

Imagining an Ethical Future for the Mekong River

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The future of the Mekong River is unfolding like a movie we have seen many times. The opening scene is this idyllic river with traditional fishing and farming villages clustered along the shore. Hydroelectric dams first start appearing on the tributaries, and then on the main stem of the river. We can expect the movie to end with the river transformed into a series of reservoirs backing up to the dams that provide electricity for the region's economy. The traditional villages, farms, and forests, are replaced by shopping malls, factories, and monoculture plantations.

Is this the inevitable development scenario for the Mekong? Major elements, including two of eleven planned mega-dams on the Mekong's main stem, have already become "facts on the ground" constraining future options. Decisions that will affect the whole Basin are being taken unilaterally, sidelining both international diplomacy and the Mekong River Commission. Environmental and social impact studies have become cynical exercises with no actual role in decision-making.¹ Politics, power, and money, rather than reasoned planning, are driving the agenda.^{2,3} We are not so naïve as to be surprised, but neither should we be complacent. What kind of future do the 60 million inhabitants of the Basin want? What kind of Mekong River would they like to see? Whose voices should be heard? Whose values should prevail?

The Mekong ecosystem is dramatically rich in fish and biodiversity, and provides both food and income for millions of people. The environmental, social, and economic costs of the currently planned hydropower scenario for the Mekong Basin are huge. Depending on the assumptions, the costs could be exceeding the benefits when the lost

¹ Andrew Wells-Dang, Kyaw Nyi Soe, Lamphay Inthakoun, Prom Tola, Penh Socheat, Thi Thanh Van, Areerat Chabada, and Worachanok Youttanakorn, "A Political Economy of Environmental Impact Assessment in the Mekong Region," *Water Alternatives* 9, no. 1 (2016).

² John Dore, Louis Lebel, and Francois Molle, "A Framework for Analysing Transboundary Water Governance Complexes, Illustrated in the Mekong Region," *Journal of Hydrology* 466 (2012): 23-36.

³ Tira Foran, "Node and Regime: Interdisciplinary Analysis of Water-Energy-Food Nexus in the Mekong Region," *Water Alternatives* 8, no. 1 (2015).

ecosystem services are considered.⁴ But the question facing the Mekong Basin surpasses the fish versus electricity or tradition versus modernity quandaries. The big question, in my view, remains what type of modernity will unfold? Will the future be marked by a centralized or a decentralized authority? Will nature continue to play a central role in everyday experience, or will uniform technologies (e.g., monocrops and aquaculture) displace diverse ecologies as the source for food and fish?

The field of applied ethics developed around the need to make life-altering decisions in the face of long-term uncertainties and short-term temptations. Ethics offers a way of identifying the norms and values that are bound up in development policies and judging the desirability of particular courses of action. While best known from the fields of medicine and public health, theories and methods of ethics are equally relevant to a range of environmental concerns,⁵ including agriculture⁶ and water.⁷

Through the application of ethical reflection and analysis, Mekong River stakeholders could, and should, clarify the values they want to express in their management of the river and its resources. The inevitable diversity of values (healthy fish versus hydropower) can be sorted out through mutual respect for divergent perspectives that motivates a creative search for innovative solutions to accommodate diverse values.⁸ Indeed, it is the tension between these seemingly conflicting aims that motivates the search for new solutions and drives innovation. But the prerequisites for unlocking a constructive innovation dynamic include both understanding and respect. Without authentic respect for the others' values, differences of view will be settled by political, economic, or military dominance rather than through innovation.

A Framework for Mekong River Values

If there is a willingness among the parties, whether they be states, sectors, political factions, ethnic groups, or other stakeholder interest groups, to engage in dialogue about the shared use of the Mekong's resources, then an ethics approach could facilitate a search for solutions. The framework presented here is taken from my book *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis* (see Figure 1).⁹ It distinguishes two basic contexts of water: (1) Water that is in nature, in a river or aquifer, or in the soil; and (2) Water that we take out of nature to use for a purpose. We divert water for urban water supply and for irrigation, or we pump water from aquifers to use in manufacturing, to

⁴ Apisom Intralawan, David Wood, Richard Frankel, Robert Costanza, and Ida Kubiszewski, "Tradeoff Analysis Between Electricity Generation and Ecosystem Services in the Lower Mekong Basin," *Ecosystem Services* 30 (2018): 27-35.

⁵ Marion Hourdequin, *Environmental Ethics: From Theory to Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁶ Paul Thompson, "Agricultural Ethics, Then and Now," *Agriculture and Human Values* 32 (2015): 77-85.

⁷ David Groenfeldt, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁸ Anna Simpson, *The Innovation-Friendly Organization: How to Cultivate New Ideas and Embrace the Change They Bring* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

⁹ David Groenfeldt, *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

wash coal, or to mix with fracking fluid. Water impounded in a reservoir and released for hydropower can also be considered water that is effectively diverted for human use.

These two kinds of water—nature’s water and people’s water—cycle back and forth, as water is diverted, used, and returned (often polluted), to nature. Although water easily crosses the boundaries between natural ecosystems and man-made infrastructure, the laws and policies pertaining to the natural environment (in contrast to the economic sectors) are separated into distinct legal and institutional frameworks, often referred to as “silos” of water use. Much of the controversy confronting Mekong stakeholders deals with the management of the Mekong River and its tributaries, rather than the use of water after it is taken out of the river system. Separating out the ethics of river management (the top row in Figure 1) from the ethics of water use (the bottom row) helps us focus our analysis and clarify the particular values that might provoke conflict or facilitate cooperation.

Figure 1. Two Categories of Water Context (left) and Five Categories of Values (top)

	Environmental values	Economic values	Social values	Cultural values	Governance values
Water in Ecosystems (rivers, lakes, wetlands, aquifers, green water, etc.)	X	X	X	X	X
Water Use (agriculture urban/domestic water supply, industrial, or other)	X	X	X	X	X

The Mekong River ecosystem is appreciated and valued differently by the various categories of stakeholders involved. Traditional communities along the Mekong River have evolved in harmony with the river and they may value particular benefits they receive from the river (e.g., certain kinds of fish) as well as their over-arching relationship to the river, celebrated in festivals and daily rituals.¹⁰ But modern urban professionals also hold values about the river, which might overlap, or conflict with, traditional values. Hydropower company executives, for example, are expected to appreciate the economic potential of the river, as they project their own value systems onto the river. The five value categories (the columns in Figure 1) are seen as universal aspects relevant both to the river (top row) and the particular uses of water (bottom row). These categories are also seen as universally applicable to any and all stakeholders, whether they be an Indigenous fisherwoman or a university-educated energy company CEO.

¹⁰ Yot Santasombat, *The River of Life: Changing Ecosystems of the Mekong Region* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2011).

Values About the River

The Mekong River, as large and obvious as it is, can be difficult to see as a river on its own terms. Instead, we tend to see the river in our terms, according to what we notice and consider important. It is because of our diverse perspectives of the river that a unifying framework can be helpful for understanding what different individuals and groups see in the Mekong. I distinguish five categories of values that are useful to disaggregate to understand the value of the Mekong River, or water in general:

1. Environmental values about the health and welfare of fish, wildlife, and rivers as complex ecosystems, are of obvious importance within the Mekong Basin. The ecological integrity of the Mekong River and its tributaries serve as the foundation for both people including cultural identity and livelihoods, and for nature including biodiversity and ecosystem health.
2. Economic values of water are realized not only by taking water out of nature to provide beneficial services of hydropower and irrigation (which we consider below), but also by deriving economic value from the river through its services as a river: habitat for fisheries, river transport, and the economically valuable indirect ecosystem services of pollution abatement and flood water retention. These are functions that depend on the viability of the whole river.
3. Social values supported by the Mekong River and its riparian ecosystem include the provision of good quality water for domestic uses and recreation, swimming for example, or social interaction such as visiting friends and relatives along the river, and the river as a common aesthetic amenity for all to use and enjoy.
4. Cultural values include not only traditional spiritual and religious understandings of the river, but also the emotional relationships with the river and with culturally-infused livelihood activities, ranging from the traditional (fishing) to the modern (eco-tourism industry). The river serves as a cultural resource of heritage and identity which has broad psychological value.¹¹
5. Governance values include the norms defining stakeholder roles in decision-making about water use and river management, and the value principles expressed in their institutional arrangements: river basin organizations versus private companies versus government agencies.

Values About Water Use

The Mekong and its tributaries provide water that is diverted from the natural riverbed to be used for a broad range of activities and purposes. Allocating water among competing use demands, such as hydropower or irrigation or biodiversity protection, is a central function of water governance. Just as water takes the shape of whatever is

¹¹ Karl Matthias Wantzen, Aziz Ballouche, Isabelle Longuet, Ibrahima Bao, Hamady Bocoum, Lassana Cisse, Malavika Chauhan, Pierre Girard, Brij Gopali, Alioune Kanej et al., "River Culture: An Eco-social Approach to Mitigate the Biological and Cultural Diversity Crisis in Riverscapes," *Ecohydrology & Hydrobiology* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7-18.

containing it, a water bottle, a canal, or a river, the ethics of water depend on how it is used. The ethics of water used in irrigation depend upon the ethics of the agricultural practices the irrigation is supporting. We can apply the same five value categories (the columns in Figure 1) to reflect on the ethics of water use (bottom row in Figure 1):

1. Environmental values are expressed in selecting crops and practices that minimize agro-chemical inputs and support healthy soils both for production and carbon sequestration. Environmental values are also expressed in urban water systems through water conservation policies, recycling and reuse, and by integrating natural water ecosystems into urban landscapes and applying “green infrastructure” in urban water management. Similarly, water used in manufacturing processes can reflect environmental values of “water stewardship”¹² or other environmental norms.
2. Economic values are the dominant motivation for diverting water from nature. Ethical choices come into play in terms of efficiency, frugality, and responsible use. These ethics are linked to the value placed on natural water ecosystems: When rivers are viewed as having intrinsic rights to their own water, any water that is diverted for human use incurs an ethical responsibility to make good use of it and avoid waste.
3. Social values of water are of special importance in domestic settings where access to safe water and sanitation is a universally acknowledged human right and one of the important aims of the UN’s 2030 global agenda.¹³ But over and above meeting basic water needs, there is also an open-ended opportunity to use water to advance human well-being, through, for example, creative water-sensitive urban design.¹⁴
4. Cultural values of water provide meaning and support identity through sensory and emotional experience. Water museums, urban fountains, and river trails, as well as water ceremonies, rituals, and festivals, provide expressive contexts for these cultural values. More broadly, livelihoods and water can be viewed as interconnected dimensions of well-being and the “good” life.¹⁵
5. Governance values relate to decisions about water allocation and use. Because water is so critical to human life and economic activities, these decisions can reflect values about social justice. In particular, community irrigation networks and rural as well as urban water supply systems offer opportunities for building local capacity in participatory governance.¹⁶

¹² See the “Water Stewardship Standard” of the Alliance for Water Stewardship, <http://www.a4ws.org>.

¹³ The UN General Assembly declared access to safe water and sanitation to be a fundamental human right in July 2010.

¹⁴ Briony C. Ferguson, Niki Frantzeskaki, and Rebekah R. Brown, “A Strategic Program for Transitioning to a Water Sensitive City,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 117 (2013): 32-45.

¹⁵ David JH Blake and Buapun Promphakping, “Water Resources Development, Wetlands-Based Livelihoods and Notions of Wellbeing: Perspectives from Northeast Thailand,” *The Journal of Lao Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 1-28.

¹⁶ Groenfeldt, *Water Ethics*, 50-85.

Discussion

Analysis of the multiple and interacting values, and the philosophical activity of “reflecting” on the implications of prioritizing diverse values, provides a framework for operationalizing the elusive norm of “integrated water resources management.”¹⁷ When a broad range of values are considered, including non-market intangible goods such as cultural identity and relationship to Nature, the rush to build more dams to produce more electricity to power conventional forms of economic development is called into question. Why replicate the development strategies of the past which have already painted the world into an unsustainable corner? At least look, and ethically reflect, before leaping into a relentless treadmill of river engineering and re-engineering. Rather than calculating the short-term tradeoffs between the costs of losing ecosystem services versus the benefits of producing electricity from dams and repeating the fallacies of 20th-century benefit-cost analyses, why not apply ethically-inspired imagination to find more innovative solutions that can safeguard the most deeply held values of Mekong stakeholders?

Finally, there is an overriding “meta ethic” about water decision-making. Just as ethics analysis in medical decision-making has become the expected and often legally mandated norm, the meta-ethic for water, and for the Mekong River would resemble this: Since water is fundamental to life itself, decisions about how water is managed and governed should be guided by ethics. We have a moral responsibility to treat decisions about our rivers with the serious attention they deserve, and ethics need to be part of that serious attention.

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¹⁷ Maite Martínez Aldaya, Pedro Martínez-Santos, and Ramon Llamas, “The Relevance of Ethical Factors in the Pursuit of Integrated Water Resources Management,” in *Global Water Ethics: Towards a Global Ethics Charter*, eds. Rafael Ziegler and David Groenfeldt (New York: Routledge, 2017), 147-64.