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## [Save the Mekong, a coalition to keep the river alive](#)

The Mekong River is one of the world's major rivers and flows along 4,350 km (2,703 miles) draining an area of 795,000 km<sup>2</sup>. (1) As Aviva Imhof from IRN beautifully describes it, "the Mekong River is a changing kaleidoscope of cultures, geography and plant and animal life. From a small trickle in Tibet, the river quickly gathers steam and carves magnificent gorges through Yunnan Province of China. It then turns into what it remains for most of the rest of its journey: a fast-flowing, meandering waterway that forms the heart and soul of mainland Southeast Asia." (2)

The river system is also the base of the regional food security as long as its wealthy aquatic biodiversity, which is second only to the Amazon, is not only home to migratory fish stocks and endangered species but also supports one of the most productive inland fisheries in the world, especially small-scale fisheries. Also farmers are able to thrive on rain-fed rice farming and freshwater fish. Thus, over sixty million villagers from China, Burma, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam who live in and around and share the Mekong River depend on it; for them water is more than a source of life, it is a way of life.

Yet, deaf to all warnings and blind to the potential harm to the rivers' biological and cultural richness as well as the survival of villages, the governments of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand are planning a series of eleven big hydropower dams for the lower stretches of the Mekong River. The purpose is to cater for increasing urban electricity hunger and even export electricity to distant cities. Big consortiums of hydropower companies might be rubbing their hands at the perspective of huge profits out of replacing a "river of life" with an industrialized series of reservoirs.

The dams put in peril the ecology of both river and forest ecosystems of the Mekong river system as well as the lives of the millions of riverside people who depend upon the river for their income and food security (see WRM Bulletin N° 136) and each of the water resource development projects proposed for the Mekong River basin has the potential to damage the ecology. Evaluation studies by the Mekong Resource Center have confirmed that the dams threaten the future viability and sustainability of the Mekong's fish and fisheries as long as they would obstruct fish migration, degrade aquatic habitats and affect the flow regime. Studies also revealed that "there is no existing mitigation technology that can effectively deal with the barrier effect of mainstream dams on fish migrations" and that "(T)he cost of replacing this essentially-free resource with another source of food, income and employment would be prohibitive. With this perspective, it is clear that the conservation of capture fisheries is crucial to maintaining food security and social stability."(3)

Large-scale generation –for whom and for what?-- generated at a remote site and transported by long distance transmission lines to the consumer is one of the key underlying issues of the problem.

As a response, non-government organizations, local people, academics, journalists, artists and ordinary people from within the Mekong countries and internationally sharing a concern about the future of the Mekong River, joined to create a coalition. Save the Mekong was created "to protect the river, its resources and people's livelihoods, and encourage policymakers to adopt more sustainable ways of meeting people's energy and water needs."

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The coalition has created a website <<http://www.savethemekong.org>> and carries out a campaign urging Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam to keep the Mekong flowing freely. In March and April, coalition members will be collecting signed postcards from people in the countries who would be affected by the projects and around the world. They invite anyone to support the campaign by adding one's name to the corresponding online petition at <<http://tinyurl.com/Save-the-Mekong>>, asking the governments to Save the Mekong and protect the livelihoods of those who depend on it.

(1) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mekong>

(2) World Rivers Review, International Rivers Network, <http://www.internationalrivers.org/files/WRRjune2007Final.pdf>

(3) [http://www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au/events/past/Conference\\_Nov2008/AMRC%20fisheries%20Brief%209%20%20Final%20\(Engl\).pdf](http://www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au/events/past/Conference_Nov2008/AMRC%20fisheries%20Brief%209%20%20Final%20(Engl).pdf)