

Laos sees positive outcome from Don Sahong consultation: official

Times Reporters

The government is proceeding in good faith and fully expects a positive and productive outcome from the Mekong River Commission's (MRC) prior consultation process for the Don Sahong hydropower project in Champassak province, according to a senior official.

The MRC will meet in Hanoi, Vietnam, next week as the formal six-month consultation process draws to a close.

Deputy Minister of Energy and Mines Mr Viraphonh Viravong told the *Vientiane Times* this week about the progress of the Don Sahong consultation set to end on January 25.

"It is the Lao government's practice to engage expert consultants from around the world to study, design and build technologically advanced and sustainable hydropower plants," Mr Viraphonh said. "Information

and data collected are made available to stakeholders in a manner far more transparent than what is being done on similar projects across the region."

In the case of Don Sahong in the far south of the country, Laos has had the project area under study and review since 2006, he said. More than two dozen technical and engineering studies, environmental and social impact studies and fisheries studies have been shared with stakeholders and posted on the Don Sahong web site: www.dsppp.com.

"Over the years, government and project specialists have met regularly with villagers and learnt from their local knowledge. They are well aware of the changes that have occurred to dry-season water levels and the reasons for the decline of the once-abundant fishery."

As stated in the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the purpose of the Prior



A site visit to the Don Sahong project is arranged so stakeholders can see the project for themselves and ask questions of the project staff, experts and the villagers who live nearby.

Consultation (PC) process is to determine whether the proposed water use will have significant impacts on the Lower Mekong Basin, and

if so, how to minimise or mitigate them.

"The PC process is a means for the proposing country to hear out and respond to the

concerns of the other Member Countries. It does not empower the Member Countries to arbitrarily delay, or veto, a

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Govt mulls forest protection strategies

Somxay Sengdara

The government is considering measures to protect forests against illegal logging and encroachment by local communities who have depended on forest products for their survival since ancient times.

Director General of the Department of Forest Resource Management under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Mr Khamphanh Nanthavong, responded to public concerns raised through *Vientiane Times* on the decline of large trees in conservation areas amid rising demand for wood products.

"It is not true that big trees cannot be found in national bio-conservation areas," Mr Khamphanh told *Vientiane Times* on Monday.

But he did not dispute the fact that illegal logging takes place on a daily basis, especially in the dry season. The demand for timber has



This woodland in the Phou Khao Khuay national protection area in Vientiane province is part of the country's conservation forests. (File photo)

heightened due to rapid development and increasingly easy transport among countries in the region.

He said people who make a profit from wood have developed various tricks for getting trees out of forests,

including making cash payments to local people.

He pointed out the difficulties involved in

restricting access to forests by local communities whose life is inextricably linked to forest resources, and who know no other way of life.

He cited the case of Thongmixay district in Xayaboury province, where 60 percent of the population are forest dwellers.

"It is difficult to prevent people from entering forests, which are their only source of livelihood, when there is no village in the area," Mr Khamphanh said.

Attempts to relocate people and provide them with permanent jobs have proved challenging.

Mr Khamphanh also mentioned the dearth of human and financial resources available for the management of forests, both in terms of quantity and quality.

Ideally, this work should be done by people who have

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Korean tourists enjoy the Nam Song river in Vangvieng district, Vientiane province.

Tourist arrivals grow almost 10 percent in 2014

Times Reporters

The Tourism Marketing Department, under the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, expects the number of tourists visiting Laos in 2014 to hit the target figure of around 4 million.

Department Director General Mr Saly Phimphinit said recently this would represent impressive growth of almost 10 percent compared to 3.7 million visitors in 2013.

Mr Saly said that as tourist arrivals continued their year on year growth, the department was looking ahead to further promote tourism as well as working with neighbouring countries to achieve its goal of 4.2 million visitors in 2015.

The number of Thai visitors decreased slightly in 2014,

while the number of visitors from the Republic of Korea, China and Australia grew thanks in part to the opening of direct flights from China and Korea to Laos.

The data shows the number of Chinese visitors reached 111,898, an increase of 57 percent, while those from Australia rose by 55 percent, with Korea showing a 16 percent increase compared to 2013.

Chinese business operators also made frequent visits to Laos to investigate or oversee hotel and restaurant operations which they have opened to accommodate the influx of tourists.

The Tourism Marketing Department also recorded an increase in tourists from France, the UK and Japan compared to

2013.

Mr Saly said that considering the political unrest in Thailand last year, which affected outbound tourism, the overall figure was a positive result for Lao tourism considering how many Thai nationals normally visit Laos.

Laos is now attracting large numbers of tourists from China and Korea, who are lured by the country's rich blend of nature, culture, traditions and rural lifestyle along with drawcard destinations such as Vientiane, Vangvieng, Luang Prabang and Pakxe.

Vientiane is still the most visited town in Laos with an estimated 1.9 million visitors expected to have spent time in the capital in 2014, up from 1.7 million in 2013.

Crowds expected at manikhot tree festival

Souknilundon Southivongnorath

More than 1,000 people from Laos and nearby countries are expected to pay their respects to a fallen sacred manikhot tree which has been preserved near the Khonphapheng waterfall in Khong district, Champassak province.

January 12 marks two years since the revered tree was placed in a specially built pavilion. The tree was removed from a rocky outcrop in the middle of the waterfall in the Mekong River after it fell down during a storm.

The tree was so highly valued that it was preserved for posterity.

The waterfall concession holder, Ms Somleth Phosalath, said she was certain many people would dress in white to see the tree, as is traditional at hallowed sites.

"About 1,000 people attended last year's festival but that was the first anniversary of the tree's preservation after the government brought it here from the waterfall in 2013," she explained.

This year local officials have invited people from Laos, Cambodia and Thailand to attend the festival, so she is anticipating large numbers.

Local officials have arranged a candlelight procession starting at 4pm on Monday. There will also be traditional performances as well as local products on sale.

"Entry will be free for Lao nationals but foreign visitors will be charged 55,000 kip," Ms Somleth said.

The manikhot features as a holy tree in the ancient Sanskrit epic of Phra Lak-Phra Lam, or Ramayana. A manikhot tree has three limbs. According to legend, fruit

eaten from the first limb will bring eternal youth and long life, while that eaten from the second will bring great power and status. But fruit eaten from the third limb, pointing to the west, brings bad luck - and the eater will turn into a monkey.

The history of the manikhot tree at Khonphapheng waterfall is unknown but locals say it has been there since they were born.

Many people insist it has been standing for at least 500 years since the era of the Lane Xang Kingdom.

How to get there: From central Champassak province take Route 13 South for 150 km, then turn right off the highway at the sign pointing to Khonphapheng. Not far down this road you will see another sign pointing to Khonphapheng, where you must turn left. Follow the road to the end of the waterfall.



The pavilion housing the revered manikhot tree near Khonphapheng waterfall in Khong district, Champassak province. --Photo Phoansav

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a sincere interest in forest protection rather than those whose main interest was the making of furniture and the profit they could make by harvesting the trees in their care, he said.

With regards to finance, he spoke about the responsibility of investors in the hydropower and mining sectors in relation to forest protection and their obligation to pay local communities to conserve forests in watershed areas.

The government has set an ambitious target to restore forest cover nationwide to 70 percent of Laos' total land area by 2020.

Mr Khamphanh said he could not say whether this target would be reached as the government had planned the forest restoration strategy in 2002. However, conditions have changed since then with a surge in development projects which have consumed large areas of forest.

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project that is within the sovereign rights of the proposing country to develop. In effect, it calls on the four riparian neighbours (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam) to be realistic and practical in pursuit of sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin."

A similar Prior Consultation procedure was carried out for the Xayaboury Hydropower Project in northern Laos. The Xayaboury PC gave experts a chance to raise issues, including concerns beyond the potential impacts on flow and water quality. The highly effective consultation for Xayaboury prompted a more careful assessment of possible impacts, a review of measures to avoid, mitigate and minimise these impacts, and ultimately the redesign of the project. In the end, changes to the initial project design addressed potential impacts on the sediment flux, fisheries potential, fish migration and passage, and navigation.

At the regional public consultation meeting held in Pakxe district, Champassak province, on December 12, 2014, the MRC's expert groups reported that operation of the Don Sahong run-of-river scheme would have no significant trans-boundary impacts with regard to water quality and ecosystems, hydrology, sediment balance or freedom of navigation.

"Laos has maintained all along that fish migration across the Khone Falls is the only serious environmental concern. The MRC's Fish Passage and Fisheries Expert Group has raised legitimate concerns, and these are being addressed," the deputy minister said.

"The Lao government is convinced that natural channels can be modified to

accommodate year-round fish passage up and downstream, and that the amount of fish produced in the Khone Falls area can actually increase with better management of the fishery, effective conservation measures and fish breeding."

"In pursuing sustainable development at Don Sahong, we have been open and frank. Unfortunately, environmental activists have spread mistruths about the project that have raised fears in downstream communities. Anti-dam campaigns choose to ignore the fact that a run-of-river dam has no impact on river water and the flow of water can provide a reliable source of renewable energy that produces no air pollution or toxic by-products.

"Sadly, leading NGOs have publicly announced they are boycotting the PC process. This head-in-the-sand strategy reveals their utter self-interest and disregard for the people of the region.

"While we have given all the data available, some will say there still exists information gaps. They should know by now that we are committed to developing this project in the most environmentally friendly and sustainable manner for the benefit of the Lao people. What's more, our approach is adaptive," Mr Viraphonh said.

The people of the region want the project to move ahead, he added. "They want new economic opportunities and training in vocations like driving trucks and heavy equipment, auto repair and carpentry. They want more tourists to visit the area by car and bus to see the future of Laos, not the past."