

1.98 Environmentally Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin

RECOGNIZING that the Mekong is one of the last of the earth's great river systems and is significantly undeveloped over its length;

FURTHER RECOGNIZING that the Mekong River Basin is home to a large rural population dependent for its livelihood upon the natural resources of the river and its watershed forests;

NOTING that the river is rich in aquatic biodiversity and the remaining forests of the catchment provide critical ecological services to the river system, are a repository for a diverse terrestrial flora and fauna, and are a source of a large variety of natural products for rural subsistence;

RECOGNIZING that the dynamics of the Mekong system's hydrological cycles, plus the ecology of the river's fisheries, are not well understood, but are known to be complex and dependent upon the annual cycles of the river;

FURTHER RECOGNIZING that the Mekong River Basin region stands on the threshold of a new era as development choices are made over the next few years, especially for power production and industrialization, and that these decisions will influence the sustainability of the economic and ecological systems of the region for many years;

UNDERSTANDING that public participation in planning, designing and implementing proposals is an important element of successful sustainable development.

CONCERNED that there are plans for over 150 dams in the Mekong River Basin including 10 mainstream dams;

NOTING that two mainstream dams have been constructed in the upper reaches of the Mekong River;

The World Conservation Congress at its 1st Session in Montreal, Canada, 14–23 October 1996:

1. CALLS ON the States of the Mekong River Basin and other interested parties to seek ways to address the issue of developing the river and the watershed as a single ecosystem and in a manner that:
 - a) is based on scientific information available, or when such information is unavailable or insufficient, conduct studies to collect such information in accordance with established scientific methodology;
 - b) observes the precautionary principle;
 - c) recognizes the needs and rights of the various stakeholders (especially the affected communities);
 - d) incorporates economic assessments based on long-term returns and environmental degradation;
2. FURTHER CALLS ON the States of the Mekong River Basin to address development on a broad, regional, sub-regional and national level rather than considering development projects and their impacts on a site by site basis;
3. URGES the multilateral, bilateral and other financial institutions to give equal priority to conservation as well as environmentally sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin when considering the funding of large-scale development projects or national aid programmes in the region, and to draw lessons from the negative experience of hydropower development on other complex river systems, such as the Ganges and Brahmaputra. In particular, that there be a moratorium on large dam projects until such time as regional environmental and social impact assessments have been completed;
4. ENCOURAGES scientific institutions to undertake, where appropriate, further studies of the river system, the watershed and the region's biodiversity, including basin-wide studies and cumulative impact assessments in order to assist the Mekong River Basin nations to assemble an environmental database adequate to permit environmentally rational and scientifically informed development plans for the region before further development takes place;

5. INVITES businesses and other commercial enterprises to work in partnership with the respective governments and their citizens to support sustainable development of the natural resources of the Mekong;
6. INVITES international and regional non-governmental organizations active in the development of the Mekong River Basin to give full attention to the need for transparency and the full participation of the various stakeholders, especially the affected communities;
7. REQUESTS the Director General and IUCN Commissions, within available resources, to enter into a dialogue with ASEAN to address issues related to the environmentally sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin, and to assist IUCN members who are so involved.

Note. This Recommendation was adopted by consensus. The delegation of the State member Germany indicated that it had not participated in discussion of the Recommendation nor would it have participated in any voting. The delegations of the State members Norway, Sweden and United States indicated that had there been a vote they would have abstained.