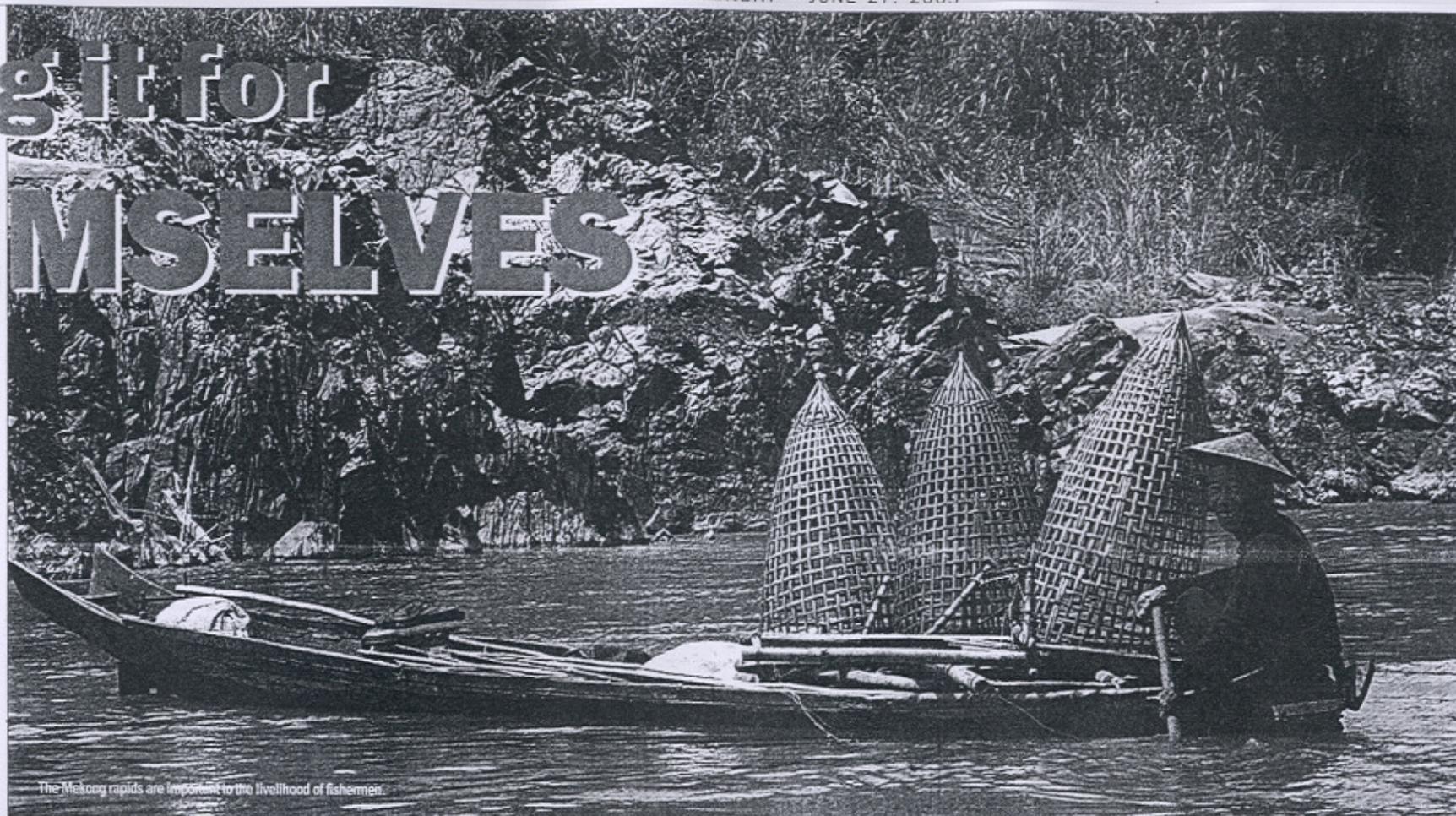


Doing it for THEMSELVES

Villagers in Chiang Khong are drawing on local wisdom and pride to protect their hometown from the onslaught of globalisation

Story by SANITSUDA EKACHAI



The Mekong rapids are important to the livelihood of fishermen.

Photos courtesy of THE NATURE AND CONSERVATION NETWORK OF THE MEKONG-LANNA BASIN

Knowledge is power. That's why a group of Chiang Khong villagers is determined to get due respect for local wisdom concerning their homes and history; they want to take charge of their own lives.

"We fishermen have knowledge about the Mekong based on our time-tested experiences," said Oon Thammawong, 57, of Ban Had Bai in Chiang Rai's Chiang Khong district. "But policy-makers dismiss us as simple folk so that they can dismiss our voices and impose their policies, which only benefit businessmen but destroy our way of life."

Oon is among 143 Chiang Khong villagers from 13 riverside communities who teamed up to pool knowledge of the Mekong's complex ecosystems which have sustained them and their ancestors for centuries.

Tracing back local memories that have no place in national history, they also helped their community leaders profile the history of their ancient hometown in order to revive their long-neglected past and identity in the face of developmental onslaught.

Over the past five years, in the wake of the building of dams and the blasting of rapids in China, the condition of the Mekong as it flows through Chiang Khong has drastically deteriorated.

Adding salt to the wound, the Thai government, as part of an agreement made with China to open commercial



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Somkiat Kuenchiangs: 'Chiang Khong is bombarded with mega-projects.'

navigation channels, agreed to blast Chiang Khong's 10-kilometre-long Khon Pi Long, a complex system of rapids, underwater rocks and sandbars which serve as habitats and spawning grounds for fish.

The plan would cause irreparable ecological destruction and severe hardship for the local people who depend on

the Mekong for their livelihood.

The blasting was temporarily shelved following a series of protests.

"But when we are weak, it'll come back again," predicted Oon, a staunch opponent.

To empower the local movement, Chiang Khong residents

feel they should bone up on facts about their environment and cultural identity. "We need to know who we are and what causes changes in our communities," said environmentalist Niwat Roygaew of Raks Chiang Khong, a local conservation group.

"By making local knowledge systematic and academic, the villagers' voices will be listened to more," he added.

"This is very important in our struggle to preserve our environment and way of life."

Mekong knowledge

The Chiang Khong villagers' research, supported by the Southeast Asia Rivers Network and the Nature and Culture Conservation Network in the Mekong-Lanna Basin, reveals little-known riverine ecosystems that are part of the 4,200-kilometre waterway which passes through six nations.

The research findings, now published as a book in Thai, detail Khon Pi Long's 11 sub-ecosystems, which are dependent on the seasonal water level of the Mekong. They include *pa* (rapids), *kok* (riverside whirlpools caused by currents from the rapids), *don* (sandbars), *had* (sand or pebble beaches), *nong* (ponds), *huai* (streams), *rim fang* (riverbanks), *long* (shallow streams unconnected to the main river) and *jam* (rock juts).

Doing it for themselves

FROM Page 01

The villagers have also identified 100 fish species in their area. Out of the 88 native species, 14 are rare, including the famous Mekong giant catfish (*pla buek*), the world's largest scaleless freshwater fish.

The spawning grounds of the fast-dwindling *pla buek* are in the Mekong, along Ban Muang and Ban Saew, the research indicated.

Different ecosystems are homes for different fish. For example, 16 types of fish are found in rapids, 24 in riverside whirlpools, 19 off sand and pebble beaches, 48 in streams or tributaries, and 59 near the banks of the Mekong.

Some 50 types of riverine vegetation, which are also sensitive to water levels, serve as food for the fish as well as a place for them to spawn during the annual floods.

The Chiang Khong fishermen's research also sheds light on the migration patterns of fish in the Mekong. About 20 types move up the river to lay their eggs between January and June. Meanwhile, about 54 native species of fish migrate to tributaries, where the water is warmer than in the main river, to lay their eggs from May to July. They swim back to the Mekong when the water level drops during the cool season.

While policy-makers see rapids as an impediment to commercial navigation, and therefore as something to be destroyed, local fishermen argue that the rapids are extremely important to the ecology of the Mekong.

Called *pa* in the Chiang Khong dialect, rapids aerate the water and therefore help to cleanse it, they said. Rocks also control the direction of the currents and thus help preserve the natural course of the river and stop the riverbank from crumbling. "Destroy the rapids and you destroy the Mekong and the villagers' ways of life," said Rian Jinnarat of Ban Had Krai.

Women and the Mekong

The local women, meanwhile, are a treasure trove of knowledge when it comes to vegetation in the waterway.

"We know lots about the Mekong plants because it's us, the women, who collect them as food for our families," said Gaewsai Saoleesang, 52, of Ban Had Bai.

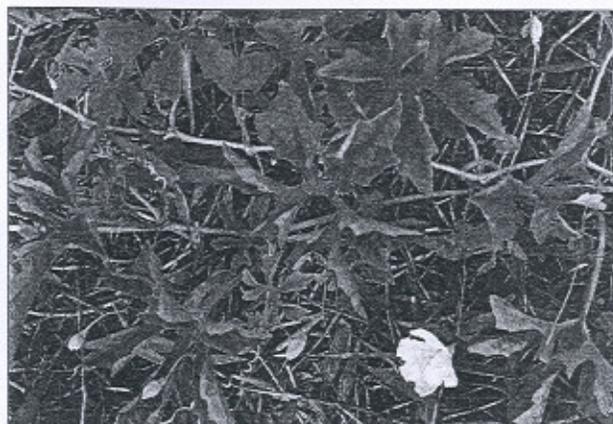
The Chiang Khong mothers, who formed the backbone of the research team on Mekong vegetation, have identified 65 riverine plants in their neighbourhoods: 42 of them are used for food, 30 as medicinal herbs, 19 for animal feed, nine for fishing bait, three for making fishing gear, 11 for fashioning household tools, and three for rituals.

The best-known of these plants is a freshwater algae they call *gai*. It is now well-known as a product from Chiang Khong so the proceeds from sales to outsiders contribute to the local economy.

Before the Chinese began building dams and blasting rapids five years ago, the *gai* season used to start in February when the level of the river was beginning to drop, Gaewsai said. "When the men told us the water at the rapids was turning green, we women would take our small boats out to collect the *gai*, which we could keep to eat ourselves or to sell."

Villagers said they could easily earn 300 to 500 baht a day back then from selling *gai*, which is now becoming rare due to the murkiness of the river and the fluctuating water levels.

Like *gai*, the once-abundant riverside algae locals call *tao* — another Chiang Khong delicacy — is also fast disappearing. So, too, are shallow-water fish that people here used to know so well.



ABOVE FROM LEFT Plants which grow in the Mekong include 'bon nam' and 'mahoy'.

While the men venture out into the Mekong, the women wade along parallel to the riverbank to catch fish with small, tray-like nets called *swing*.

"Before, we never ran out of food, thanks to the Mekong. Since we were children, we've been used to using its clean, clear water for drinking, bathing and whatnot. But now the river has become murky and dirty," Gaewsai said. "China has made us suffer so."

When the level of the Mekong drops, it's also mainly the women who are responsible for riverside farming, growing vegetables to feed themselves and cash crops to supplement the family income.

But with rapids in the upper reaches of the Mekong now removed, the fiercer currents have washed much of the riverbank and the seasonal kitchen-garden plots in their area, causing the villagers even more hardship.

Past and present

But there's more to Chiang Khong than an endangered

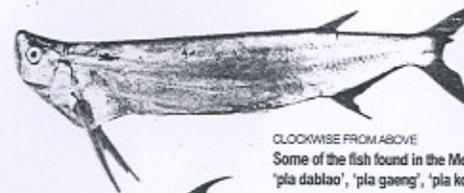
giant catfish and the mighty Mekong.

Situated in a valley between two mountain ranges, this is an ancient town first settled in the 16th century, with local memories, in the form of folklore and legends, stretching much farther back. Since it's a border town, the people here have always been a mosaic of different ethnic groups who have, over time, learned to co-exist peacefully.

Like other communities, however, the Bangkok-oriented education and political systems have robbed the locals of their historical roots and pride in their culture.

Local pride swelled, however, when a group of residents took on the role of researchers to profile Chiang Khong's ethnographic history and document changes in their hometown.

"Reconnecting with one's past and understanding what has shaped one's present is always an empowering process," explained veteran anthropologist Srisakara Vallibhotama, director of the project, which is supported by the Thailand Research Fund.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Some of the fish found in the Mekong:
'pla dablao', 'pla gaeng', 'pla kod' and 'pla pia'.

Though treated by modern policy-makers as a village in the boondocks, throughout its history Chiang Khong has been much sought after as a river port by competing powers in the region.

In days of yore, the townspeople had to juggle between the contesting claims of kingdoms and city-states in what are now Thailand, Laos and Burma. When the French colonised Indochina, Chiang Khong became a buffer between the territories of Siam and France. Later it was fully annexed by Bangkok.

During the Cold War era, the secret American assaults on Laos fuelled Chiang Khong's economy, which screeched to a halt in 1975 when the communists took over, closing Laos' frontiers, cutting off age-old ties and cross-border commerce.

Then modernisation arrived in Chiang Khong, bringing with it rapid deforestation, first from logging, later from military resettlement programmes to fight communist insurgency in the 1970s and, today, from huge commercial plantations.

"We can't discount the heavy use of farm chemicals as one of the sources of pollution in the Mekong," noted community leader Rian Jinnarat.

During the land-speculation boom, many Chiang Khong residents sold their farms only to find themselves in a tight spot again when the cash ran out.

And although ethnic barriers have increasingly become blurred, thanks to inter-marriage, political tensions are building up as the lowlander *khon muang* group loses ground to the Hmong highlanders because the latter have larger families, thus more votes.

Amid these unsettling changes, the locals encountered a rude shock when the Cold War ended. China, intent on boosting its economy and catching up with the Western powers, started damming the upper Mekong and blasting the rapids, causing much hardship for villagers downstream.

"But the worst is yet to come," said Chiang Khong environmentalist Somkiat Kuenchiangsa.

Globalisation threatens the town, bombarded with several mega projects now that "economic globalisation in a borderless world" has become the mantra of governments in the region.

In addition to the threat of further blasting of rapids by China, villagers now fear that the second bridge project linking Thailand to Laos will overwhelm them with new problems from the expected influx of human and drug traffickers.

But the biggest threat, Somkiat said, is the government's plan to turn Chiang Khong into a special economic zone. Under this controversial scheme, any domestic law that impedes foreign investment can be ignored while the use of local resources must be geared to maximise investors' profits.

"The scheme is very oppressive and damaging," said community leader Rian Jinnarat. "We locals will lose whatever say we had about our hometown. And the country will lose sovereignty. I really fear for the future."

But Chiang Khong residents and conservationists are trying not to lose hope. Plans are underway, they say, to use their research on local social history and the Mekong's ecosystems to sensitise everybody in the community, especially schoolchildren, to the threats their hometown faces.

As long as mainstream society thinks only about money and doesn't listen to the little people, the challenge ahead will be daunting indeed, conceded conservationist Niwat Roygaew. "But if we know who we are, we will have the strength to get our voices heard," he said.

Oon Thammawong, who is now often invited to talk about Mekong fauna and flora, said his heart swelled to see his neighbours' knowledge about the river finally documented and accepted. "It made me feel strong and even more determined," he said. "Our fight is far from over."