



Extending the Tonle Sap Initiative in the Greater Mekong Subregion

By Chuon Chanrithy
Ministry of Environment

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Cambodia's main feature, the Tonle Sap basin, covers 44% of the country's total area. And the main feature of the basin is the Tonle Sap, which happens to be the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The Tonle Sap has defined Cambodian life. It conditions its prospects. Why? Because its incredible biodiversity, allied to that of the watershed, underpins the livelihoods of one third of the population. There is more: the lake's importance extends far beyond Cambodia's borders. Fish migrations from the lake help to restock the Mekong River and its tributaries. The lake also helps to control salinity intrusion and to conserve mangroves in the Mekong delta, by acting as a reservoir from which water drains in the dry season. The lake and its watershed are a regionally vital resource. Their biodiversity is of global significance.

Threats to the Tonle Sap

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|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Climate Change | Cumulative Impact of Built Structures on the Hydrology of the Mekong Basin | Deforestation in the Watersheds | Agricultural Expansion |
| Industrial and Urban Pollution | Conversion of the Flooded Forest to Agriculture | Overexploitation of Fisheries and Wildlife Resources | Agricultural Runoff |
| Mining | Habitat Fragmentation | Collection of Fuel Wood from the Flooded Forest | Introduction of Non-Native Species |

Source: ADB. December 2004. *Future Solutions Now: The Tonle Sap Initiative*. Manila.

However, high population growth is increasing the number of people to feed and consumptive use of the Tonle Sap basin's resources is intense. Major threats to the Tonle Sap, to name a few, include overexploitation of fisheries and wildlife resources, conversion of the flooded forest to agriculture, and collection of fuel wood from the flooded forest. In the watersheds, deforestation is destroying habitats and also results in a deterioration of water and soil quality and increased siltation rates. And so, despite the inherent richness of the lake, most indicators of poverty in the basin are even more negative than those that characterize the national population as a whole.

Outside Cambodia, major threats to the Tonle Sap include the cumulative impact of built structures on the hydrology of the Mekong basin. This relates to the importance of dynamic flows and the impact that changes may have on flood pulses, flood triggers, and flood timing. Relatively unregulated tropical rivers such as the Mekong River support a high biodiversity and their dynamic component is essential to their productivity. Since dams, the largest of built structures, are usually constructed to enhance socioeconomic development, they tend to attract people and industry: therefore, river ecosystems containing dams must also contend with secondary environmental pressures that are independent from and in addition to the direct influences of dams on the physical and biological dimensions of the system.¹

¹ The influence of other built structures, e.g., roads, weirs, and flood control works, in floodplains is even less understood.

What is being done in Cambodia? In 1993, a Royal Decree designated the lake as a multiple-use protected area. In 1997, the lake was also nominated as a biosphere reserve. In 2000, a Prime Ministerial decree released 56% of the former fishing lot area to communities. In conjunction with local authorities, they are to manage fisheries sustainably. In 2002, ADB approved the Tonle Sap Environmental Management project. That project aims to enhance systems and develop the capacity for (i) natural resource management coordination and planning, (ii) community-based natural resource management, and (iii) biodiversity conservation in the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve.

The Tonle Sap Environmental Management project focused ADB's attention on the Tonle Sap and led, in July 2003, to the formulation of the Tonle Sap Basin Strategy. This geographical focus has just been integrated in ADB's Country Strategy and Program, 2005–2009 and forms the basis for setting priorities and planning assistance in the Tonle Sap basin over the next 5–10 years. The Tonle Sap Initiative, which is a partnership of organizations and people working to meet the poverty and environment challenges of the Tonle Sap, will accomplish the Tonle Sap Basin Strategy through a suite of highly integrated loan and technical assistance projects.

In the Tonle Sap basin, the development objectives are to foster, promote, and facilitate (i) pro-poor, sustainable economic growth, (ii) access to assets, and (iii) management of natural resources and the environment. The strategy is based on three underpinning principles (i) sustainable livelihoods, (ii) social justice, and (iii) a basin-wide approach. The strategy focuses on two core areas (i) rural development and the environment, and (ii) human development. Crosscutting themes will ensure that attention is paid to vulnerable groups, governance, resource cooperation, and the private sector.

The threats to the Tonle Sap must be considered from the perspective of the basin as a whole but it is impossible to tackle all of them at the same time. Therefore, for practical reasons, the Tonle Sap Initiative encompasses the following important tactics:

- Geographical phasing of interventions,
- Development of the institutional, policy, and regulatory framework,
- Acquisition and dissemination of knowledge,
- Enablement of stakeholders, and
- Forging of partnerships.

Time is short and I cannot brief you fully on how these tactics are being applied. Clearly, however, the geographic phasing of loan projects is central to it. These started at the heart of the Tonle Sap basin with the Tonle Sap Environmental Management project, which became effective in early 2003. In the buffer zone, access to capital assets will be promoted through the Tonle Sap Sustainable Livelihoods project. Moving from the buffer zone to the transition area, the emphasis will switch from conservation and fisheries to enhanced agricultural production through the Tonle Sap Lowland Stabilization project. Finally, the Tonle Sap Watershed Management project will take us to the basin's uplands with the absolute imperative for their protection through sustainable management of native vegetation and reduced land degradation while affording means of livelihood to those living in these upland areas. It is

envisaged that most elements of this cycle will go through a number of iterations and they therefore incorporate piloting of interventions.

The strategy is expected to concentrate 30–40% of ADB's operations in Cambodia, a concentration that has catalyzed bilateral and multilateral assistance in support of the Tonle Sap Initiative. Implementation of the Tonle Sap Basin Strategy will afford a significant and positive contribution to more effective basin management; offer possibilities for cooperation with local, provincial, and national stakeholders to balance ever-increasing demands on the lake's resources; and encourage continuity, give confidence to stakeholders, and present opportunities to resolve current and future challenges.

At the international level, there is now greater understanding that natural resources do not recognize administrative boundaries and that decisions in one part of a basin can have significant impacts on natural resources elsewhere. In recent years, a deteriorating environment in the Mekong basin has led to a greater awareness of the need for cooperation. One of the most significant cooperative efforts to date has been the Mekong River Commission. And, for the reasons to which I alluded earlier, policymakers have also begun to pay more attention to factors that affect the timing, quantity, and quality of water, and not just water flows. But much more is needed to meet transboundary environmental challenges. Cambodia, Lao PRD, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam, and Yunnan Province, in the People's Republic of China, must share the costs of, and responsibility for, altering the hydrological regime of the Mekong River and its tributaries. All six countries of the subregion are riparian and all are eager to boost development using the Mekong River basin's water and related resources. Notwithstanding, their perspectives are not the same. And so opportunities for enhancing transboundary environmental governance must be found. In this spirit, we invite your continuing attention to the Tonle Sap Initiative and invite you to examine how its approach to management of water and related resources could be extended in other subbasins of the Mekong River.