

SOUTHEAST ASIA

SAVE THE MEKONG

by Andrea Di Biagio





My Tho (Vietnam). The Mekong Delta is the region in southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River flows into the South China Sea. The vast delta includes an area of approximately 39,000 km² and the areas covered by the river's waters vary greatly depending on the season (2016).

The “Mother of Waters” is the world’s largest freshwater fish supply. And is critical to maintaining ecosystems across Southeast Asia

For years the World Bank has supported projects that promote development in the Global South, including the construction of large hydroelectric power plants. Many of these are planned along the Mekong river, which originates on the Tibetan Plateau in China and flows for roughly 5,000 km through Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Known as the “Mother of Waters”, the Mekong is the world’s largest freshwater fish supply and is critical to maintaining ecosystems across Southeast Asia, as well as for irrigation, navigation and the livelihood of local communities.

At this time, 65 dams are active along the river and its tributaries, while at least 11 more are planned to be built. The construction of new dams will cause further damage to the environment and will hamper fish migration,

which is essential for the survival of around 60 million people. Moreover, many villages will be relocated to make room for the new infrastructures, and the people forced to radically change their lifestyle. The most affected countries are Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Environmentalists, experts and representatives of local communities, who consider the dam-based development model a threat to the planet and to the future of mankind, have long sought to raise awareness of the damage caused by the exploitation of the Mekong.

Save the Mekong is a long-term photographic project started in 2013, with the aim of documenting the environmental and social transformations caused by the exploitation of the river.

Can Tho (Vietnam). Vietnamese women sell food directly from their boats. the Mekong Delta is characterized by numerous waterways, swamps and fields dedicated to agriculture. Despite this it is one of the most tourist areas in all of Vietnam (2016).





Xayaburi (Laos). View from the Xayaburi dam, its construction cost is evaluated a \$ 3.7billion and powered by 1285 megawatts. This project is arousing strong protests of environmental movements from all around the globe. Scientists expect that the dam will block critical fish migration routes for between 23 to 100 species, including the iconic Mekong Giant Catfish. The dam would also destroy the river's complex ecosystems that serve as important fish habitats (2013).



Stung Treng Province (Cambodia) a province located on a high sandy bank overlooking Mekong River, is about 455 km North of Phnom Penh and 40 km south of the Laos border. In the photo the playground set up for the weekend in the town of Stung Treng (2023).

Phnom Penh (Cambodia) is the political and economic capital of Cambodia. The city is located on the banks of the Mekong River, at the site where the Tonle Sap flows and where the Tonle Bassac river branches off. With its approximately three million inhabitants, Phnom Penh is also the largest and most populous city in the country and a major commercial and cultural centre (2023).





Saigon (Vietnam) with its 8 million inhabitants is the second most populous city in the country, after the capital Hanoi. The city is located just north of the Mekong Delta, on the western bank of the Saigon River (2016).

Bangkok (Thailand) is the capital of Thailand. With almost 9 million inhabitants it is in all respects one of the great Asian megacities. Bangkok is a city that never sleeps. Bangkok's rapid growth in recent decades and its unique form of urbanization have resulted in increased electricity consumption. For this reason, the energy produced by the dams of neighboring Laos is exported to Thailand (2016).





Ben Tre (Vietnam), young fisherman in the waters of the Mekong Delta. In this region, fishing represents a strong incentive for the country's economy. Vietnam is one of the world's largest exporters of fish species. According to experts and environmentalists, the construction of new hydroelectric plants along the Mekong River and its tributaries will hinder the migratory processes of many fish, thus reducing their production (2016).



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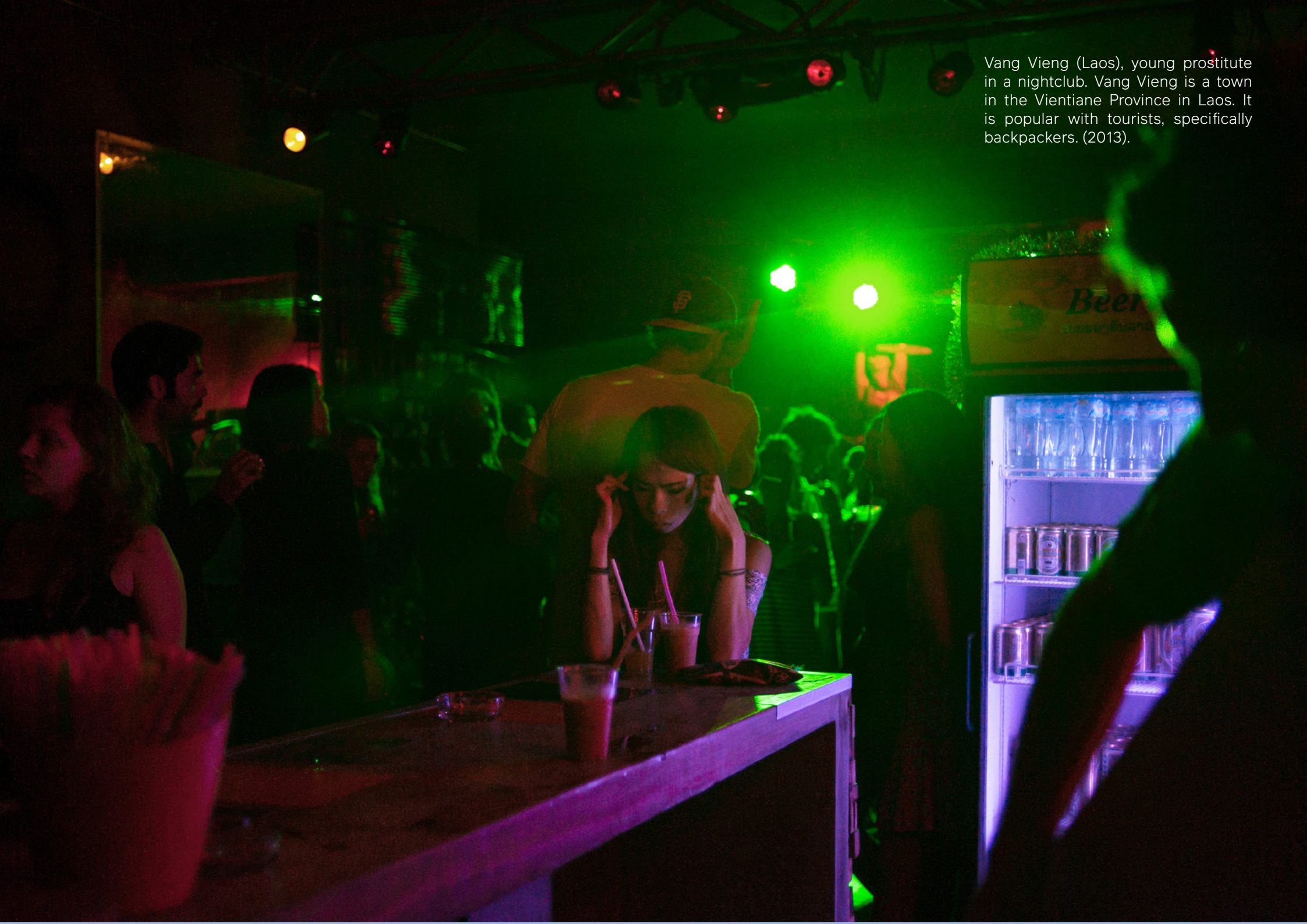


Can Tho (Vietnam), inside the fish market in the city. Vietnam is the world's fourth largest producer of farmed fish, with an annual production of almost 4.9 million tons. However, the construction of new hydroelectric power plants along the Mekong and its tributaries will endanger the entire fishing industry (2023).



Nakai (Laos). Children near the dam of Nam Theun 2. Independent studies estimate that within its 450 square kilometers, the Nam Theun 2 dam's bassin emits massive amounts of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere, as a result of the transformation of huge anaerobic organic mass submerged. US researchers at the University of Duke and the University of Toulouse, estimate that the rate of emission of the Nam Theun 2 dam is substantially greater than the estimation produced during the environmental impact assessment of the project. It also corresponds to about 40% of the greenhouse gas that would be emitted by a coal plant of equivalent power, a much greater impact of an equivalent plant with natural gas (2013).

Vang Vieng (Laos), young prostitute in a nightclub. Vang Vieng is a town in the Vientiane Province in Laos. It is popular with tourists, specifically backpackers. (2013).





Xayaburi (Laos). A woman washes her clothes along a river near the city of Xayaburi. The daily routine of Laotians is closely linked to the Mekong and its tributaries. The construction of new hydroelectric plants will lead to the diversion of waterways, thus changing the living habits of many villagers (2013).



Trà Vinh (Vietnam), young people playing billiards. Trà Vinh is a province in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The delta of the river Mekong is the perfect place to grow tropical fruits, rice and fish farming. The Mekong River Delta is the ideal place to grow tropical fruit, rice and fish. The construction of new hydroelectric plants along the Mekong River will result in a decrease in the water level in the Mekong Delta, allowing the sea to rise rivers, thereby creating the process of water salinization. Entire agricultural fields will no longer be irrigable (2016).



Can Tho (Vietnam), inside the fish market in the city. Vietnam is the world's fourth largest producer of farmed fish, with an annual production of almost 4.9 million tons. However, the construction of new hydroelectric power plants along the Mekong and its tributaries will endanger the entire fishing industry (2023).



Phnom Penh (Cambodia). Cambodians see racing boats at the annual Tonle Sap River Water Festival in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The festival will see teams of boats from all over Cambodia compete in races on the Mekong River (2023).



Bangkok (Thailand). Inside a shopping center. Bangkok is the capital of Thailand. With almost 9 million inhabitants it is in all respects one of the great Asian megacities. Bangkok is a city that never sleeps. Bangkok's rapid growth in recent decades and its unique form of urbanization have resulted in increased electricity consumption. For this reason, the energy produced by the dams of neighboring Laos is exported to Thailand (2016).

Don Khon (Laos) is an island on the Mekong River in the Si Phan Don Archipelago ("Four Thousand Islands") in Champasak Province, southern Laos (2023).





Xayaburi (Laos), bus station. Laos is a Marxist-Leninist one-party state and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) exercises a monopoly on political power. The National Assembly, the country's legislative body, is dominated by the LPRP. In practice, there is little separation of powers in Laos, as the LPRP controls all branches of government and the judiciary is not independent. There is no constitutional court that judges the validity of legislation (2013).



Savannakhet (Laos). Young Buddhist monks on the banks of the Mekong look towards Thailand. 80% of the hydroelectric energy produced in Laos is exported to richer countries such as Vietnam and Thailand. The majestic Mekong River forms much of the border between Thailand and Laos (2013).

Pak Mun Dam (Thailand) is a barrage dam and run-of-river hydroelectric power station 5.5 km west of the confluence of the Mun and Mekong Rivers in Khong Chiam District, Ubon Ratchathani Province (2023).





My Tho (Vietnam), in a restaurant along the banks of the Mekong. The Mekong Delta is the region in southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River flows into the South China Sea. The vast delta includes an area of approximately 39,000 km² and the areas covered by the river's waters vary greatly depending on the season. (2016).



Phnom Penh (Cambodia), inside a restaurant. Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia, with its 2 million inhabitants is the most populated and extensive city of the country. Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia: 17.7% of the population lives below the poverty line and the nation relies heavily on international aid (2016).



My Tho (Vietnam). Many people during the morning take a bath in the Mekong River Delta. The Mekong River, more than 4,000 km long, is the longest watercourse in Southeast Asia. From its source in the Tibetan plateau, it flows to the South China Sea through countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (2016).



Can Tho (Vietnam), inside a shop that sells rice. Vietnam is one of the world's largest rice exporters. The construction of new hydroelectric plants along the Mekong River will result in a decrease in the water level in the Mekong Delta, allowing the sea to rise rivers, thereby creating the process of water salinization. Entire rice fields will no longer be irrigable (2016).



My Tho (Vietnam). The Mekong is the world's largest reservoir of freshwater fish, originating from the Tibetan Plateau in China and running through Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Known as the 'Mother of waters', the Mekong is approximately 5,000 kilometres long and is crucial for the maintenance of ecosystems throughout Southeast Asia, as well as for irrigation, navigation, and fishing (2016).



My Tho (Vietnam). Farmer at work. The Mekong River Delta is the ideal place to grow tropical fruits and rice. The construction of new hydroelectric plants along the Mekong River will result in a decrease in the water level in the Mekong Delta, allowing the sea to rise rivers, thereby creating the process of water salinization. Entire agricultural fields will no longer be irrigable (2016).



Phnom Penh (Cambodia). Along the river Mekong. Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia, with its 2 million inhabitants is the most populated and extensive city of the country. Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia: 17.7% of the population lives below the poverty line and the nation relies heavily on international aid (2016).



Xayaburi dam (Laos). Worker on the dam construction site. Laos plans to build around 140 dams on the Mekong and its tributaries in the coming years, half of which will be financed by China, with the ambition of becoming "the battery of Asia" (2013).



Nakai (Laos). Independent studies estimate that within its 450 square kilometers, the Nam Theun 2 dam's basin emits massive amounts of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere, as a result of the transformation of huge anaerobic organic mass submerged. US researchers at the University of Duke and the University of Toulouse, estimate that the rate of emission of the Nam Theun 2 dam is substantially greater than the estimation produced during the environmental impact assessment of the project. It also corresponds to about 40% of the greenhouse gas that would be emitted by a coal plant of equivalent power, a much greater impact of an equivalent plant with natural gas (2013).



Savannakhet (Laos). Two Lao children look towards Thailand. 80% of the hydroelectric energy produced in Laos is exported to richer countries such as Vietnam and Thailand. The majestic Mekong River forms much of the border between Thailand and Laos (2023).

Xayabury (Laos), the city is located in northern Laos, about 30 km from the controversial dam that bears its name. Laos, officially Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), is the only landlocked country and one of two Marxist-Leninist states in Southeast Asia (2013).



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