be seen on the back cover.*

### Green Journalism

In October this year, the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation (IMMF) held an environmental journalism training course for sixteen journalists from the region, including Mang Channo. The course's objective was to provide opportunities for Indochinese journalists to observe, assess and debate economic development and its impacts, by using Thailand as an example.

In addition to field visits around Thailand - including one to ethnic communities in the north's highlands - the trainees heard speakers from NGOs, Thai newspapers and the government.

IMMF was founded two years ago to support the development of the media in Indochina, with a particular emphasis on providing educational opportunities for journalists in the region.

# A journalist in Cambodia: "I cannot close my eyes"

*Mang Channo, journalist with the Phnom Penh Post, talks with Watershed about the problems facing Cambodia, his motivations for writing about environmental and social issues, and the role of a free press in a democracy. Mang Channo recently won an environmental journalism award for an article about logging and shrimp farming in Koh Kong province.*

In my country environmental problems are not so similar to other countries - we don't have that much of a population problem, and there is not a lot of pollution as Cambodia is not industrialised. Our biggest problem now is deforestation. Before, of course, there was logging, but not so much because it was supplying wood for inside the country, for building and for fuelwood. But when Cambodia started to open up and have a free market economy, then foreign investment came in. At that time, in 1991-92, Cambodia was like a young country; even now we do not have laws or guidelines for forestry or to protect the environment. The investors look for a quick profit, they just see the timber - they don't care because it's not their country, and they don't care about the environment or the people here.

Before, Cambodia had 73 per cent forest cover and now it is only 40 per cent, so there has been massive destruction of the forests. This is very dangerous for Cambodia. You can see the experience from other

countries, such as Thailand and Vietnam, where they have flooding every year. In the past three years, this has started to happen in Cambodia too. The bad effects are suffered by the people, by the poor. The good effects are felt only by the government officials who earn money from timber. The people who suffer aren't those who live in villas, who have cars, but the people in the villages, in the country, as floods come and destroy the crops. Most Cambodian people work in agriculture, not industry, they work in the fields, so most of them are affected. It's not the investors who suffer! How come government people earn such low salaries but have a nice villa, and two cars? How come? Yet there are so many people in poverty.

If this money at least went to the national budget it would be better, but the money doesn't come back to the people for education or for health. It goes straight to the pockets of the people who have power.

I'm not saying I'm a good person, but I say that I cannot close my eyes to this kind of thing.

I think that it's not too late for Cambodia. I do not have the power to stop what is happening. But maybe my writing can help to show the government the truth, to show them what they should be aware about, to show them what they should do - and ensure that the public know the truth about what's happening.

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*The investors look for a quick profit, they just see the timber - they don't care because it's not their country*

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I have just returned from an environmental journalism training course in Thailand, organised by the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation. The two things which struck

me most during the three week course were the Thai experience with deforestation, which is causing the present massive flooding, and how environmentally conscious the Thai people and government are, which comes from their past experiences. We in Cambodia can learn from this, and I want to help by writing about what I saw in Thailand.

But I got a shock last week when I heard that the Cambodian government had just given a 1.5 million hectare concession to the Indonesian company Panin - covering some of our best forest in Rattanakiri province. I just don't understand this! It makes me feel powerless. But at least I can

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