

Review of: "The Political Ecologies of the Tonle Sap: Global, Regional and National Framework for Conservation and Development"

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The Tonle Sap is a wonder of the world. Swollen by the monsoon, the Mekong River backflows and fills the lake, creating an ecosystem that is at once incredibly productive and at the same time vulnerable. The lake provides most of the protein for Cambodia, and fueled the heart of the Khmer Empire at Angkor. But at the same time, the disruptions in the flow of the great river occasioned by hydropower projects upstream – in China, Laos, and Cambodia, threaten this entire system and, by extension, Cambodian security itself. All this is to say that this article addresses a pressing crisis. Seeing the term “demise” in the abstract here is both devastating and, I fear, accurate, although the author might want to consider if this doomed perspective is what they want to convey.

In sum, I rather like what this paper is trying to do. Here is a presentation based on statistics and surveys of the problems facing the Tonle Sap and some of the major barriers to its flourishing. I could easily see citing this when I need some broader data for my own studies. But the writing could be improved, and the significant points highlighted throughout.

I will present minor comments here as I work through the paper:

TSL is never actually written as “Tonle Sap Lake”. I dislike the use of acronyms in general, but if one is to use them, at least write what it stands for once.

The writing here struggles a bit. This is not damning, but a nicer writing style – along with the data – could convey better the stakes here. There are some grammatical difficulties as well – again, not a damning critique but something to be looked at.

The MRC’s recommendations are to manage the flow of the river in an acceptable way. But as Whittington argues, much of this river is simply understudied. Uncertainty is a feature of such projects – what does it mean to do a political ecology when so much is unknown, and so many powerful actors stand to benefit from this lack of knowledge? All that is also to say that political ecology is exactly the correct lens through which to look at this issue.

With regard to changing cultures and ecosystems into *modern* ones, it might be helpful to think about what is meant by this word, *modern*. Modernity is a means of dividing the world into understandable, manageable chunks. It claims knowledge and authority, but often does so by ignoring those things which are inconvenient. Other ontological worlds become subsumed into “local knowledge,” things far away (e.g. salinity in the Mekong Delta) become seen as irrelevant. It is a way

of forgetting as much as knowing.

At the end of section 2 here, I might ask for a bit more of a summary. I understand we're just defining terms, but give us a clue as to where you're going to go with this.

Mentions of LBC and WBC do not mention ethnicity in section 4, which I think is rather important. It is my understanding – I am not a Cambodia researcher – that many communities on the TSL are Vietnamese, and run into problems owning land. Here, too, is a classic example of where politics intersect with labor, which intersects with ecology. I may be wrong about this.

The invocation here of Scott is good!

A question that I might have about the designation of a biosphere reserve is this: what impact, if any, would such a designation have upon hydropower? Could such a designation put pressure on dam construction? Why or why not? Some of this is addressed in 4.4., but a more direct way of writing would be good here.

In section 4.3, the writing is starting to get in the way of seeing the overall point. I'm not sure if the state has absolute control over the fisheries, or if the French system remains in some way (of individual fishing plots). I feel like the data is here, but after reading through a couple of times I'm still not sure.