

Gold Mining in Attapeu

As an output of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) training course held in April 2005, Attapeu, the following fact sheet has been prepared by the Provincial Project Office in collaboration with the Provincial Science Technology and Environment Office (PSTEO).



Fact sheet of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

1. STATUS OF GOLD MINING ON THE SEKONG RIVER

Status

- * Planning and suitability surveys were conducted between August 2003 and June 2004.
- * The mining operations are a joint venture between the State Geological Exploration Unit (on technical matters), and Sithisay Saysana Company (the funders).
- * Implementation commenced in October 2004, subject to yearly renewable contracts.
- * Existing projects are subject to annual review prior to extension, dependent on mutual Government and company agreement.
- * 25 operating units are underway and a number of new mining projects are planned.

EIA requirements

- * EIA regulations state that an EIA should be conducted and approved and certificate issued prior to implementation. This procedure has not been followed in this case with contracts signed and implementation underway prior to submission of an EIA report. Subsequent comments provided by PSTEO to the EIA document have been provided, however the status of amendments is unknown.

2. PROCESS AND EQUIPMENT USED IN SEKONG RIVER MINING

Staff and equipment required

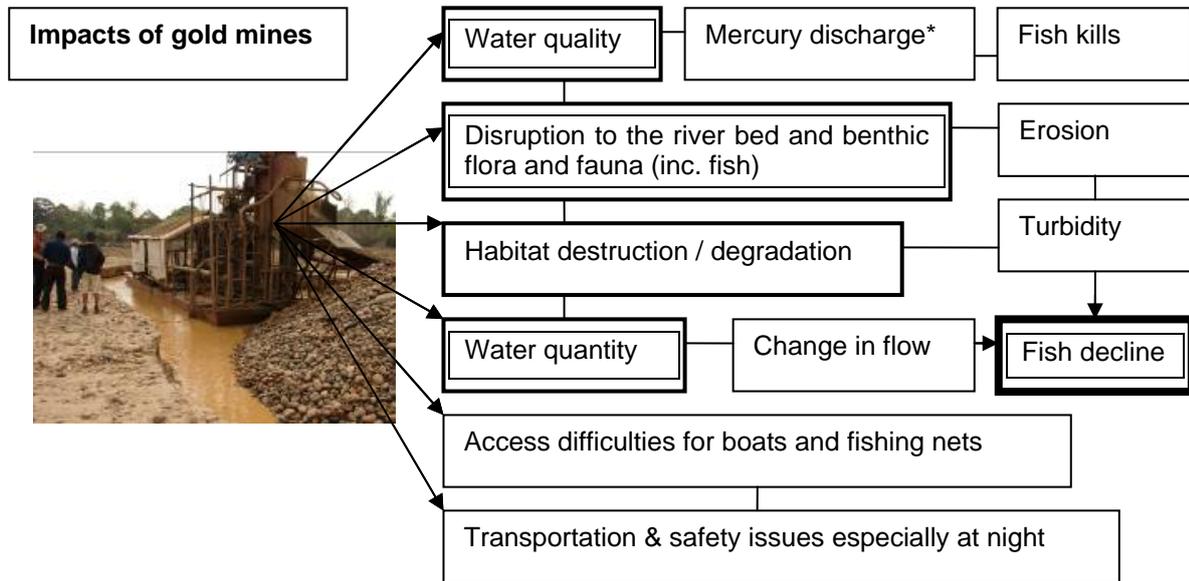
- * A medium sized motor boat is moored and use of aggregate excavating equipment and conveyor belts are employed in the gold extraction process.
- * 2-3 Persons are employed per boat working up to 18hrs per day. The excavating equipment is often operating day and night.

Process

- * Approximately 5M³ of aggregate is excavated per hour giving 0.625-2.45g of gold depending upon location.
- * Mercury is then used during the extraction process. It is mixed with the gold derived from the sediment and heated with acid in order to purify the gold.
- * After the gold has been extracted, most of the mercury is then recovered through a simple recovery process using aluminium foil and acid solution.
- * The mercury can be used repeatedly by periodically cleaning it in Nitric acid.

3. OBSERVED AND RECORDED IMPACTS¹

The following impacts were observed and/or recorded through interview and are presented in the diagramme below. They fall broadly into the following categories: Hydrological, Biological, Physical, and, Socio-Economic. Whilst it is recognized that gold mining is an economic activity which may accrue benefits in terms of revenue collected through taxes, the overall impact on livelihoods and the resources upon which communities depend are likely to be negative.



* Though largely re-used, the mercury acid mix derived from the extraction process mentioned above, may be released in small amounts into the environment through; evaporation from the heating process (unless a fume cupboard is used); as a residual quantity left behind from the recovery process; and, by accidental spillage.

4. EFFECTS ON LIVELIHOODS

In addition to the environmental impacts, particular attention should be placed on impacts that are likely to directly affect peoples' livelihoods. These include access to community and public fishing areas, damage to fishing gear and decline in fish stocks. According to villagers, it is more difficult and dangerous to access fishing areas, with damage to nets and fishing gear commonplace. This they say, makes their lives harder.

5. WAY FORWARD PROPOSED BY THE MEETING

The Deputy Provincial Governor has requested a report from both the PSTEO and Provincial Industry and Handicrafts Office on the status and threats/impacts of gold mining activities on the Sekong. With special reference to the compliance to EIA regulations in order to provide recommendations to support improved environmental management decision making in the future.

¹ **Please note** the above impacts are based on field research including both observation and interview conducted by EIA trainees, based on a one day field visit only and is not the result of a comprehensive analysis or study.