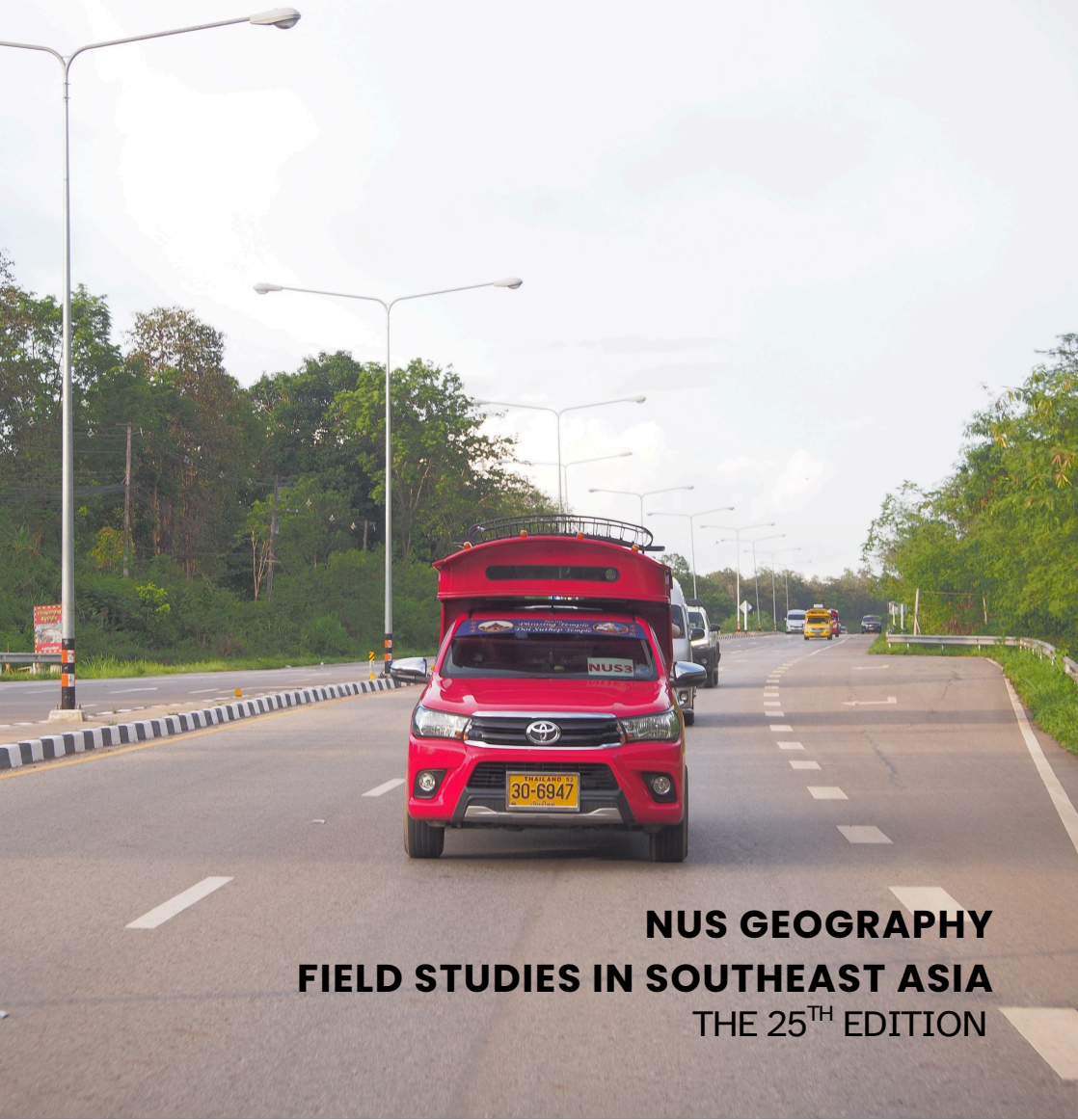




FIELD STUDIES

**RCSD – CESD – NUS WORKSHOP
2025 | 2568**



**NUS GEOGRAPHY
FIELD STUDIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
THE 25TH EDITION**

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RCSD-CESD-NUS WORKSHOP

21 – 22 MAY 2025



INTRODUCING: THE REGIONAL CENTER FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (RCSD)

The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) was established as an academic unit under the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University in 1998. By linking graduate training and research to development theories, policies and practice, RCSD aims to create a deeper understanding of the social, environmental and cultural challenges of modernization and development processes, in particular the impacts of the processes of regionalization and economic integration on local people and the environment.

Over the past decade, RCSD has focused its main interest on social transformation processes in the broader framework of increasing regional connectivity in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) by highlighting a number of key issues in the region, such as land governance, transboundary resource management, exploitation of nature and cross-border mobility.



The Regional Center for Social Science
and Sustainable Development
Chiang Mai University

INTRODUCING: THE CENTER FOR ETHNIC STUDIES AND DEVELOPMENT (CESD)

Formerly a research group unit of the Social Research Institute in Chiang Mai University, the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) was established in 1995. In the mid-1990s, Thailand became part of the economic integration of the Mekong Sub-region. Hence the Center was established under the awareness of changes faced by ethnic groups due to both national development and globalization.

Since then, the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development has expanded its scope of work to study the problems of ethnic groups in the Sub-region. It plays a role in supporting the movements of agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working with ethnic groups. It has also organized the Hill Tribe Volunteer Project to provide hill tribe youth with opportunities to learn about development concepts and support research that can lead to knowledge creation and strength of ethnic communities.

In 2009, Chiang Mai University requested that the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development be transferred from the Research Institute to the Faculty of Social Sciences in order to expand ethnic research more widely and integrate research into post-graduate teaching. The Center for Ethnic Studies and Development has been promoted to the Center of Academic Excellence of Chiang Mai University since October 2009.



HONOURING OUR PARTNERS: RCSD AND CESD

Since my early days of researching in Southeast Asia and the Mekong region, Dr Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and colleagues at Chiang Mai University have led, encouraged and inspired social scientific and ethnographic research across the region. The RCSD has been a beacon of ethical research spanning borders, cultures, and landscapes across Southeast Asia, particularly the greater Mekong Sub-Region. In addition, the CESD's research and collaborations about indigenous and ethnic societies and cultures has helped throw light on multiple issues of cultural, social, and environmental justice. The RCSD and CESD have multiple global and regional collaborations, and they have brought scholars, practitioners, and community-based knowledge producers together in interactive workshops and projects.

It has been a pleasure and privilege to be able to celebrate FS25, our field studies course (GE3230A), with a workshop held at RCSD on 21 and 22 May 2025. Prior to undertaking experiential field-based activities in other parts of northern Thailand, the workshop held at RCSD has exposed our students to past and ongoing research that is highly relevant to this field studies program.

We are very grateful and appreciate our collaboration with RCSD and CESD.

Thank you and peaceful vibes,

Dr Carl Grundy-Warr and all the participants of FS25

HONOURING OUR PARTNERS: RCSD AND CESD

The extraordinary achievement of RCSD has been its transformation since its early days from a small group of Thai scholars, into a regional centre of critical engagement and research on development, environment and social justice.

Among its many achievements has been its expansion of sources of knowledge beyond the orthodox academic world to harness the often untapped resources of indigenous knowledge, ethnic minorities and their cultures.

At the same time, RCSD has become a pioneer in creation of a Mekong network of regional collaboration with universities in Cambodia, Laos Vietnam and prior to the 2021 coup, a partnership with Myanmar's Mandalay University.



Tom Fawthrop, RSCD Research Associate

HONOURING OUR PARTNERS: RCSD AND CESD

Knowledge is partial and multiple truths can simultaneously coexist - accordingly, the RCSD trailblazed efforts to put epistemic justice at the forefront of sustainable development research, such as through co-production of knowledge between academics and the community. This meant the involvement and participation of locals in areas such as policy-making and advocacy. This way, the worldviews, ideas, and lifestyles of diverse indigenous peoples can be represented on an equal footing with mainstream scientific knowledge.



Adib Amali, previous teaching, research, and student assistant at NUS Geography

ENTANGLEMENTS THROUGH FIELD ENCOUNTERS

FIELD-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLES: LIVER FLUKES, HYDRO-SOCIAL RELATIONS, INDIGENOUS RITUALS AND PRACTICES

Dr. Carl Grundy Warr

“As a craft, research methods can best be learned through experience.”

Wayne Fife (2005) Doing Fieldwork. Ethnographic Methods for Research in Developing Countries and Beyond. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.2.

“Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. Although punctuated by knowledge milestones, learning does not end in an outcome, nor is it always evidenced in performance. Rather, learning occurs through the process of ongoing experience; ideas and thoughts never remain the same but are formed and re-formed through experience.”

Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb (2017) The Experiential Educator. Principles and Practices of Experiential Learning. Kaunakakai, Hawaii: EBL Press, p.25.

Field Studies in NUS has now reached a quarter century of learning journeys and field-based enquiry-driven student research. To demonstrate the deep connections between experience and research methods, and experiential learning as an ongoing process, I will share ideas based on student research projects focusing on different types of cycles, each combining different elements of life: ecological, hydrological, medical, indigenous, nonhuman nature, social and cultural relations, to name a few key ones. For the purposes of this presentation, I will focus on three specific cycles that have informed the experiential learning of different groups of students over time. These are namely: the life cycle of *Opisthorchis viverrini*, an endemic parasite (or liver fluke) in the Mekong region, associated with livelihoods, food cultures, and health issues relating to a fatal bile-duct cancer; the hydro-social cycles of the Lower Mekong.

Here I will focus on why it is necessary to investigate hydro-social relations in projects about plastic matter in and around the Tonle Sap, the Great Lake of Cambodia. I will also demonstrate why investigating indigenous practices and rituals can enhance experiential learning, using illustrations from Field Studies 2024 with a Moklen community along the Andaman Sea coast.

*Dr Carl Grundy Warr, Senior Lecturer, NUS
Department of Geography*



Using a few diagrams and images, the talk will hope to illustrate how different cycles relate to field-based experiential learning.

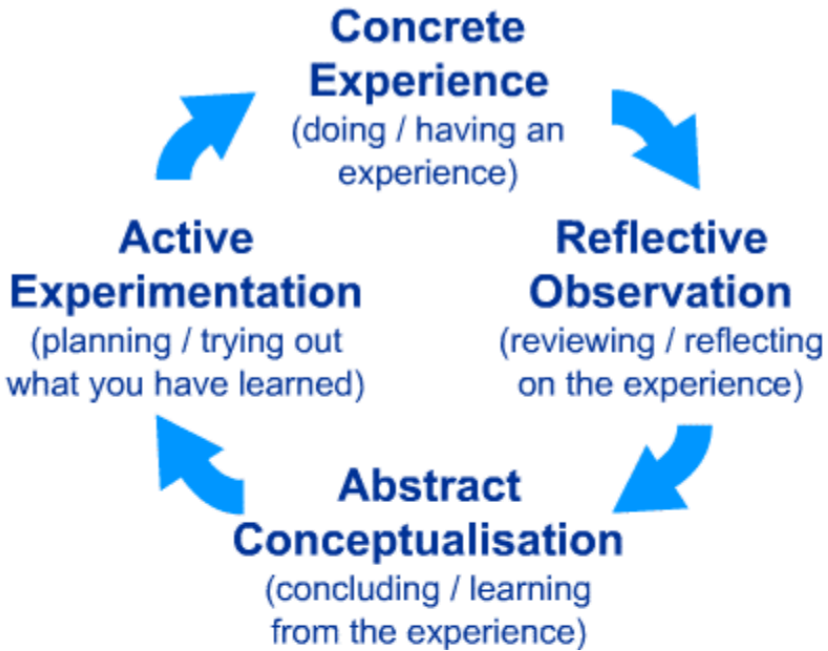


Figure 2. The Experiential Learning Cycle. Adapted from: Kolb, David. (1984). Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. Prentice-Hall.

This cycle is part of an ongoing process, meaning that on any given project there may be more than one full cycle, and at any given moment one of the attributes becomes more significant to the project than others. A cycle of learning is not rigid and linear, but dynamic in that it leads to new ideas, thoughts, and concepts over time. An experiential cycle is based on immersion and active learning by doing. It can be learning through practical hands-on activity. Engineers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, and other professions, often involve learning by doing as an essential part of the learning by doing process. There are multiple potential applications for experiential learning.



Figure 3. Students from Field Studies 2023 learning about Mekong geopolitics on Bird's Nest Island, an islet within the Mekong River.

Field-based experiential learning requires students to learn through fieldwork. “The field” encompasses different things and places. It can be learning by visiting a temple, by participating in a ritual, by observing behaviour in a coffee shop, by going on a fishing boat with a local fisherman, by planting rice with villagers, and by living in a homestay. Vital to all of this is the notion of “process” rather than a focus purely on outcomes. As you engage in team-based fieldwork you are engaging in a process that has multiple experiences that help to shape your thinking, ideas and concepts. This is sometimes called grounded learning, and it is possible to theorize from experience, and it is possible to test a top-down hypothesis through grounded fieldwork. Ideas derived from class or lab may be tested in the field. Such ideas may also be challenged through fieldwork. What you learn in a university setting may not relate to what is observed in the field. What is taught in class may not reflect what exists in real world situations. And many things in context are never taught in class.

Illustration 1:

The following examples are based upon previous field studies and research experience. The idea is simple: studying different cycles through experiential fieldwork.

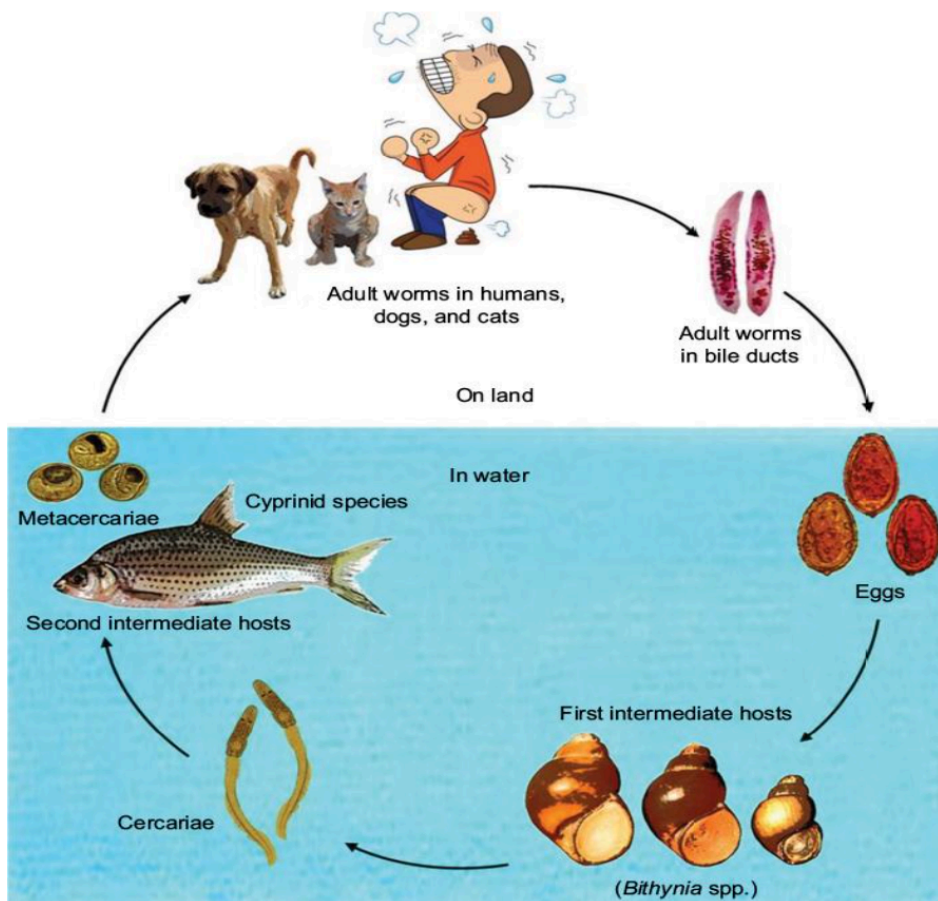


Figure 4. The Life Cycle of *Opisthorchis viverrini*. Source: Hughes, Thomas & O'Connor, Thomas & Techasen, Anchalee & Namwat, Nisana & Loilome, Watcharin & Andrews, Ross & Khuntikeo, Narong & Yongvanit, Puangrat & Sithithaworn, Paiboon & Taylor-Robinson, Simon. (2017). 'Opisthorchiasis and cholangiocarcinoma in Southeast Asia: an unresolved problem', *International Journal of General Medicine*. 10. 227-237.



Figure 5. Students from Field Studies 2025 learning more about coffee commodity chains and social entrepreneurship from Akha Ama's coffee producers and partners, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

According to Kolb and Kolb (2017: 81): 'The experiential learning spiral represents the highest culmination of a learning process that can be traced to the organization of life itself.' Life cycles are very relevant to the idea of experiential learning. During a Field Studies in Chiang Rai Province, I met an ecologist called Professor Ross Andrews, who invited me to visit Khon Kaen University and go along with a research team studying the life cycle of an endemic parasite called *Opisthorchis viverrini* as part of a multi- and inter-disciplinary program relating to medical evidence and public health interventions in northeast Thailand. After multiple visits to Isan, northeastern Thailand, I focused on the cultural dimensions, particularly the "raw attitudes" of consuming common raw, semi-cooked, and fermented freshwater fish species, which is part of food cultures throughout the Mekong region (Grundy-Warr et.al., 2012).

Figure 4 is especially significant for Field Studies, because in 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2019 we had groups of students from NUS and Khon Kaen University working on different dimensions of the *O. viverrini* life cycle. The parasite (also known as a liver fluke) is one of the contributory elements causing a fatal bile duct cancer, or cholangiocarcinoma in humans. Our investigation aimed to understand how changing livelihoods, farming practices, biophysical aspects of the landscape, and other factors influence public health, specifically examining their role in complicating existing public health interventions to reduce cholangiocarcinoma. To investigate the life cycle we worked alongside medical, public health specialists, parasitologists, field and lab ecologists, health volunteers, and members of different village communities.



Figure 6. Liver Flukes (O. viverrine) are totally adapted to the physical conditions (wet and dry seasons), water bodies, snail populations, and ecologies of the lower Mekong region.

Different aspects of the life cycle involved the following: medical interventions and public health screening programs; landscape ecology; human changes to the landscape affecting irrigation, water channels, water diversions, cropping patterns, paddy fields, and infrastructures; sanitation and hygiene within village communities; food cultures and eating habits. Thus, the experiential learning cycle on interconnected and interdisciplinary projects was facilitated through exploration of different elements of the *O. viverrini* life cycle. In 2017, we had about 72 students (NUS and KKU), spread across three Northeast Thailand provinces, working in five villages on 12 distinct projects relating to the life cycle.

“The students explored how liver fluke infection and potential cholangiocarcinoma development are influenced by local landscape dynamics, aquatic ecology, livelihoods, food culture and health education. Qualitative fieldwork was guided daily by the researchers in a collaborative, co-learning process that led to viewing this health issue as a complex system, influenced by interlinked multidimensional factors.

*Our transdisciplinary experience has led us to believe that an incomplete understanding of these linkages may reduce the efficacy of interventions. Further, viewing liver fluke infection and cholangiocarcinoma as the same issue is inadvisable. Although *O. viverrini* infection is an established risk factor for the development of cholangiocarcinoma, multiple factors are known to influence the likelihood of acquiring either.*

*Understanding the importance of the current livelihood transition, landscape modification and the resulting mismatch between local cultures and new socio-ecological settings on cholangiocarcinoma initiation and liver fluke transmission is of critical importance as it may help readjust our view of the respective role of *O. viverrini* and other socioeconomic risk factors in cholangiocarcinoma etiology and refine intervention strategies.”*

Ziegler, et. al., 2016

Figure 7. Young children playing along the village road that has been inundated by floods during the wet season in Kampong Phluk, Cambodia



In other words, field-based experiential learning generated transdisciplinary observations that have potential practical implications, in this case for public health campaigns.

Illustration 2:

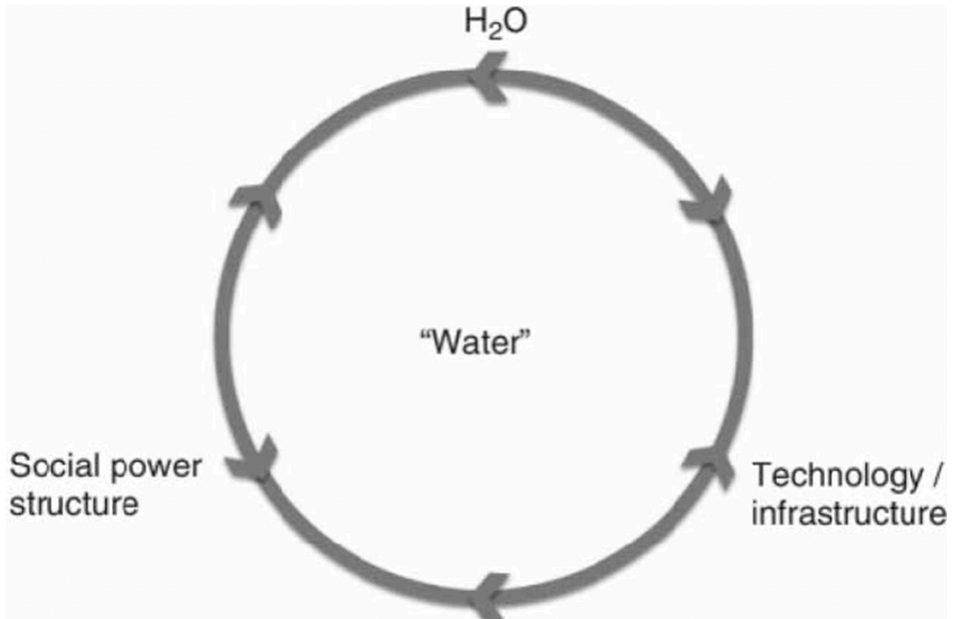


Figure 8. The Hydro-Social Cycle. Adapted from Linton, Jamie & Budds, Jessica. (2014). 'The Hydrosocial Cycle: Defining and Mobilizing a Relational-Dialectical Approach to Water.' Geoforum, 57. 10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.10.008.

Figure 8 refers to the hydro-social cycle. The idea is that the hydrological cycle has been affected by and altered in so many ways through societal utilization of water and by technologies and infrastructures. Social power structure relates to the governance, administrative, political economic and legal frameworks that influence decisions about water, such as building hydropower dams for electricity, water diversions for irrigation, reservoirs for urban populations, and desalination to enhance water supply. Furthermore, we need to consider the myriad ways in which people interact with, utilize, and relate to water.

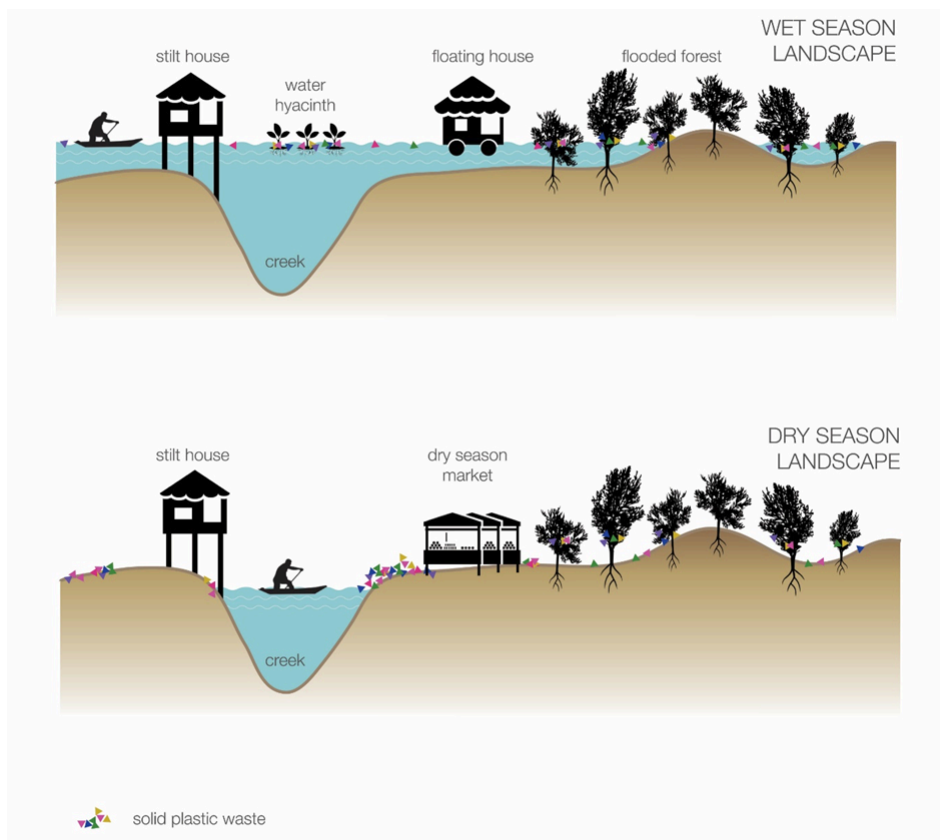


Figure 9. Wet and dry season profiles of aquatic-terrestrial zone near the Tonle Sap. Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.

Figure 9 relates to an aspect of the hydro-social cycle of the Lower Mekong and Great Lake of Cambodia called the Tonle Sap. The Mekong hydrological regime has pronounced wet (June – October) and dry (November – May) seasons, which help regulate the flow regime and water volumes. Many riparian and lake communities have adapted their livelihoods, highly dependent on fishing and aquatic resources to the annual flood pulse. The flood pulse is driven by the big increase in water volumes during the wet season with lateral overflow of water between the river/lake and the large floodplain surrounding the lake.

We can see people's lives along the rivers, wetlands, and lake system as the social part of the hydrological cycle. In the Tonle Sap people have adapted to the annual rising and falling of water-levels as part of a normal cycle. Thus, the neak tonle (river people) do not see the flooding season as a calamitous flood, but as a beneficial 'tuk leung' ('rising waters'), and 'tuk srork' ('falling waters') in the dry season (Grundy-Warr, Sithirith, and Yong, 2015). They have adapted to a pulsing ecosystem with pronounced seasonal fluctuation in water-levels.

The following images stem from student field investigations in 2016, 2017, and 2018 to a floating community called Chhnok Tru in Kampong Chhnang province. One of the outcomes of these visits was a project called 'Waste on Water.' The Mekong Basin has thousands of riparian and wetland communities whereby livelihoods and cultures are linked to waterbodies. All these communities are now living within anthropogenic land-and-landscapes full of plastic. The hydro-social cycle has a pervasive and problematic ingredient, which is plastic waste. To illustrate this are two photographs taken in the same locality, near to the crossing point of a creek, between a lake-side community and a local school. Figures 10 and 11 illustrate what "garbage creek" at the start of the wet season, when water-levels are rising and at the height of the dry season, when water has receded.



Figure 10. "Garbage Creek." Going to school. No visible plastic at the onset of the wet season.
Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.



Figure 11. "Garbage Creek" in the dry season. Returning from school.
Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.

Linton and Budds (2014: 170) define ‘the hydro-social cycle as a socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time.’ However, plastic is an element that has become deeply embedded in the social lives of wetland communities and the freshwater lake system, transported by the flow regime of the hydrological system yet in existence due to the massive increase in plastic being used throughout the water system in urban areas, towns, and villages. Water levels, current direction and flow patterns lead to complex distributions of plastic within river basins.

Field observations at different times of the year reveals significant temporal and seasonal garbage geographies, with new socio-ecological lexicons that could be applied. In the dry season, we were curious to find a plastic hanging in a line high up in the exposed trees of the ‘water forests’ (prey roneam) or flooded forests (prey lichtuk), which we termed ‘plastic fruit’ (pler chher plastik in Khmer). As we walked along a small creek, with masses of plastic and other garbage on both banks, which we nicknamed it ‘garbage creek’ (prek somram). Figure 9 is an attempt to show this diagrammatically, comparing wet season water-levels with those in the dry season. Comparing Figures 10 and 11 illustrates that the massive amounts of plastic waste in ‘garbage creek’ are only truly exposed in the dry season, because the wet season both disperses plastic and hides it.

One of the most rewarding aspects of field-based experiential learning is when students work closely with communities to try to find ways to tackle problems. Our field investigations led eventually to a one-year project involving students from Cambodia and Singapore, working within the water-based communities of Chhnok Tru.

During this time, we participated in women's group meetings whereby members of the community were actively involved in discussing practical ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle waste on their floating houses in the water-based communities (Figure 12).

Whilst the intractable problem of plastic pollution is not something that single communities alone can resolve, what we discovered were creative ideas to cope with and reduce the most harmful aspects of plastic in their watery environment, and a strong collective sense of responsibility to manage this issue, recognising very limited external governmental and non-governmental support.



Figure 12. "Garbage Creek" in the dry season. Returning from school.

Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.



Figure 13. Singaporean and Cambodian student volunteers introduce the ‘Waste on Water’ project to young students in a Chhnok Tru school.

Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.

We also visited local Khmer schools where we met with enthusiastic responses from teachers and pupils who subsequently introduced a waste use and reduce dimension, using stimulus materials introduced by our team, and creating ideas for reducing, reusing, and recycling plastics from the pupils themselves (Figure 13).

Indigenous communities rely on environmental resources within the vicinity of places where they live to supplement their livelihoods, for food resources, and materials. In Field Studies 2024, students benefitted from homestays with Moklen communities in Phang 'Nga province. Local livelihood cycles are often based upon long-term knowledge of physical spaces, which are also part of the cultural landscape. Our students were introduced to the ways of life of the Moklen through interactive workshops with community leaders in a “cultural home” within a small coastal community on the Andaman Sea coast (Figure 14). This home is where the local community have sought to preserve aspects of their cultural heritage, and it acts as a contemporary community centre.



Figure 14. Students learning from the Moklen community in their “Cultural Home”, Tubtawan, Phang 'Nga Province, Thailand, Field Studies 2024. Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.

Our students picked up on the significance of physical cycles and tidal ebbs and flows in relation to nearshore maritime resources for the Moklen villagers.



Figure 15. Students going on a learning walk along with Moklen aunts, including Yai Lap, to learn about indigenous knowledge of coastal resources.

Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.

They accompanied a group of Moklen aunts on one of their regular low tide treks to search for squid, shellfish, clams, and crabs (Figure 15). As they observe:

‘During low tide, the receding waters expose the seabed, offering a window of opportunity for Moklen women to gather (shell)fish, squid, and crabs. Conversely, during high tides, Moklen women turn to refining previously collected tin ore and foraging wild herbs and vegetables. The intricate knowledge of the tides is passed down inter-generationally.

Beyond the daily influence of tides, the Moklen people navigate the cyclical rhythms of seasons. As Yai Lap illustrates, the absence of squid outside of ‘squid season’ reflects the importance of seasonal abundance. During lean harvesting seasons, the Moklen demonstrate their resourcefulness by turning to other sources in the coastal forests and shrublands.

These seasonal variations that span months present an additional layer of challenges that build upon the complexities of daily tidal interactions. The Moklen people’s relationship with their coastal environment transcends mere dependence – it’s a dynamic interplay shaped by both natural processes and human interactions’ (Hon, et.al. 2024: 21-22).



Cycles of life and learning

Field-based experiential learning is learning by doing and being part of a more hands-on and direct engagement with different environments, landscapes, places and communities. In this short presentation, I wish to show three very distinct illustrations that are based upon student fieldwork during field-based courses. The first illustration reveals multiple projects; inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary engagements are possible from investigations based upon the life cycle of a parasite. Students were able to learn about changing livelihoods, agricultural transformation, ecological issues concerning water, fish, snails and the physical environment, human-induced environmental change, human-nonhuman interactions, medical interventions, public health initiatives, cultural landscapes, regional food cultures, among other things. The second illustration reveals that field-based education often necessitates collaborative and participatory approaches, whereby community members shape activities. Student investigations may help to act as a spark or stimulus for a more sustainable, organic and creative set of actions within the communities where they are engaging in their projects. The third illustration shows that one of the best ways to understand why cycles and rhythms are part and parcel of everyday life is to go along with indigenous knowledge-producers and learn how they perceive their physical spaces and environmental resources.

Field Studies is itself part of a life-long learning cycle, but at the very least it is an attempt to expose students to a more participatory, interactive, experiential, and collaborative form of education that is another form of A.I. Not Artificial, but grounded, direct and visceral, a form of Alternative Intelligence!

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A PERSPECTIVE ON FIELD-BASED LEARNING

*Dr. Natthaphon Santhi
(Ajarn Nueng)*



Figure 1. Ajarn Nueng with Dr Carl.

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, field-based learning stands out as one of the most powerful educational approaches we can offer. It moves beyond the classroom and into the dynamic, messy, and deeply human contexts where knowledge is lived, not just learned. In the field, students are not passive recipients of information—they are active participants, co-creators, and observers embedded in real-world settings.

One of the core strengths of field studies lies in its ability to foster intercultural collaboration and understanding. Students often work in mixed teams, learning to communicate across languages, disciplines, and worldviews. These collaborations sharpen critical skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, and empathy. Just as importantly, they create space for building relationships – between students, with communities, and with the land itself. Shared meals, early morning hikes, spontaneous conversations, and long hours of fieldwork become moments of connection that transform how students understand themselves and others.

Figure 2. Professor Nueng and Dr. Carl presenting Adib with a certification of appreciation, FS 23



Field-based learning also challenges the boundaries of conventional academic knowledge. It requires students to navigate uncertainty, to sit with ambiguity, and to reflect deeply on what it means to “know” something. It teaches humility – how to listen, observe, and ask questions without easy answers. Whether students are tracing water flows, mapping plastic waste, engaging with indigenous rituals, or simply walking with local guides, they are exposed to perspectives and practices that cannot be captured in textbooks.

Perhaps most importantly, the field is where theory meets practice. It is where abstract concepts – like sustainability, development, health, or justice – take on tangible forms. Students confront the ethical and practical dimensions of these issues and begin to understand how local struggles are tied to global processes. They witness resilience, creativity, and knowledge grounded in place. In doing so, they begin to reimagine their role not only as learners but as responsible actors in a shared world.

Field-based learning is not just about content – it is about transformation. It invites students to be present, to be challenged, and to be changed. It cultivates a lifelong orientation toward curiosity, reflexivity, and relational thinking. In a time when education must do more than transfer information, field studies remind us of what learning can be: experiential, ethical, and alive.

GOING WITH THE FLOW

THE HYDROLOGY AND HEARTBEAT OF THE MEKONG



BIOPHYSICAL GEOPOLITICS AND HYDRO-SOCIAL RELATIONS WITHIN SHARED TRANSBOUNDARY WATERS

Dr. Carl Grundy Warr

Why biophysical geopolitics? Biophysical geopolitics can be viewed as a subset of environmental geopolitics focusing on parts of the ‘bio’ (living nonhuman nature) and ‘physical’ landscape (deep pools, rocks, reefs, channels, geomorphological features, sediments), which relate to parts of the river basin that become the targets of or become particularly impacted by alterations relating to mega projects, such as navigation improvement schemes, water diversion projects, and hydropower dams. Large-scale technologies and infrastructures inevitably have implications for the politics of scale, position, and place. I apply the notion of bordering to suggest that hydropower and other infrastructures effectively have different kinds of geographical bordering and social reordering implications (Grundy-Warr, 2017).

Rocks, reefs, channels, deep pools for dolphins and fishes, and other biophysical matter, have become geopolitical at different moments and phases of development in the Mekong Basin. It is possible to talk about geopolitical rocks, pools, channels, and nonhuman living matter when they become integral to developmental narratives that straddle and are impactful at various scales, regional, transboundary, and national, all the way down to subdistrict and village scales. Grounded geopolitical river issues require unpacking, not least because socio-ecological relationships in the Mekong Basin are simultaneously regional, transboundary, trans-local yet intensely localised in terms of ecological, economic, social, and cultural impacts. Environmental geopolitics can help to analyse basin-scale environmental and social impacts and raise questions regarding ‘sustainable development.’ A focus on specific biophysical geopolitics reveals why transboundary subnational,



Figure 1: Rocks and reefs of Chiang Khong – Bokeo river border space. Source: Carl Grundy-Warr.

fine-tuned scales, multiple locations, positions and places are critical to seeing diverse and differentiated impacts of mega-projects.

Figure 1 is a photo of a section of the Mekong River between Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai province, northeast Thailand and Bokeo province, northwest Laos, showing one section of the local reefs known as Khon Phi Long, or “waterfall” (as the water flows over the rapids in the wet season) “of lost ghosts” or the “Islet of Lost Souls”. According to folklore, in the past, deceased ancestors were floated downstream and the rocks harbour their spirits (Yong, 2020).. For local people, boat operators, traders, and fishers, the river unifies more than it divides, and geomorphic features in the river often have meanings and values that relate to beliefs, practices and customs. In addition to the rocks’ ancestral and spiritual significance, they are excellent places to place fish traps (economic) and are ‘second homes’ for local fishers from both sides of the boundary (cultural transnational linkages). Despite the river boundary making most river islets part of Laos, local fishers from each side meet on some of the larger rocks and sandy islands.

From 2001-3, rocks, reefs, and sandbanks in the river became the focus of transnational geopolitics as Rak Chiang Khong ('Love Chiang Khong'), a community-based organisation aided by NGOs through the Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARIN), resisted plans to blow these geomorphological features up as part of the China-led Navigation Channel Improvement Project (NCIP). The latter was part of the Quadripartite Economic Cooperation Plan for the 'navigational improvement' of the Lancang-Mekong from Simao (China) to Luang Prabang (Laos) (Hesengerth, 2009).

The geo-economic imaginary of the Mekong as a superhighway for vessels up to 300 DWT (Dead Weight Tonnage) was contested by local CBOs such as Rak Chiang Khong. Rak Chiang Khong activists lobbied the Thai Border Patrol police about their concerns over the effects of blasting on the river boundary with Laos. In July 2002, the Thai Ministry of Defence (MoD), under then-Defence Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, called for a temporary suspension of the project due to concerns that it would impede future river border delimitation and demarcation work (Southeast Asia Rivers Network, 2003).

The MoD were concerned that border problems could emerge if the rocks and reefs were removed, and doubts emerged about the precise location of the thalweg, the line or course of the lowest elevation within a watercourse (Osborne, 2019). This boundary was first delineated in an 1893 treaty signed between France and the Siamese government and modified in 1926. The boundary line follows the thalweg nearest to the Thai side, which means most of the islands belong to Laos (Office of the Geographer, 1962).

After the initial success of the Chiang Khong Conservation Group alongside relevant NGOs in stopping the blasting of the Khon Phi Long and other features, the plan was resurrected again in December 2016 by General Prayuth Chan-ocha's military government in response to The Development Plan for International Navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River (2015-2025) (Yong, 2020).

As part of the drive to get Thai approval, the principal Chinese multinational company involved, CCCC Second Harbour Consultants, conducted a series of consultation meetings at key districts along the Thai banks of the Mekong, in Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong and Wiang Kaen, Chiang Rai Province. In these dialogues, rocks, reefs, and shoals become part of contested geopolitical imaginaries of space, ecology, and resources. The company's 3-D presentations identified stretches of the river where rocky islets would be dynamited and dredging would be necessary, particularly along the navigational bottleneck between Chiang Saen to Chiang Khong where the Khon Phi Long reside.

Clashes in conceptions of river space became apparent, as presentations by the company utilized technical engineering language, translated into Thai, that basically reduced the river into "shipping canal" in need of modification (Stone, 2019). This contrasts sharply with the notion of a riverscape that incorporates its multi local uses, sub-ecologies, and cultural connections to the river and its features.

In common with many other parts of the Mekong, appreciation of indigenous understandings of resources, local resource uses, seasonality, and vernacular readings of the landscape reveal that reducing values for very specific forms of transnational accumulation misses multiple ways of understanding the environment. Figure 2 reveals some common physical features apart from the rocks and reefs of the middle-lower part of the Mekong basin that play interrelated parts in the local riparian ecology and livelihoods. Yos Santasombat (2011), drawing on the ecological knowledge of the local riverside communities and Chiang Khong Conservation group, observed the significance of ‘micro-ecosystems’ for riparian communities. Villagers in Chiang Khong, for instance, divide their complex riverine ecosystem into numerous micro-ecosystems, that include pha (rocks), khok (deep pools near riverbanks), don (sandbars or islands), and hat (sand or pebble beaches). Cultural mapping research based upon local ecological knowledge reveals that riparian people who utilise environmental resources daily as part of their livelihoods know the values of micro-ecosystems, water-levels, flow patterns, and the physical environment (Malee Sitthikriengkrai, 2024).

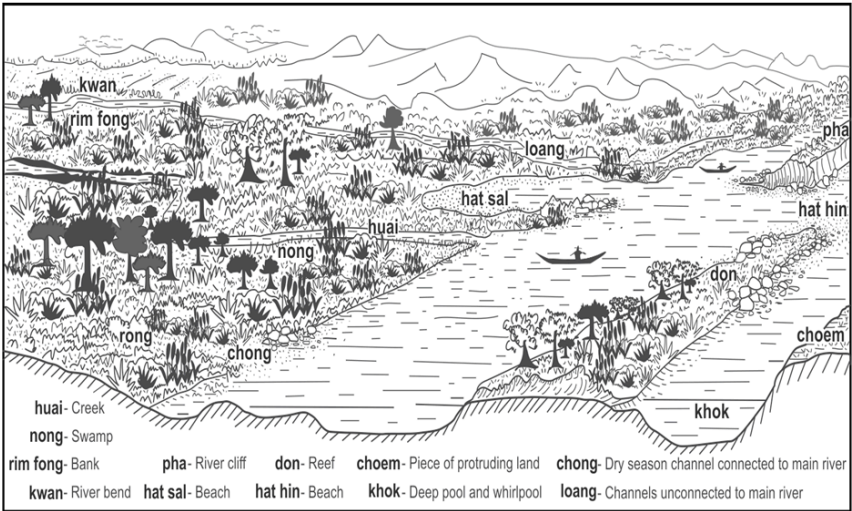


Figure 2: River landscape diagram of physical elements in addition to rocks and reefs.
 Diagram adapted from Santasombat (2011).

Local extinction of dolphin population near the Lao-Cambodia river border

In the river border zone where the Mekong River runs from Laos into Cambodia, the building of the Don Sahong Dam blocked one of the major migratory pathways for fish moving up and downstream in that section of the river (Figure 3). According to local people, the dam construction disrupted water conditions, creating pollution and noise that upset the remaining Irrawaddy dolphin population living in the river. The building of the dam cannot be blamed for the local extinction of the dolphins as there are other threats, such as cross-border fishing with fine meshes, and sometimes dolphins get caught by nets or injured by “ghost” gear floating in the water. However, the dam construction did nothing to help preserve the fish biodiversity or benefit the endangered dolphins, and a local extinction has had serious negative social and economic consequences for eco-tourism in the area.

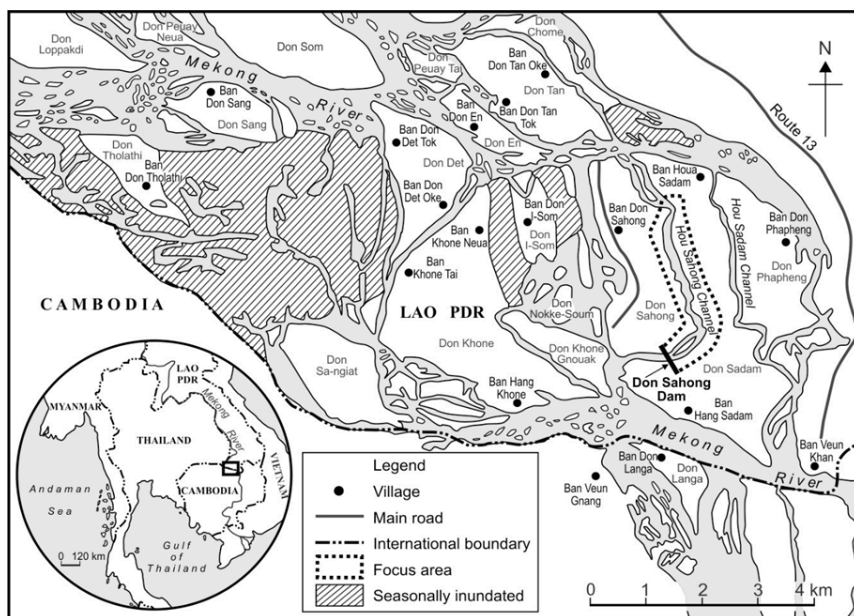


Figure 3: Map showing the location of the blocked Hou Sahong near the Lao-Cambodia border. Map by Li Kheng for Carl Grundy-Warr.

The following account is based on NUS students' research from the Field Investigation in September 2023 to the Cambodia-Lao section of the Mekong River.

'Affectionate terms and personal names have given dolphins humanlike personality as distinct from scientific code numbers. Thus, some the last dolphin was called 'Sne' (Love). Economically, the local extinction of dolphins had immediate devastating impacts upon the local economy which was based upon ecotourism associated with dolphin watching. This was a huge blow to the livelihoods of residents, many of whom had depended on ecotourism for economic survival. "Tourists would come here for the dolphins," said Tina, who used to be very active in eco-tourism. "But now, there are no more dolphins" (Yeo, et. al., 2024).'



Figure 4. Finding the body of “Sne”, the last Irrawaddy dolphin in the Lao-Cambodia river border area. Photograph provided with permission of Phou Vanna.

Interactions between human and nonhuman natures are critical issues relating to water and environmental governance, whether this be between channels, migratory fish, and riparian communities; the cultural, spiritual, and livelihood ties to rocks and reefs; or the aesthetic charisma between dolphins and humans. Hydro-social relations take many forms throughout the Mekong basin, and it is vital to recognize biophysical drivers that provide many ecological (and social) services. Fieldwork in areas such as the river border between Thailand and Laos, and Laos and Cambodia, can reveal much about hydro-social relations and biophysical geopolitics at subnational transboundary scales.

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Figure 1. Typical Mekong long-boat used for local transportation and ecotourism, with a Buddhist temple in background. Image courtesy of Tom Fawthrop

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IN LAOS, A ‘VERY DANGEROUS DAM’ THREATENS AN ANCIENT WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Tom Fawthrop

Nestled amid the mountains of northern Laos, the picturesque ancient capital of Luang Prabang is under siege from a dam-building fever along the Mekong River, with a Thai developer now pushing to construct a hydroelectric dam just 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) from one of Asia’s best-loved world heritage sites.

Inside the UNESCO-protected historical zone, Luang Prabang is a living mosaic of Buddhist temples, restored villas, artisan craft shops and tree-lined cobblestone alleyways squeezed by two rivers: the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan.

The importance of Luang Prabang goes far beyond its historical buildings, with its UNESCO World Heritage status also encompassing the natural heritage of its riverside, an essential part of the Mekong’s ecosystem.

If the Luang Prabang dam project goes ahead, says WWF Mekong specialist Marc Goichot, the impacts would include “drowning an amazingly beautiful riverscape, and a mosaic of ecosystems; causing the relocation of communities, whose culture is so intimately linked to the ecology of the river; and changing water flows and river appearance [which] will disfigure the priceless World Heritage site of Luang Prabang.”

Although the Lao government has not yet started building the dam, villagers have already been displaced, and preliminary preparations have started around the proposed construction site.

The Lao government remains determined to dam its rivers, despite mounting criticism and objections from downriver states. The country has 78 dams in operation and has signed memorandums of understanding for another 246, part of a plan to establish itself as the “battery of Asia,” by selling the electricity generated to Thailand and other nearby countries.

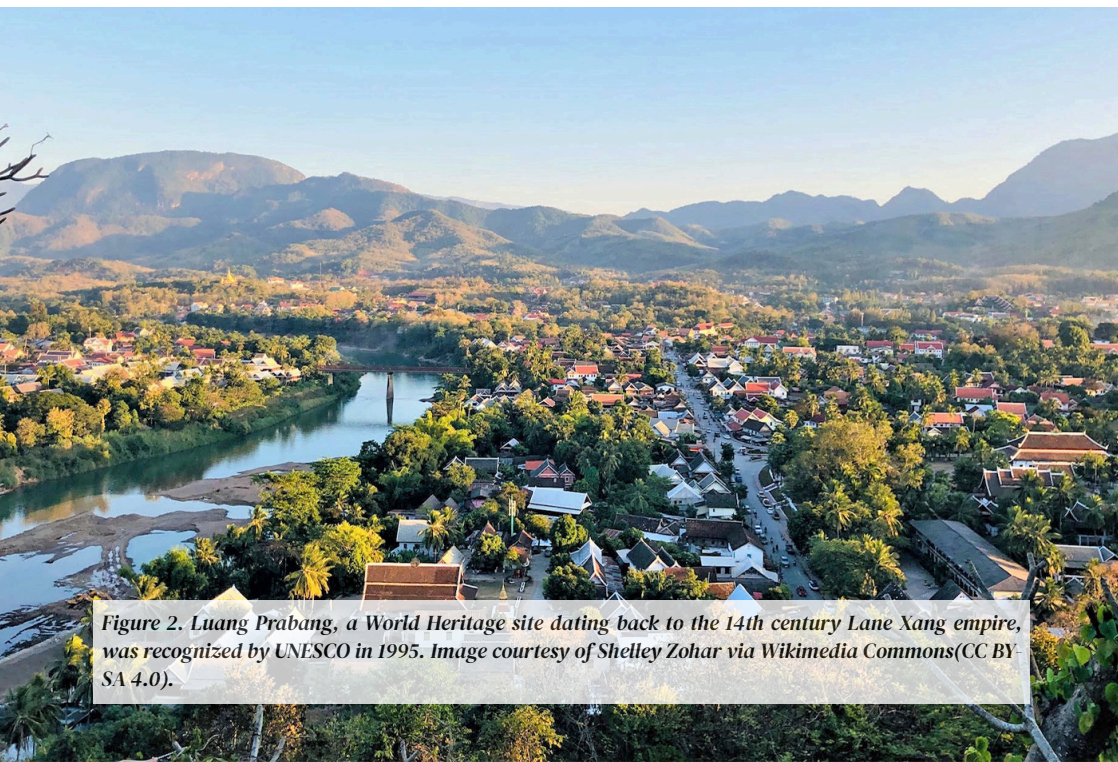


Figure 2. Luang Prabang, a World Heritage site dating back to the 14th century Lane Xang empire, was recognized by UNESCO in 1995. Image courtesy of Shelley Zohar via Wikimedia Commons(CC BY-SA 4.0).



Figure 3. Xayaburi Dam, completed in 2019, is the first of five planned dams on the Mekong mainstream in Laos, and stands around 130km downstream from Luang Prabang. Image courtesy of CK Power Company.

During a 2020 visit, Mongabay found growing fear and foreboding of living near a dam that would be holding back several hundred million cubic meters of water in an earthquake-prone region.

“The dam will discourage tourists and will block ecotourism and boat travel all along the river from the Thai border. It will make problems for our way of life,” said a Lao travel guide. Like most locals Mongabay spoke with, the guide did not want to be quoted by name, for fear that any public criticism under the current one-party socialist rule would likely result in imprisonment.

Many people recall the 2018 collapse of the Xepian Xenamnoi dam, which swept away villagers and villages alike, leaving 14,440 people homeless and 71 confirmed dead.

Even more worrying for citizens of Luang Prabang province is the 6.4 magnitude earthquake that struck northern Laos in 2019, with its epicenter not far from the Xayaburi dam, also on the Mekong. Their fears are backed up by academics who have raised concerns that extreme weather and the likelihood of more earthquakes in this region could trigger a series of dam disasters.

“We are very worried about the seismic fault only 8.6 kilometers [5.3 mi] from the Luang Prabang dam site,” says Thai seismologist Punya Churasiri. “It is too dangerous to go ahead with this project.”

An eco-cultural oasis flanked by dams

As the Lao government’s appetite for hydropower unfolds, Luang Prabang could soon be faced with the daunting prospect of two massive dam walls blocking the free flow of the rivers on either side of the historical town.

The site for the proposed Luang Prabang dam lies just 25 km to the north of the city; already ensconced 130 km (80 mi) downstream is the 1,285-megawatt Thai-built Xayaburi dam.

The first mainstream dam on the lower Mekong, the Xayaburi dam went into operation in 2019 and has already caused serious erosion of the Mekong and Nam Khan riverbanks, affecting Luang Prabang to the point that it required a World Bank-funded restoration project.

According to Goichot, the erosion and increased flooding caused by the dam is already “endangering the natural landscape and cultural assets” of the ancient capital.



Figure 4. Major dams along the Mekong River. Image by The Asean Post.

The harm done to cultural assets has also been confirmed by Philip Hirsch, emeritus professor of human geography at the University of Sydney, who noted in a recent op-ed that Luang Prabang has lost its river frontage and is now essentially “a lakeside town at the tail end of the Xayaburi reservoir.” Hirsch also points to the “permanent inundation of key cultural sites such as Don Sai Mongkhon island.”

Less than 10 km (6 mi) upriver from Luang Prabang lies the once beautiful Nam Ou tributary, now fragmented into a series of reservoirs. Seven dams built by China’s Sinohydro company have effectively sucked all the life out of the river, and cost 12,000 villagers their land and their livelihood.

Freedom of speech and the right to protest are nominally permitted in Laos, but severely restricted in reality, so the most vocal opposition to dam building can be found in neighboring and downstream countries. The Xayaburi dam was strongly opposed by riverine communities and NGOs in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, but the Lao government and the Thai dam developer refused to delay or suspend any hydropower projects.

In February 2020, farmers in northeast Thailand, downstream of Lao, revived their long-standing lawsuit against Thai government agencies on the basis of evidence gathered since the Xayaburi dam started running in 2019.

“The rise and fall of the river is not normal anymore,” Channarong Wongla, one of the plaintiffs from Thailand’s Loei province, said in a press statement. “The rapid fluctuations of the river is impacting on aquatic ecosystems and fisheries. I am worried that fisheries, which are important for our food and income, will continue to decline.”

With 1,148 known fish species, the Mekong is the world’s third most biodiverse river basin, after only the Amazon and the Congo. The Lower Mekong River has the world’s largest inland fishery, with total fish catch of 2.3 million metric tons a year, valued at \$11 billion.



Figure 5. Pakse fish market, Laos. Most of these fish were caught in the Four Thousand Islands. These migratory fish suffer due to the blocking of the Don Sahong channel by the installation of Sipangdon's Don Sahong dam, completed in 2019. Image courtesy of Tom Fawthrop.

“Mekong fisheries are integral to food security for 70 million people living in the river basin,” says Ian Baird, a geographer at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “In Laos and Cambodia, fish is the major source of protein. The loss of fisheries could have huge developmental knock-on effects, undermining livelihood, health and nutrition.”

The economic benefits of fisheries are generally undervalued by policymakers, according to Mekong specialist Hirsch. “Many studies show that the real costs of hydropower outweigh the benefits, but the projects still go ahead,” he says.

According to research conducted by the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission, if Laos is permitted to build all its nine proposed mainstream dams, the decline in the Mekong’s fisheries alone is predicted to cost nearly \$23 billion by 2040, and cause risks to riverine communities and Indigenous peoples who rely on fish for their sustenance and livelihoods.



Figure 6. The Nam Ou, a Mekong tributary, was once a popular ecotourism route small boats could ferry people to neighboring provinces. However, seven dams have irrevocably changed not only the scenery, but the livelihoods of hundreds of villages and displaced 12,000 people. Image by Anne Roberts via Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Twin dams: Xayaburi and Luang Prabang

The Luang Prabang project is effectively a sister dam to the Xayaburi dam, with the same design and the same players on board: Thailand's CH Karnchang PCL, partnered by hydropower consulting firm AFRY, a company recently formed after the merger of Finnish energy corporation Pöyry and Sweden's AF.

Many who depend on the Mekong for survival say they fear the Luang Prabang dam will amplify the impacts they are already witnessing. The plans call for a dam 80 meters high and 275 wide (260 by 900 feet), with total generating capacity of 1,460 megawatts.

Niwat Roykaew a community leader born in Thailand's Chiang Khong district, has led the Chiang Khong Conservation Group through 20 years of anti-dam protests. "We used to see so many people fishing in the river and many, many fish."

Niwat says. “But since the dams upstream, the situation of Mekong is very bad now. Many fishermen have no more fish to catch.”

Niwat also says he is particularly concerned about plans to build the dam so close to a world heritage site. “To build Luang Prabang dam is very terrible for the ecology of the Mekong River,” he says. “When I visited this heritage city, I saw everything about nature and culture was very good. Everything. I think it is a paradise. This is a very dangerous dam.”

Activists are also calling on the Thai government to refuse to sign any agreements to purchase power from Luang Prabang or any other dams on the mainstream of the Mekong.

A decision by Thailand’s National Energy Policy Committee in November paves the way for the country to purchase power from two more Mekong dams at Pak Beng and Pak Lay, after the first purchase from the Xayaburi dam. So far no decision on the Luang Prabang dam has been announced.



Figure 7. A flotilla of boats protest against the Xayaburi dam from the Thai side of the Mekong, opposite the Lao capital Vientiane. The boundary between Thailand and Laos is roughly falls in the middle of the Mekong. Image courtesy of International Rivers.

Heritage versus hydropower

In addition to civil society opposition, some observers are calling on UNESCO's Paris-based World Heritage Committee to do more to protect Luang Prabang. Minja Yang, who in the 1990s served as UNESCO's mission chief for Cambodia's Angkor Wat, told Mongabay that when UNESCO inscribed Luang Prabang as a world heritage site in 1995, it was "based on the unique links between nature, culture, and history along the confluence of the Mekong and Khan rivers. If the site becomes a 'lakeside' town and no longer a riverside town, the authenticity as well as its integrity will be lost forever."

In 2020, the World Heritage Committee reminded the Lao government that dams with large reservoirs are "incompatible" with world heritage status if built inside the site boundaries. The Lao government belatedly agreed to carry out a heritage impact assessment.

In spite of UNESCO's requirement for a "rigorous assessment," a source speaking to Mongabay on condition of anonymity said the Lao government gave the job to AFRY — the same firm that has partnered with the government to build both the Xayaburi and Luang Prabang dams. AFRY (then Pöyry) also drafted the feasibility study presented to the Mekong River Commission in 2019 claiming there was no risk to Luang Prabang's world heritage site.

AFRY's vice president for Asia hydropower projects, Knut Sierotzki, declined requests to provide clarification and did not deny the company's alleged involvement in carrying out the heritage impact analysis.

UNESCO's sanctions against member states that fail to protect their heritage sites are limited to warnings about being placed on the "Heritage in Danger" blacklist. The ultimate threat, if the dam still goes ahead, would be a withdrawal of the world heritage status.

Figure 8. When UNESCO inscribed Luang Prabang as a world heritage site in 1995, it was “based on the unique links between nature, culture, and history along the confluence of the Mekong and Khan rivers.” Image by mythliu via Pixabay.



In Laos, where eco-cultural tourism brought in almost 5 million foreign visitors and \$934.7 million in 2019, losing that status could be a major blow.

The country has a debt profile that ratings agency Fitch describes as “challenging,” with external debt payments of \$1.16 billion due annually between 2022 and 2025. Lao analysts point to dam and other infrastructure spending as the source of much of the country’s debt, but also say the government looks to hydropower revenue as a way to relieve the economic plight.

However, protecting Luang Prabang, the country’s primary tourist site, looks like a better bet for both the Laos economy and for the sake of world patrimony, says heritage expert Yang.

“If we lose Luang Prabang,” she says, “we will lose a very unique site that will be lost to humanity. Once the damage is done, it will be irreversible. It cannot be undone. The dam will become obsolete in a few decades or less, while centuries of Luang Prabang’s history and ecology, so important for future generations of Laotians and the world, would be damaged or lost forever.”



*Figure 1. Construction on the Luang Prabang dam site. Photo courtesy of the Bangkok Tribune.
Credit: Bangkok Tribune/ S. Chuen*

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THE LAST DAYS OF BEAUTIFUL LUANG PRABANG

Tom Fawthrop

UNESCO experts insist that a huge dam would destroy the “authenticity and integrity” of the World Heritage Site in Laos. Activists say dam operators and the Mekong River Commission must be accountable for the ecological impact, while experts are urging fisheries to turn to solar and wind power.

The ancient citadel of Luang Prabang, hidden away in the mountains of northern Laos, has miraculously survived for centuries. Preserved by its picturesque isolation, it is the iconic center of Lao Buddhism, culture, and history.

Waves of tourists are expected to flood Luang Prabang this year, buoyed by a succession of upbeat reviews from outlets like National Geographic, CNN, and Time magazine, all listing this much-loved UNESCO World Heritage-listed town as a must-see Asian destination in 2023.

But the predicted tourism recovery and economic revival is clouded by more dire news for the town renowned as an unspoiled oasis of eco- and cultural tourism. Construction has just started on a huge dam just 25 kilometers upstream from the heritage town, and only four kilometers from the revered Buddhist shrines hidden inside the Pak Ou caves.

Even worse news is that the Thai developer is building this dam in an earthquake-prone zone. “We are very worried about the seismic fault only 8.6 kilometers from the Luang Prabang dam site,” said leading Thai seismologist Punya Churasiri. “It is too dangerous to go ahead with this project.”

Satellite information from the Stimson Center’s Mekong Dam Monitor proved that these warnings have been ignored, and serious construction of the Luang Prabang Hydropower Project (LPHP) coffer dam has commenced. The serenity of the riverside has been shattered by the din, dust, and disruption of dam construction.

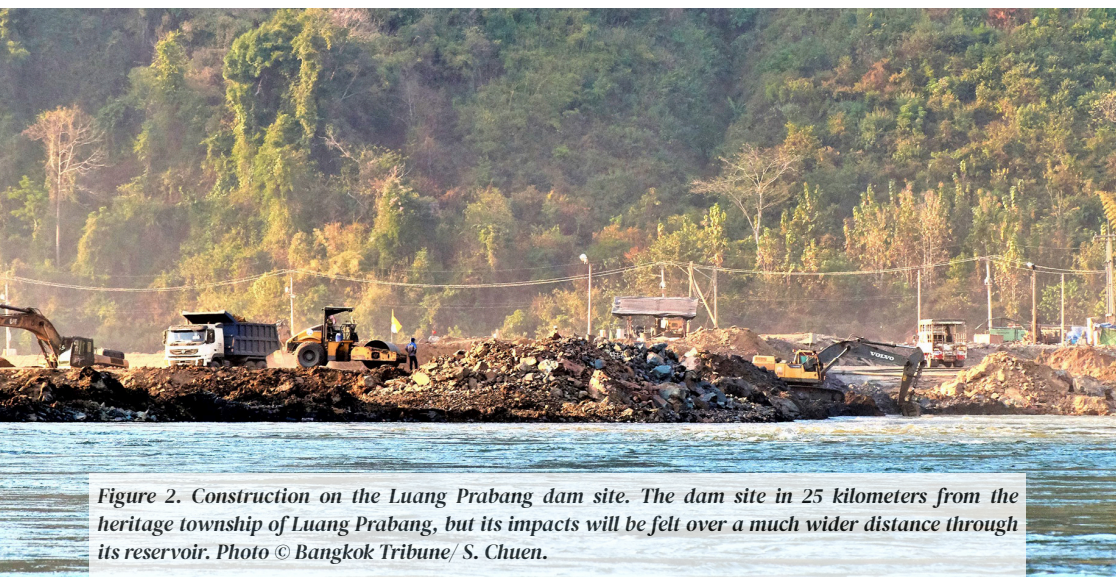


Figure 2. Construction on the Luang Prabang dam site. The dam site is 25 kilometers from the heritage township of Luang Prabang, but its impacts will be felt over a much wider distance through its reservoir. Photo © Bangkok Tribune/ S. Chuen.

Will Luang Prabang Become a Paradise Lost?

Laos, in signing the 1995 World Heritage agreement with UNESCO, had pledged to conserve nature, culture, and history along the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers.

Yet UNESCO's appeal to the Lao government to stop the construction has been ignored. Thai investor and engineering corporation CK Power, a subsidiary of Bangkok-based Ch.Karnchang, has surged ahead with construction this year.

In April 2022, a UNESCO detailed monitoring report made it clear that this 1,460-megawatt hydropower project, given its perilous proximity to an active earthquake zone, was a major threat to the integrity and safety of one of Asia's outstanding world heritage sites.

This report made a comprehensive assessment of the possible heritage impacts. In its conclusion, the monitoring mission recommended that Laos "take the precautionary approach, not to pursue the LPHP, and relocate the project."

But this 2022 report has been largely ignored. "The Lao government and developers of the Luang Prabang dam have again chosen to ignore the evidence," commented Gary Lee, Southeast Asia program director at International Rivers. "It shows that profits and vested interests are driving decisions, not science or concern over the multiple economic, environmental and cultural values and benefits the river provides."

It seems incredible that a host government would risk its UNESCO World Heritage status to build a dam that will bring almost no benefits to the Lao people, according to the Stimson Center's Brian Eyler, director of the Washington-based think tank's Mekong program.

"The ostensible reason to build these dams is to support Laos's economic development, but Laos has given up on 'battery of the region' trope," he said. "Now these dams only drive the country further into debt. Corruption is the major driver of this dam's development."

“I have seen Luang Prabang. I have seen a beautiful heavenly city. When I visited this heritage city, I saw everything about nature and culture was so good. It had rice, fish, food, greenery, and cultural life in abundance. It was a paradise,” Niwat said.

“If the Luang Prabang dam is built, they will destroy the [ecological] wealth and the abundance of the Mekong River. We will lose the Heavenly City. It will be a paradise lost. And to build a dam is very terrible for the ecology of the Mekong River.”

Luang Prabang is becoming encircled by a nexus of dams and reservoirs, according to Dr Philip Hirsch, emeritus professor of geography at Sydney University. “The riverside of Luang Prabang has already been turned into a quasi-lake from the back-up impacts of the Xayaburi dam, 130 kilometers downstream,” Hirsch explained. “The tail end of the Xayaburi reservoir stretches 20 kilometers upstream from the UNESCO site.”



If the LPHP project moves forward, from Xayaburi to Luang Prabang to Pak Beng to the Lao-Thai border – a distance of over 700 kilometers – the Mekong will morph into a network of still-water reservoirs. This means the free flow and quintessential life of the river, vital to the survival of fisheries and food security of tens of millions of people, will be gradually choked until the river will cease to function as one.

This fragmentation of the river alarms many in the tourist industry, especially tour agencies that send traditional Lao boats on a two-day ecotourist trip along the Mekong from the Thai border to Luang Prabang. Long before the Pak Beng dam is completed, their business will be ruined.

“The dam will discourage tourists and will block boat travel all along the river from the Thai border,” a Luang Prabang guide told *The Diplomat*. “It will make problems for our way of life.” Like most locals I spoke with, the guide did not want to be quoted by name, fearing reprisal for criticizing Laos’ government.

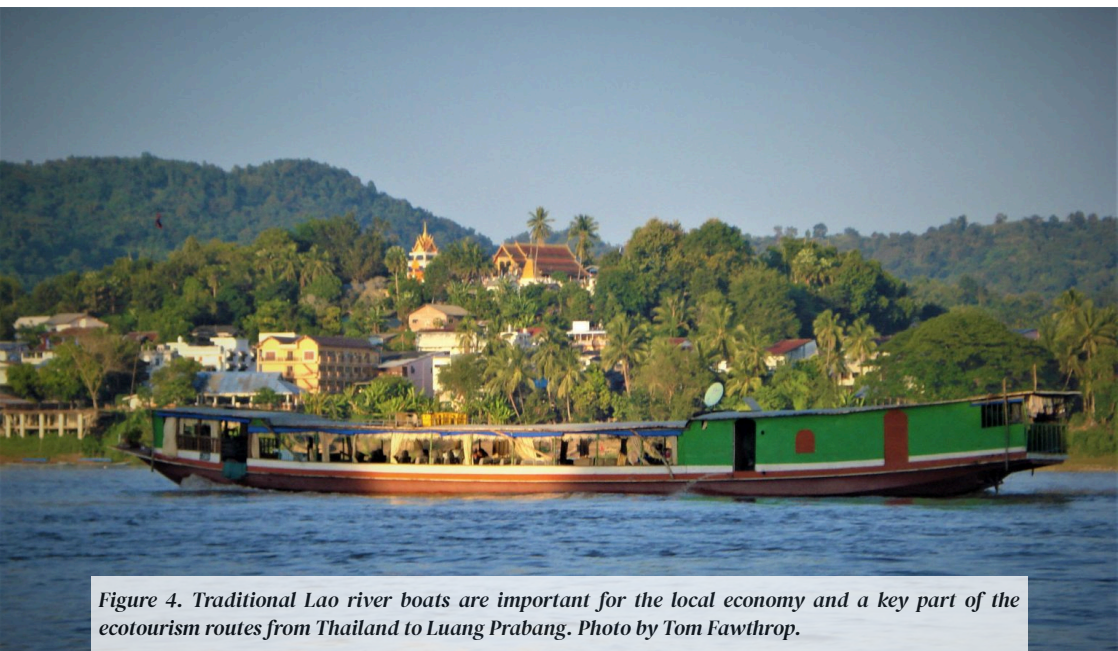


Figure 4. Traditional Lao river boats are important for the local economy and a key part of the ecotourism routes from Thailand to Luang Prabang. Photo by Tom Fawthrop.



Figure 5. The Mekong River Commission Secretariat in Vientiane, Laos. Photo by Tom Fawthrop.

Has the Mekong River Commission Failed?

Most regional policymakers look to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) a body composed of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, to facilitate environment protection. But as a consultative body, it lacks any veto powers over the decisions of member-states.

In its regional stake-holder consultation in 2020, the MRC classified the Luang Prabang dam “as an extreme-risk dam,” but stopped short of recommending an end to the project, or an in-depth study.

The MRC strangely failed to consult with any World Heritage experts, and apparently did not hire any seismologists to assess dam safety. As Punya Churasiri, the Thai seismologist, observed, “A cascade of dams that can trigger reservoir-induced seismicity has not been investigated by the MRC.”

Hirsch has criticized the MRC’s scope for being too narrow. “While [MRC’s] prior consultation cannot veto a dam, they have neglected to provide a full study of heritage impacts,” he said.

According to Lee of International Rivers, “the construction of Luang Prabang dam also points to the failure of MRC and its Prior Consultation process. The Joint Action Plans (JAPs) have done little to meaningfully address concerns raised by communities, civil society and neighboring countries.”

If UNESCO ever had any hope of curing Laos’ communist leaders of their “dam-fever” – with 65 Lao hydropower dams in operation in 2019, the government is milking each and every river for electricity – that appears to have been wishful thinking.

But there was a more realistic prospect of exercising influence on the Thai government through lobbying by Thailand’s northeastern network of river NGOs. Bangkok has long supported electricity imports from Lao hydropower. If Thailand had listened to the voices of civil society and Mekong experts, alternative options were possible.

There were several sound reasons for Thailand to change its energy policy and not buy into this high-risk project. Lee pointed out that Thailand “has a massive oversupply of electricity – its reserve margin is equivalent to more than 10 Luang Prabang dams. Thailand has a reserve margin of 16,900MW or 34 percent, which is more than double the international norm for reserve margin of 15 percent.”

Lee concluded, “This highlights that the key driver of dams is not energy demand and security, but rather generating profits for a few at the expense of the Mekong and the communities that depend on the river.”

However, the government’s Thai Energy Council ignored the contradictions and the same old policy was renewed. Last year, Thailand signed an MOU for three new dams on the mainstream Mekong, including the Luang Prabang Hydropower Project, complete with power purchasing agreements. That places Bangkok at odds with its UNESCO obligations to protect world heritage.

Heritage vs. Hydropower

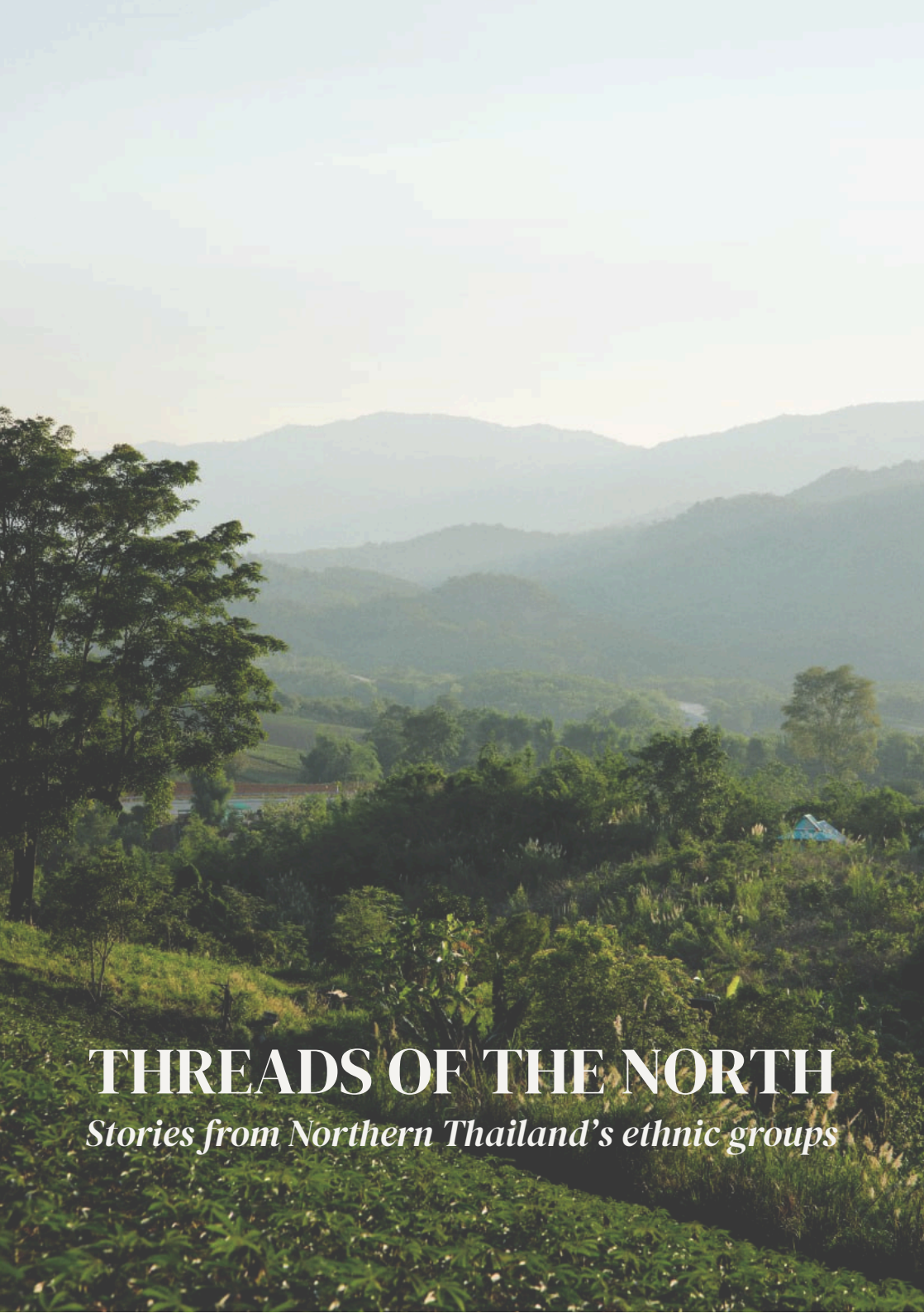
The MOU that commits Thailand to buy electricity from the LPHP is clearly in conflict with Thailand's U.N. obligations. According to section 6.3 of the U.N. 1972 World Heritage Convention, of which Thailand is a signatory, "Each state party undertakes not to take any deliberate measures, which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage situated on the territory of other state party to this convention."

Minja Yang, a former UNESCO heritage chief for the Asia-Pacific, clarified: "The government of Thailand, as a State Party to the World Heritage Convention has an obligation to stop companies registered in their country from harming World Heritage sites not only within its territory, but also in other countries."

However the case of Luang Prabang sadly illustrates how the 21-state intergovernmental World Heritage Committee is longer capable of preventing harmful public and private works. The Luang Prabang dam is just the latest in a long line of destructive dams that jeopardize the world's heritage. UNESCO's sanctions against member states that fail to protect their heritage sites are limited to being placed on the "Heritage in Danger" blacklist. But as the damage to the natural heritage of the Mekong River is irreversible, being added to the blacklist will have no effect unless UNESCO can close down the dam. And that is highly improbable.

Even a dam-blighted and endangered Luang Prabang would still attract some tourists, especially on the new Chinese-built international express train from Yunnan province to Vientiane. But it will no longer be the same ecological paradise that it has been for most of its history.

Minja Yang, who just retired last year as President of Leuven University's International Centre for Conservation in Belgium, lamented, "If we lose Luang Prabang, a very unique site that will be lost to humanity. Once the damage is done, it will be irreversible. It cannot be undone."



THREADS OF THE NORTH

Stories from Northern Thailand's ethnic groups

Policy and Practice of Formalization of Land Rights in the State Forestland under the National Land Policy (Kor Tor Chor) Scheme in Nan Province, Northern Thailand

Chusak Wittayapak

The talk is based on our recent re-visit study to investigate how the community forestry movement in Northern Thailand emerged and evolved and then transformed into a communal land titling movement. Research explains how the government of Thailand has recently chosen to abandon a stronger rights-based communal land title (CLT) proposed by the grassroots movement in favor of a less rights-based approach called Kor Tor Chor (KTC) scheme. The Thai government, due to its opposition to any attempt to privatize public land, has offered usufruct rights to formalize farmers' occupation of state forestland without granting property rights.



Figure 1. Certificate of land use rights – green book that grants individuals permission to cultivate land within the KTC program.

Our discussion focuses on the contextualization of conjuncture of state views and villager views regarding rights and the security of land tenure and livelihoods.

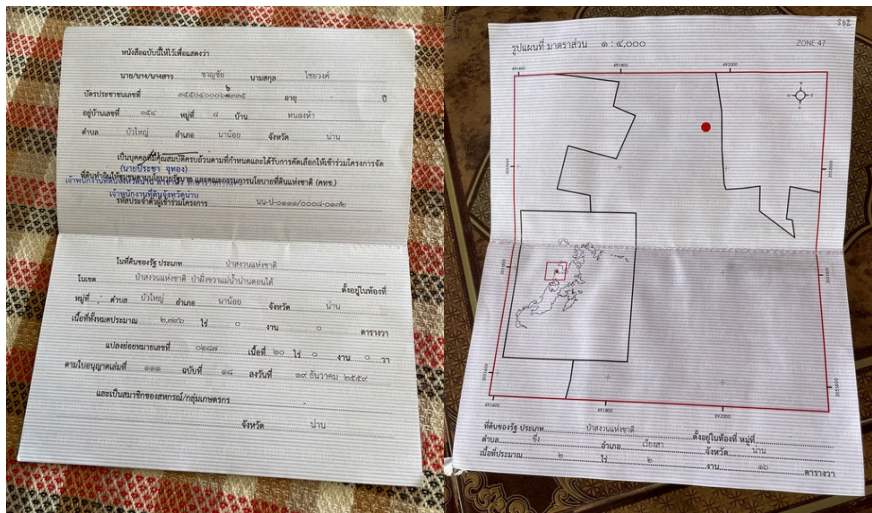


Figure 2. Pages from a "green book" showing land registration data (left) and the location and size of the land (right).



Figure 3. Cultivated land in national forest reserve.

We argue that the variant outcomes of the scheme have been influenced by multi-party coalitions of state actors, non-state actors and local communities' desires for development and environment integration in the backdrops of historical specificity of locality. Our research examined the KTC scheme in Nan Province, Northern Thailand to exemplify the potential for the bottom-up formalization of land rights as an alternative to a top-down and one-size-fit-all scheme controlled by the Thai state.



Figure 3. Professor Chusak and Dr. Carl.



Image credit: IMPECT

IMPECT

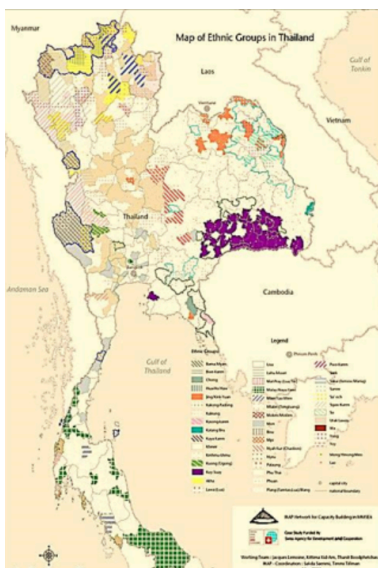
The Inter-Mountain Peoples Education & Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) is an Indigenous non-government organization with over 20 years (established in 1991) of practical experience in highland Indigenous community development. This organisation was founded and is staffed entirely by representatives of the Indigenous groups and networks involved in the Association. IMPECT was regally registered as the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) on March 1993 and certified by the Ministry of Culture of Thailand, enabling it to operate with a focus on social development and advocacy for Indigenous communities. Its legal status allows it to work in collaboration with national and international partners.

Its aim is to assist in driving the Indigenous movement by and for Indigenous people, focusing on the “dimension of Indigenous cultural values”, which forms the basis of self-development of Indigenous organizations and networks. Emphasis is placed on raising the potential of local leaders to address issues at the local level, especially among Indigenous women and youth, reinforcing the strength of Indigeneity.



Image credit: IMPECT

IMPECT is an association (membership organisation) that represents the interest of 14 Indigenous ethnic networks mostly in the north, including Karen, Kachin, Dara-ang, Hmong, Iu-Mien, Mlabri, Lisu, Lahu, Lwua, Shan, Thin, and Akha. Cooperation and coordination of government agencies, non-government organizations, and local people and civil society groups promote local mechanisms to address issues and sustainable self-management.



Vision: Indigenous Peoples (IPs) have their right to self-determination with dignity and recognition from the State and the public.

Image credit: IMPECT

Organisational Strategy

- Support the empowering of leadership potential for Indigenous leaders and strengthening community organizations.
- Support the development of concrete models on self-management (health, NRM, transferring of IK) based on cultural identity and way of life.
- Promote and protect the rights of IPs.
- Strengthen mechanisms to drive policies and laws related to Indigenous peoples.
- Develop creative public information campaigns for learning and policy-changing.
- Provide capacity building for IMPECT personnel.
- Strengthen self-reliance for the organization.



Image credit: IMPECT

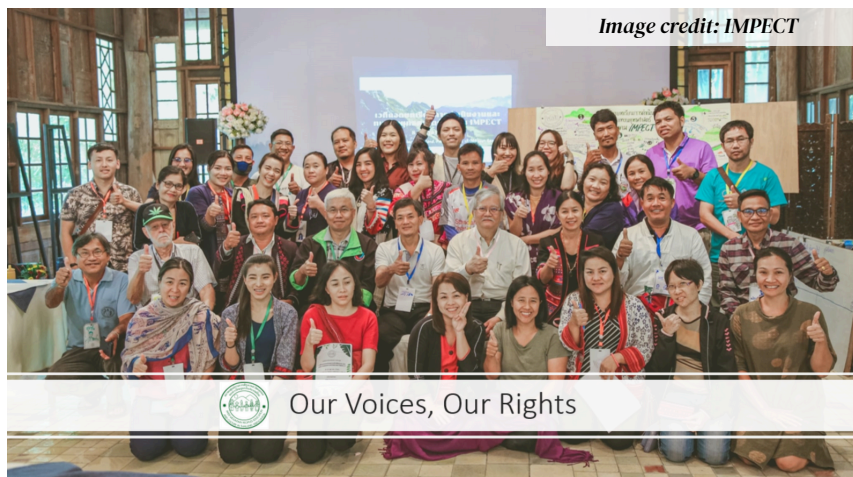


Image credit: IMPECT

IMPECT focuses on several key areas of work. It engages in **capacity building** to strengthen the skills and leadership of indigenous individuals and communities. It **supports the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices**, ensuring that traditional wisdom remains a living and vital part of community life. IMPECT also **advocates for the rights of Indigenous peoples**, promoting dignity, recognition, and legal protection. Through **collaboration and networking**, it builds alliances with other indigenous groups, civil society organizations, and policy-makers. Lastly, it plays an active role in **advocacy for policy change**, working to influence laws and regulations that affect the well-being and autonomy of indigenous communities.

Figure 1. Kaew from KNCE working with individuals from the Karen ethnic group.



KAREN กระเหรี่ยง “ป่ากันยอ”

The Karen people are one of the largest and most widespread hill tribes in Thailand, with communities stretching across more than fifteen provinces, particularly along the border with Myanmar. While their exact origins remain unclear, scholars suggest ancestral links to Tibet or the Gobi Desert. Having lived in Burma for centuries, Karen groups began migrating into Thailand during the 18th century, gradually settling in regions from Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son down to Kanchanaburi and the Isthmus of Kra.

In Thailand, the Karen are linguistically diverse, speaking languages that belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. They are broadly categorized into several subgroups: the S’gaw Karen, who refer to themselves as Pga-gan Yaw or Pakayor; the Pwo Karen, who speak four main dialects; the Pa’O or Black Karen, identifiable by their distinctive headscarves; and the Kayah or Red Karen, which includes the Kayan people known for the “long-neck” tradition. Despite differences, these groups share a strong cultural emphasis on community, identity, and oral tradition.

Karen clothing remains an important expression of cultural identity. Unmarried women are traditionally distinguished by their long, white, handwoven tunics, while others wear colorful v-neck garments made from naturally dyed fabrics. Weaving is a highly valued tradition passed from mother to daughter, with looms often found beneath the stilted wooden homes in Karen villages. These textiles reflect not only aesthetic values but also social status and ritual meaning.



Figure 2. Karen Hill Tribe. Image by Royal vacation.



Figure 3. A Karen woman weaving. Image by Reporter on the Road.

Agriculture lies at the heart of Karen life. Most communities practice subsistence rice farming through rotational swidden cultivation, a method that moves fields rather than entire villages. This system reflects the Karen's deep ecological knowledge and commitment to forest conservation, often earning them recognition as one of the most environmentally conscious hill tribes. Their villages, typically situated at lower elevations than other upland groups, are relatively accessible and increasingly integrated into Thai infrastructure and services.





Image credit: Elephant Peace Project

A unique feature of Karen society is their historical relationship with elephants. For centuries, Karen villagers have domesticated and cared for elephants, using them for transport, agriculture, and ceremonial roles. In some areas, such as Huay Pha Koot in Mae Chaem district, families still maintain ownership of large elephant herds, a tradition that continues to shape both cultural and economic life.

Despite increasing modernisation and integration into Thai society, the Karen people continue to maintain their cultural identity with quiet resilience. Through weaving, storytelling, language preservation, and sustainable farming practices, they assert a way of life rooted in respect – for land, for community, and for the rhythms of tradition that still guide them today.



Figure 1. Women and young Karen community members in Hin Lad Nai, BanPong, Wiengpapao, Chiang Rai work together during a traditional “Lue Mee To” firebreak activity. This seasonal practice helps prevent wildfires and is rooted in ancestral knowledge passed down through generations. It reflects the community’s commitment to living in harmony with the forest while protecting it for the future.

ROOTED IN THE FOREST: WHY INDIGENOUS NETWORKS MATTER

Ms. Srikaew Kunteng (Kaew)

Across the forested highlands of northern Thailand, Karen communities have lived for generations in close relationship with nature, guided by values of respect, balance, and care for the land. Today, as forests face growing pressures from development and climate change, the Karen Network for Culture and Environment (KNCE) works across 15 provinces in Thailand to support these communities in protecting their territories, cultures, and rights.

Indigenous networks like KNCE are essential, not only for preserving cultural identity, but also for offering powerful solutions to global issues like deforestation, biodiversity loss, and sustainable living.

Participatory Field Mapping in a Karen Rice Field



Through real-life examples: from sacred forest rituals like Lue Paka (forest ordination) and Lue Mee To (firebreak ceremonies), to youth-led mapping, eco-friendly farming, and advocacy for community land rights. We see how traditional wisdom is being used to shape a more sustainable future.

Stories from communities like Hin Lad Nai and Mae Jok will show how people continue to gather food, medicine, and materials from the forest, while also caring for it with deep knowledge and respect. These are not just survival skills — they are ways of living with dignity, resilience, and harmony.

Figure 2. Karen community members in Bonna Village, BanPae, Chomthong, Chiang Mai use participatory mapping techniques to document traditional rice farming areas. This practice helps protect indigenous land rights and ensures sustainable agricultural use rooted in ancestral knowledge.



Figure 3. The Karen Buddhist community celebrates the Kee Zhu ceremony to bring peace, balance, and blessings to individuals and the whole community. It's a time of reunion, good thoughts, and collective harmony.

"Kee Zhu Ritual: Tying Threads of Well-being and Unity"

For students and young people, the Karen experience offers inspiring lessons about what it means to protect what you love, live sustainably, and find strength in community and tradition.

LISU ลีซู

The Lisu are one of the ethnic groups in Northern Thailand, residing mainly in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son and Tak. The Lisu live across the highlands of Northern Thailand, Myanmar, and China, and carry with them a vibrant culture woven from threads of tradition, community, and spiritual connection. While modernisation has reshaped many of their practices, Lisu material culture remains a profound expression of identity, memory, and meaning.



Figure 1. Lisu shoulder bag. Photo from Mimi.

Woven Shoulder Bags – More Than Utility

Among the most iconic items is the Lisu traditional shoulder bag, adorned with intricate stitching known as Aghama ghaa or “spider stitching.” At its heart are the Laesha naphu, or “ears of the bag,” once delicately hand-embroidered. These bags hold both everyday and ceremonial importance. At funerals, a new bag without ears may be offered to the deceased—believed to accompany them to the spirit world.

Piee Keus – The Gourd that Nourishes and Binds

Dried gourds, or Piee keus, hang from bamboo fences as simple scoops for water or fermented corn. Yet their role extends into sacred rites. During funerals, food served from these gourds becomes “rice for the orphaned,” shared among the children of the deceased. The ritual act underscores kinship, grief, and spiritual continuity.



Figure 2. A row of Piee keus. Photo from Mimi.



Figure 3. Lisu patchwork. Photo from Mimi.

Patchwork and Identity in Lisu Dress

Traditional Lisu costumes, once hand-stitched with wide, multi-layered patchwork by women for their families, carried emotional and social meaning. Some were gifts for orphaned youth, others for brides. Today, costumes are mostly mass-produced and sold during festive seasons. The once diverse palette has narrowed to just red and orange, and wedding costumes are now rarely made or worn.



Figure 4. Lady in Lisu costume. Photo from Mimi.

Tassels that Stir the Spirits

The Lisu dancing tassel, worn by women on their backs and men at the front, signaled joy and reverence. Once embroidered by hand in quiet evening hours after farm work, the tassels added color to festivals and were believed to awaken ancestors during New Year dances. Today, mass production has simplified their form and erased the intricate needlework of the past.

Aprons of the Past

The Lisu apron, once a staple of daily wear, has become symbolic—reserved now for special occasions like the New Year. As lifestyles shift and younger generations adapt to new livelihoods, such items carry the memory of another time, bridging past and present.



Figure 5. Lisu apron. Photo from Mimi.



Figure 6. Mimi posing for a photo in the rice field. Photo from Mimi, founder of the LCHC.

Lisu cultural objects are not just artifacts—they are living threads of heritage, care, and community meaning. Even as machine production and modernity reshape them, their symbolic power remains. In each stitch, scoop, and tassel is a story—not only of what has been lost, but of what still endures.

Lisu Cultural Heritage Centre (LCHC)

Located in Chiang Mai, the Lisu Cultural Heritage Centre (LCHC) is dedicated to promoting and preserving Lisu culture through the celebration of traditional craftsmanship and community knowledge. The Centre showcases a remarkable array of Lisu handicrafts, handmade by villagers from Doi Laan in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. These vibrant works reflect generations of artistic skill and cultural expression.

The LCHC also houses an important archive of cultural materials, including rare ethnographic photographs, detailed field notes from anthropological research conducted in Doi Laan, and a range of historical documents and artefacts. Together, these collections offer a rich lens into the lives, traditions, and transformations of Lisu communities.

In addition to its archival and exhibition spaces, the Centre features a community market where visitors can purchase authentic Lisu handicrafts. Many of these items are lovingly crafted by village elders and cultural custodians, who play a vital role in reviving and passing on traditional knowledge to younger generations. Through mentorship and intergenerational exchange, the LCHC breathes new life into Lisu heritage—ensuring that these cultural practices remain meaningful, visible, and resilient for years to come.



Figure 7. A group of students visiting the LCHC in May 2025. Photo from Mimi.



Figure 2. Akha Hill Tribe. Image by Dave Stamboulis.

AKHA ᩈᩢ᩠ᨦ

The Akha are an indigenous hill people originally from the highlands of Southeast Asia. They are part of the larger Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic group, with ancestral roots stretching from Yunnan province in southern China into the mountainous regions of Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and northern Thailand. In Thailand, Akha communities are primarily located in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai provinces, where they have lived for generations as part of the country's diverse upland ethnic landscape.

Language and Identity

The Akha language belongs to the Loloish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family and is traditionally unwritten, though modern efforts—particularly in missionary and academic contexts—have introduced scripts for literacy and preservation. Akha identity is deeply rooted in oral tradition, storytelling, and ritual, with a strong emphasis on ancestral knowledge and community ethics.

Cultural Practices and Belief Systems

The Akha are known for their rich spiritual and ritual life, which blends animism, ancestor worship, and in some communities, Buddhist or Christian influences. Central to Akha cosmology is the "Akha Zang" or Akha Way—an unwritten code that governs daily life, ceremonial cycles, social conduct, and respect for the natural world. Rituals mark key life events, agricultural milestones, and the seasons, with ceremonies like the Swing Festival (Yee Peng) celebrating fertility, harvest, and the link between community and land.



Figure 2. An Akha lady helps her granddaughter put on her traditional headwear outside the village church building which had a Sunday service ongoing. Image by Nathaniel Soon

Traditional Akha dress is distinctive and highly symbolic. Akha women are especially known for their elaborate headdresses adorned with silver coins, beads, feathers, and other ornaments, which signify age, marital status, and regional identity. These costumes are typically handwoven and dyed, showcasing incredible textile skill and cultural pride.

Livelihoods and Shifting Landscapes

Traditionally, the Akha practiced subsistence agriculture, using rotational swidden (slash-and-burn) methods adapted to mountainous terrain. They cultivated rice, maize, and vegetables, often supplemented by foraging, hunting, and livestock rearing. However, changing national land policies, conservation laws, and economic pressures have disrupted these practices.

In recent decades, many Akha communities have adapted by participating in cash crop economies, handicraft production, and ecotourism. Coffee cultivation, as seen with Akha Ama Coffee, is one such example of cultural and economic adaptation that merges traditional knowledge with contemporary sustainability and fair-trade practices.



Figure 3. Akha Ama Coffee Products packaging features coffee producers, a branding strategy connecting consumers directly to the growers, their community, and their story. Source: Akha Lee.



Figure 1. Lee Ayu Chuepa (Middle), Founder of Akha Ama Coffee.

AKHA AMA COFFEE

Lee Ayu Chuepa

The climate of the Northern Thai mountains is extremely suited to growing Arabica coffee beans, the most sought-after coffee bean in the world and indispensable for making real espresso. Combined with the agricultural skills of the ethnic groups who live in these mountains, including the Akha, production has grown significantly in recent years, up from around 500 tons of Arabica in 1991 to more than 10, 000 tons in 2019.

In 2010, Lee Ayu Chuepa and families of Maejantai village began “Akha Ama Coffee”. Instead of selling the cherry and parchment coffee to middlemen for a low price, the family decided to process and market the coffee oneself, ensuring a better price for the product. The family also decided to change to an organically sustainable system of mixed multi-cropping system for their coffee, reducing the use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides. The coffee plants, which grow up to about the height of a human, are now grown in between larger fruit trees and a wide variety of vegetables. This system is beneficial to the soil ecology, produces humus, stabilises hillsides against erosion and retains moisture during the dry season.

Due to constant crop rotation, pests are less liable to negatively affect the plants. Although seen as a “new” system of agriculture in the West, the fact is the Akha people have used this method throughout their whole history, working in cooperation with nature, instead of against it.



Figure 2. Lee Ayu Chuepa, Founder of Akha Ama Coffee, discussing beans and growing conditions on a coffee exchange camp.



FROM SEEDS TO FRUITS
EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD



Figure 1. The Akha village that Xiyao stayed to learn about heirloom seed conservation. It is located at the border of Yunnan and Myanmar, in a patchy landscape of plantations and forests.

TASTING AND TRANSLATING COFFEE WITH THE MULTISPECIES PLANTATIONS: ETHNIC SPECIALTY COFFEE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Fu Xiyao

How do the sprawling coffee plantations in highland Southeast Asia both erase and preserve ethnic identity? How do specialty coffee entrepreneurs become more connected to both the global economy and their land and ethnic communities? This research aims to make sense of these paradoxes in making ‘ethnic specialty coffee’. To do so, it draws attention to how indigenous producers themselves are tasting, living, and moving with coffee through its global network. The research is firstly in dialogue with the commodity chain studies where geographers have been ‘following the thing’ to expose the exploitative relations between distant producers and consumers. However, with the rise of specialty coffee and coffee tourism in highland Southeast Asia, the linear and geographically separated ‘chain’ is increasingly replaced by multi-directional ‘circulation’ and ‘translation’ of people, things, and values.



Figure 2. A Wa farmer holding their heirloom upland rice seeds. They are still growing it for a variety of reasons although their livelihood does not depend on heirloom rice anymore.

Bringing together the scholarship from political ecology, visceral geographies, and multispecies ethnography, I take an embodied and more-than-human approach to illuminate the agency and politics emerged from ethnic entrepreneurs' making of specialty coffee.

Following the ethnic coffee producers, I propose a multi-sited ethnography to trace the contentious processes of translating between materials (plants) and values (commodities) as well as their political and ecological implications for ethnic communities. Prepared for the Field Studies course, this presentation also demonstrates how to develop research questions that intricately connect grounded fieldwork observations with broader theoretical debates, especially in the field of human geography.

Figure 3. On the day of transplanting rice seedlings to the paddy, the host gathers their relatives to help and plant a bundle of freshly cut traditional flowers from their home garden. The flowers are said to attract the Rice Spirit for a good harvest.





Figure 1. FI23 (February), Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya: There is something magical about sitting together and staring blankly into the campfire.

Live in the moment, go with the flow: FS advice for the unprepared soul

Adib Amali

Field courses, and as an extension, the social sciences, inculcate a wide range of immeasurable soft skills within students. It is an experience fraught with many contradictions: you slow down yet can feel the intensity; you discover your inner self as you immerse in the outdoors; you navigate complexity and exercise spontaneity within the dynamic borders of “The Plan”.

Nevertheless, there are three areas that are mostly within the student's control:

Health: Climate change may be in vogue but it is never not hot during May and June – every single field course, there is a real fear of heat injury. I would say that the most dangerous part about it is that you might not realise it until it is too late – one of the common symptoms is the inability to think straight, something which I experienced in FS24 while we were in Laos. Fortunately, the solution is simple: cultivate a good habit of drinking water frequently, while reminding and looking out for each other. It is too late if you feel thirsty – that would already mean that you are dehydrated.



Figure 2. FS23, Mae Salong, Thailand: Students providing shade and help to a museum staff working in the afternoon sun -- foreshadowing (pun intended) their future roles as student assistants.

Learning: Having had the opportunity to review student assignments in FS24, I realised that many have not moved on from the common “JC” framework of essay writing: students would expound on the multiple dimensions of a certain issue and call it a day. One way to improve upon this is to find a key theme as a pivot, while supporting real-world observations with relevant literature. Writing consistently in the field journal would also serve as a ‘memory bank’ that inspires you to add a personal touch to your essays and presentations.



Figure 3. FI23 (September), Lower Sesan 2 Dam, Cambodia: We were lucky to have gained access to visit a controversial dam, where tributaries converged and opinions clashed.

Social relations: The highlight of FS is almost always the friendships forged regardless of age, language and culture. However, some tensions may arise if we are not sensitive or considerate enough of the other party, especially at times when we might be physically, mentally, emotionally, or socially exhausted. For this, I would advise for us all to be reflective and aware of our positionality and the different roles that we play – as students, visitors, tourists, and Singaporeans.



Figure 4. FS24, Tubtawan Village, Thailand: In this farewell dinner, students, staff and villagers dance merrily on the ground, as sorrow and wistfulness intermingle in the air.

There are many more advice to be shared, but the TLDR is: live in the moment, go with the flow. In a world where the hustle culture reigns dominant, I promise you that FS will be a journey of deep learning, profound self-growth and meaningful memories.

Trust me bro.

Kampong Classroom: Reflections from FI'24

Joanne Tan

FI'24 brought me to Kampong Phluk and Kampong Khleang — two villages on the northeastern edge of the Tonle Sap. Through doing fieldwork in these two villages, I came to appreciate its unique value of being a process of immersion, discovery and reflexivity.

Beyond learning new information, the value of doing fieldwork lies in its creating space for exploration and unplanned conclusions. Speaking with locals, visiting field sites and following in the footsteps of the everyday reveals nuances that may not emerge through desk research alone. In Kampong Khleang, we investigated the benefits of its community-based tourism. While many assumed that more tourism benefits local communities, our conversations



Figure 1. Interviewing Mr Phonta, a English-speaking local tour guide who also works as an English teacher to the children in Kampong Khleang. He shared with us his recommended itinerary of Kampong Khleang and many stories about the heritage of the commune and its culture.

revealed quiet disparities in the spatial distribution of the benefits of tourism and unexpected challenges in scaling up tourism due to limited local resources. These insights were made by engaging with multiple groups simultaneously and staying open to new pathways of understanding, made possible through the dynamic nature of fieldwork.



Figure 2. Group member Rachel conducting door-to-door interviews about water usage in Kampong Phluk with the help of Nita and Suying (Nita's cousin) who assisted with translation and connecting us with their neighbours.

Sharing in the everyday rhythm of village life and participating in our homestay hosts' routines also created opportunities to build genuine relationships within the community and opened the door to collaborative research with the locals. In Kampong Phluk, we examined water quality through the lens of public health. During our stay, we befriended our homestay hosts' grandchildren who helped answer our initial curiosities about the village's water sources and later supported our door-to-door interviews and water sampling. Amid the hustle of city life most of us are accustomed to, this also reminded me that setting aside time to connect with those around us is a key ingredient in cultivating meaningful interactions.

This physical geography project also involved conducting multi-parameter tests on water samples. As this was my first time working with such equipment, the fieldwork provided a valuable hands-on opportunity to gain practical skills in using various water testing probes. Learning about these methods also gave me a more tangible understanding of environmental issues in the context of public health.

Additionally, this experience has helped me ground theoretical knowledge in real-world complexities of implementation. Conversations with the village leaders in Kampong Phluk revealed how even basic water distribution plans become highly complicated when accounting for budget constraints, challenging terrain and village needs. Moments like this have lent a deeper sense of purpose to my studies and reinforced an ethical responsibility to produce outcomes that are socially meaningful — even in my role as a student.



Figure 3. Meeting the village leaders of Kampong Phluk at the Commune Office to learn more about water sources and water pollution issues in the commune.

Field Reflections on Water: Livelihoods in Tonle Sap

Rachel Sng

My second project in FI'24 focused on understanding the livelihoods of people living in stilted versus floating homes on the Tonle Sap Lake. Our fieldwork took place in Kampong Khleang and Chong Pralai, a nearby floating community with Vietnamese residents living in Cambodia for generations. My first field experience taught me that a project is not defined by how many readings you complete or how well you score in school. It is shaped by your ability to observe, listen, and remain open-minded, which leads to meaningful insights.



Figure 1. Inside the floating house of a Khmer fisherman and his family. The bowl of catfish can be sold for approximately \$3 SGD per kilogram.

I learnt that fieldwork goes beyond collecting data points for the “right” answers. In fact, there's usually no clear-cut answer at all! One of my most memorable interviews was with a Khmer woman living in a boat-turned-home. She shared how she made an agreement with a stilt-house resident to live behind it for ten years due to a lack of land/property ownership.

Her story challenged my earlier assumption that floating communities only lived in Chong Pralai, and strongly revealed the complexities and diversity of livelihood strategies. My experience also demonstrated how raw data – the smell of fish, the grittiness of wood planks and subtle wobbles of the floating house – can hit you right in the face (and sometimes feels).



Figure 2. Photo with Khmer woman and her family in her floating home. She used to stay in a stilted home, until her parents revealed that they did not have land nor a house to give to her after she got married. Her husband, a shrimp farmer, plans to find alternative work as a boat driver to bring tourists around Kampong Khleang.



Figure 3. Group photo with my groupmates, homestay host and family, Cambodian buddy Nak (first from left) and my Vietnamese roommate Kathy (first from right).

The beauty of qualitative research became especially clear in exemplifying how much meaning lies in words, body language, and environment. These interviews led me down a rabbit hole, reading about Cambodia's land titling and ownership, for months after FI ended.

What struck me most was the importance of cultural sensitivity and respect. These are values internalized only when you are out in the field engaging with others. These engagements also unfolded over dinners in the homestay with our Cambodian buddy, and late-night conversations with my Vietnamese roommate as we tried to fall asleep. These seemingly ordinary moments revealed different ways of making sense of the world, beyond my Singaporean lens.

Between You and the World: Learning Through Fieldwork

Cyion Chua Kai Tong

Fieldwork, in its truest sense, is never just about the field. It is about movement – across terrain, across perspectives, and within oneself. Participating in Field Studies and Field Investigation year is an immersive journey that blurred the boundaries between learner and listener, researcher and guest, observer and participant. Throughout my years as a student or student assistant, I returned not with tidy conclusions, but with richer questions, gratitude, and a deepened sense of what it means to learn with others.



Figure 1. Kampong Phluk featuring Celine and Husna <3



Figure 2. Capturing moments within flooded communities in Kampong Phluk, Cambodia.



Figure 3. Short boat ride with a boat owner to understand more about boats and livelihoods in Kampong Phluk.

One of the most striking aspects of fieldwork is its refusal to be contained by the certainty of the classroom. While lectures and readings provided conceptual frames, it was the experience on the ground – the sensory, messy, sometimes uncomfortable reality of field encounters – that forced me to interrogate my assumptions. Like being guided by an elderly fisherman who took us on his boat to share stories about floating livelihoods and the intimate knowledge of watercraft passed through generations, I came to understand knowledge as something deeply embodied, relational, and place-based.

Figure 4. Ohm Kong, head of “Kampong Phluk Community-Based Ecotourism”, attempting to use a digital camera.



Figure 5. Stepping into the flooded community of Kampong Phluk.



This year, as I return back into the field with a shift in perspective, past fieldwork has taught me that knowledge cannot always be captured – it must be felt, lived, and revisited. It has transformed the way I approach research, not as a quest for answers, but as an ongoing process of relation, humility, and becoming.

Nothing beats fieldwork. Not because it's easy, but because it's real. Because it cracks you open and fills you with stories, faces, questions, and clarity. Because it teaches you – sometimes with joy, sometimes with challenge – that knowledge is not something you go out and take. It's something that emerges in the muddy, magical spaces between you and the world. And that, I think, is the best kind of learning there is.



Figure 1. Yaay Lap looking for squid, shell fish and crabs along the coast of the Andaman Sea during low tide.

Beyond the Margins: Lessons from the Field

Christabelle Sng

Bob Simpson's poignant observation, “you don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you”, encapsulates the profound nature of ethnographic inquiry. This truth became remarkably clear during my first field “site” in a Moklen village in southern Thailand. Our group's project focused on understanding the struggles of the Moklen, a semi-nomadic seafaring people, as they navigated a changing coastal landscape in Phang Nga province. Their challenges were diverse, encompassing land tenureship, citizenship rights, diminishing fish and seafood stocks, and the added complexity of non-human actors like seasonal variations. Little did I anticipate that this immersion would initiate a significant process of unlearning what I thought I knew about environmental change, resource management, and coastal communities.



Figure 2. CPG (Charoen Pokphand Group)'s shrimp farm pond in Ban Thap Tawan Beach that has encroached into the Moklen's ancestral land. The release of waste water from the farm has resulted in coastal erosion and ecosystem degradation.

The Unsettling Wisdom of the Field

During our stay at the Moklen Cultural Home, amidst grappling with the intricacies of their livelihoods and the linguistic hurdles of a thick southern Thai accent, a particular comment from a village elder, Yaay Lap (Grandmother Lap), resonated deeply: “the sea didn't change, people did”. This simple yet impactful statement was disarming. It offered an immediate insight into the intricate relationship between communities and their environment, underscoring how fieldwork possesses a unique ability to catch one off guard, revealing momentous insights in the most unexpected moments. Such experiences compel a re-evaluation of the ingrained perspectives and established knowledge that often become second nature during our academic journeys. Indeed, Yaay Lap's perspective was a profound initial jolt in my personal process of unlearning. Field studies, in this regard, are unique; they place you in situations that can be uncomfortable for the mind and body, yet simultaneously prepare you for uncertainty and foster adaptability to change.

Embracing the unknown and interrogating knowledge

Fieldwork, in essence, grants permission to embrace not knowing. It allows for a temporary disengagement from swathes of existing scholarship, encouraging a critical examination of the knowledge we often privilege. This deliberate act of stepping outside conventional frameworks fosters a more nuanced understanding of the world. While confronting the niche struggles of indigenous and ethnic groups can be isolating and uncomfortable, these encounters sharpen one's attunement to the subtle, everyday workings of power. They tease out an awareness of truths that are often more convenient to ignore, pushing us, the researcher, towards a deeper, more reflexive engagement with both the subject of study and our own positionality within the research process.



Figure 3. Moken fishing boats docked by the shore. What appears to be a calm field site became a formative experience, providing insights into subaltern geography and the reality of unexpected fieldwork hurdles.

Ingenious Indigenous – Northern Thailand

Nicholas Ng

To the layman, Thailand is often generalised as a tourist hub. Yet, there is much more to this nation than meets the eye. To truly experience Thailand, one simply has to step out of the touristy cities of Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, et cetera, to experience the rich culture.



Figure 1. Por Luang (Village Head) showing my group a physical map of Baan Mae Yang Min

The North and South of Thailand not only possess remarkably different landscapes, but different cultures as well. It would be irresponsible of us to essentialise the whole of Thailand as a singular monolithic culture. Therefore, it reinforces the importance of conducting Field Studies (FS) to truly understand a place. FS allows one to immerse in the vibrant and diverse cultures of Thailand, comparing and contrasting different groups, while analysing and uncovering the reasons behind some of their unique practices.

As seen in Figure 1, they rely on physical maps to demarcate the boundaries of the village. However, government authorities deem this evidence as insufficient.

From my FS experience, I have come to realise that each culture faces its own unique set of challenges, employing different methods to address them.

As in many parts of the country, villages housing indigenous groups such as Baan Mae Yang Min, struggle with obtaining government recognition of land rights. To prove their land ownership, they have to procure evidence of their livelihoods and land conservation efforts within the space.



Figure 2. Print out of the fire break line map with demarcations of the village landmarks and settlements



Figure 3. In Baan Mae Yang Min with Por Luang and my groupmates

This is where their ingenious plan for recognition comes into play: the creation of a fire line. Not only does the fireline protect the village from wildfires, it also serves as a clear demarcation of their village boundaries. By harnessing the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) applications, it helps with detailing out the village's layout and boundaries, while legitimising their presence within this space. Moreover, the FS team was able to help out with this process by using applications like ArcGIS and QGIS to draft a digital map, which was substantial enough

to grant them a provisional approval of land recognition by the government. The beauty of FS lies in the students' ability to use their knowledge to empower communities in unexpected, but meaningful ways.

SPEAKERS AND CONTRIBUTORS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Dr Chayan Vaddhanaphuti is the founding director of Chiang Mai University's Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, has conducted extensive research and advocacy concerning the rights of local and indigenous communities in Thailand. His work primarily examines the intersection of land rights, natural resource management, and development, notably offering critical analyses of large-scale projects like hydropower and logging and their impact on community rights.



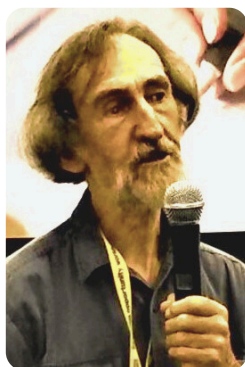
Dr Carl Grundy-Warr has been coordinating Field Studies, a field-based learning course for undergraduate students for 25 years. He has also been coordinating a Field Investigation in Human Geography course since 2012. His research interests include: cross-border geopolitics of mainland Southeast Asia; transboundary environmental politics in Southeast Asia; and the political geographies and social-ecological relations of the Mekong Basin. He obtained his Ph.D. from University of Durham, United Kingdom.



Dr Natthaphon Santhi (Ajarn Nueng) is the Assistant President for International Affairs at CRRU. Holding a Ph.D. in English as an International Language from Chulalongkorn University (2011), he has dedicated over a decade to the NUS Field Studies programme. The programme functions as a platform for students to develop critical thinking and practical skills through interdisciplinary projects addressing global and local issues, aligning with CRRU's focus on internationalisation and graduate development.



Dr Chusak Wittayapak is Associate Professor of Human Geography. For 30 years in academic career, he has taught and conducted research on subjects ranging from human geography, human ecology, political ecology, community-based natural resource management, development theories and practices, and land relations in Southeast Asia. He obtained his Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Victoria, Canada in 1994.



Tom Fawthrop is a research associate with RCSD, as well as an independent author, journalist and film-maker based in Southeast Asia over 40 years. He has extensively covered several important stories for international media, including development-environment issues within the Mekong River basin and the impacts of the Khmer Rouge regime. As a regular freelance foreign correspondent, his reports on the Mekong region have been widely published in the Economist, The Diplomat, the Guardian, and the South China Morning Post. He has also produced features for major news outlets, directed documentaries and co-authored a book on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.



Srikaew Kunteng is the Coordinator of the Karen Network for Culture and Environment (KNCE) in Thailand. A Karen woman and long-time advocate for indigenous rights, she works with Karen communities across 15 provinces to promote self-determination, environmental sustainability, and cultural resilience. Kaew also engages with national and regional networks to advance forest peoples' rights and movements across Asia.



Jantanee Pichetkulsampan is currently the Vice director of IMPECT Association, an organisation committed to empowering Indigenous communities in Thailand through education, cultural preservation, and ecological stewardship. Through her efforts, Jantanee Pichetkulsampan continues to play a vital role in promoting Indigenous knowledge systems, advocating for policy changes, and fostering collaboration between communities and governmental bodies to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources in Indigenous lands.



Lee Ayu Chuepa is the founder of Akha Ama, a community-based social enterprise committed to sustainable coffee. The enterprise is a thriving café business with three locations and a roastery in Chiang Mai, that works directly with local farmers to foster community empowerment. The brand's coffee has graced global stages for three consecutive years, earning accolades in London, Maastricht, and Vienna.



Amema Saeju, also known as Mimi, was born and raised in Doi Laan, a Lisu village in Northern Thailand. At sixteen, she moved to Chiang Mai, living with American historian Michael Vickery and Dutch anthropologist Otome Klein Hutheesing, who had researched her village. She completed her Master's in Ethnicity and Development at Chiang Mai University in 2014. Inspired by her foster mother's research and old village photographs, and with community support, she established the Lisu Cultural Heritage Center, which opened in March 2016.



Fu Xiyao holds a master's degree in environmental anthropology from the Yale School of the Environment. Her master's thesis examines agrobiodiversity conservation, indigenous climate knowledge, and food-mediated identity in Yunnan. She is currently pursuing a PhD and is interested in indigenous knowledge and agency, tropical crop commodity chain, and the onto-epistemological politics of environmental change in the borderlands of Southwest China and Southeast Asia.



Adib Amali graduated from NUS Geography in 2023. Thereafter, he became a teaching assistant and research assistant at the department for over a year. He went for FI23 (Kenya) as a student, FS23 as a student assistant, and FI23 (Cambodia) and FS24 as a full-fledged field assistant. Currently, he is preparing to pursue a Masters in Sociology at NTU, focusing on his newfound research interests in the realms of political ecology, alternative economies, and Islamic environmentalism.



Karen Network for Culture and Environment (KNCE) was established in 1998 by Karen leaders. KNCE operates as an interfaith network aimed at preserving traditional Karen wisdom and sustainable resource management. They aim to empower Karen communities to maintain their identity and effectively pass on their unique values and heritage to future generations.



Inter-Mountain Peoples Education & Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), established in 1991, is an indigenous NGO. Legally registered and certified by Thailand's Ministry of Culture, IMPECT advocates for indigenous communities and their social development, collaborating nationally and internationally. Staffed entirely by indigenous representatives, it champions the indigenous movement by emphasising cultural values for self-development, empowering local leaders, particularly women and youth. IMPECT represents 14 Northern Thai indigenous ethnic networks, including Karen, Hmong, and Akha, fostering local mechanisms for sustainable self-management.

Workshop Day 1

21 May 2025 | 2568

Time	Agenda	Speaker(s)
09:30 - 10:30	Opening Session	Dr Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, Founding Director, RCSD
10:30 - 10:45	Break	
10:45 - 12:15	Session 1: Land Rights, Indigenous Networks, and Experiential Learning	Dr. Chusak Wittayapak Ms. Srikaew Kunteng Dr. Carl Grundy-Warr
12:15 - 13:30	Lunch	
13:30 - 15:00	Session 2: Field-Based Learning in Practice: Lessons and Reflections	Mr. Muhammad Adib Amali Bin Rohaizat Christabelle Sng Nicholas Ng Rachel Sng Joanne Tan
15:00 - 15:30	Break	
15:30 - 16:30	Session 3: Environments and Communities: Fieldwork in Northern Thailand (Discussion)	

Workshop Day 2

22 May 2025 | 2568

Time	Agenda	Speaker(s)
09:30 - 11:00	Opening Session	Tom Fawthrop
11:00 - 11:30	Break	
11:30 - 12:30	Morning Session 2 and Q&A	Dr. Carl Grundy- Warr
12:30 - 13:45	Lunch	
13:45 - 14:15	Sharing by IMPECT	Ms. Jantanee Pichetkulsampan
14:15 - 14:45	Afternoon Session	Ms. Fu Xiyao
14:45 - 15:00	Break	
15:00 - 16:30	Mueang Monitor student group presentations based on fieldwork in Chiang Mai	10-minute sharing per group
16:30 - 17:00	Solidarity Session & Peaceful Vibes	

"It has been a pleasure and privilege to be able to celebrate FS25, our field studies course (GE3230A), with a workshop held at RCSD on 21 and 22 May 2025. Prior to undertaking experiential field-based activities in other parts of northern Thailand, the workshop held at RCSD has exposed our students to past and ongoing research that is highly relevant to this field studies program."



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