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Headwaters of Six Great Rivers of the World: Qingzang Plateau — An Author Interview on Dams, Transboundary River Governance, and Environmental Change in Asia

Editorial board[1]

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Abstract

This interview-based contribution presents the main scientific themes of Headwaters of Six Great Rivers of the World: Qingzang Plateau by Kenneth R. Olson and Wadslin Frenelus. The discussion focuses on the Qingzang Plateau as the hydrological source region for six major Asian river systems and examines the environmental and human consequences of hydropower development, sediment trapping, river regulation, and transboundary governance. Particular attention is given to the Lancang-Mekong system, the role of dams in altering flood pulses and sediment delivery, the ecological significance of river connectivity, and the social consequences of resettlement. The interview also addresses the environmental effects of war, especially arsenic contamination linked to Agent Blue in southern Vietnam and the degradation associated with conflict in Myanmar. Across these cases, the text argues that river management must be understood not only as an engineering problem but also as an ecological, political, and public-health problem. The contribution highlights the need for stronger interdisciplinary analysis, more effective transboundary coordination, and policy approaches centered on resilience, livelihood restoration, and long-term ecosystem protection.

Keywords: Qingzang Plateau, transboundary rivers, hydropower dams, Lancang-Mekong, sediment trapping, arsenic contamination, river governance, environmental resilience.

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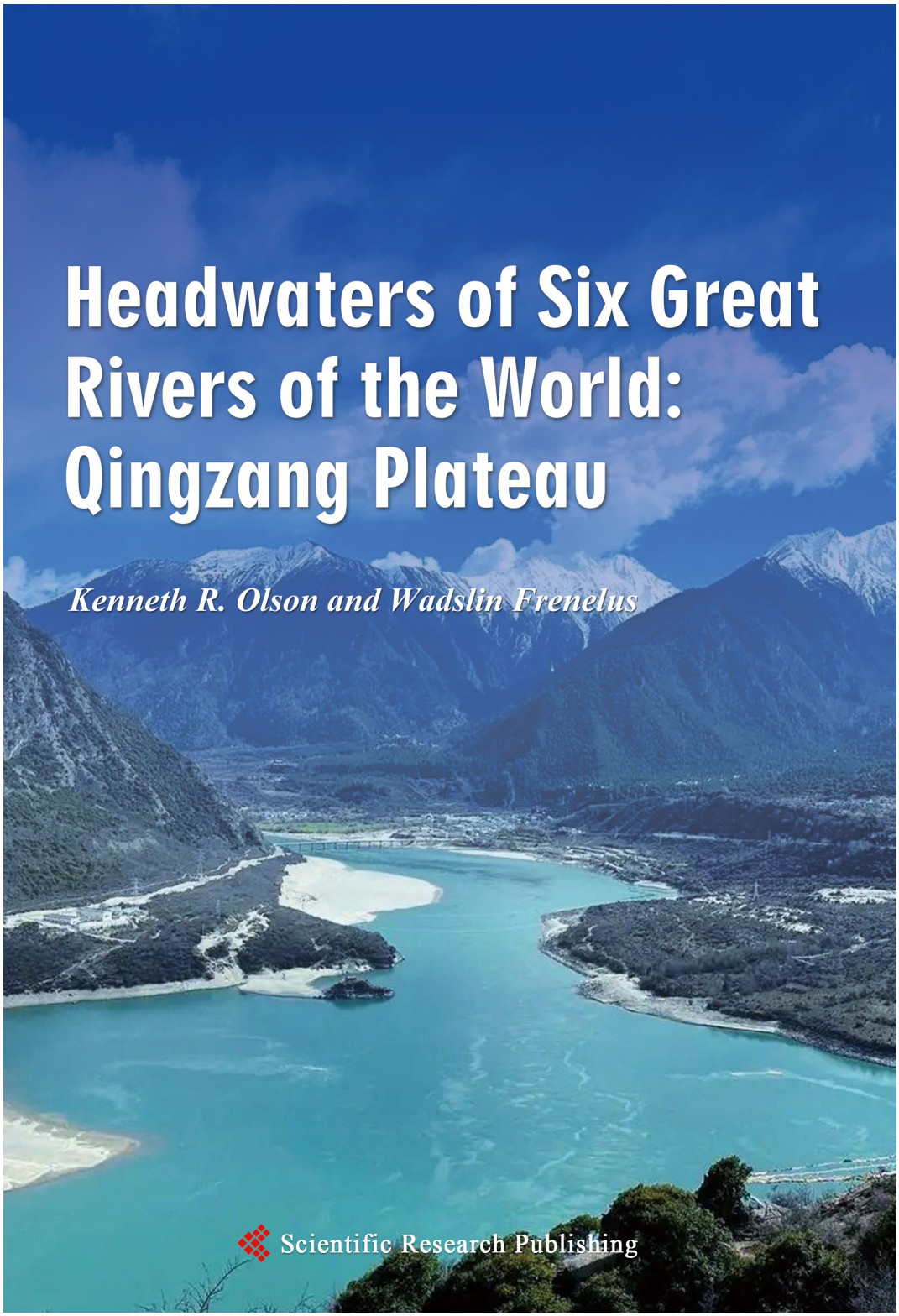

Book title	Headwaters of Six Great Rivers of the World: Qingzang Plateau
Authors	Kenneth R. Olson
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Key Points

1. The Qingzang Plateau is a critical source region for six major Asian river systems with major ecological and geopolitical significance.
2. Mainstem and tributary dams alter sediment delivery, flood pulses, fisheries, navigation, and rural livelihoods across transboundary basins.
3. War-related environmental damage, including arsenic contamination and conflict-driven resource extraction, remains central to river health analysis.
4. Effective river management requires integrated ecological, social, governance, and public-health perspectives rather than engineering logic alone.
5. Resilience-based policy is essential where river change is cumulative, transboundary, and only partly predictable.

Introduction

Interview conducted on July 2, 2026.

Prepared for the journal "Pollution and Diseases."

Professor Kenneth R. Olson is an American soil scientist, environmental researcher, and author whose work focuses on great river landscapes, environmental degradation, flooding, war-related ecological damage, and freshwater systems around the world. In this interview, he reflects on decades of interdisciplinary research, the environmental consequences of war, and the future of the world's great rivers and deltas.

Why This Book Matters Now

This book is important because it explains why the great rivers of Asia should be understood as living systems, not simply as sources of water or hydropower. The Qingzang Plateau is the headwater region for six major river systems, including the Irrawaddy, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Yellow, Yangtze, and Lancang-Mekong rivers. Therefore, environmental change in this high mountain region affects millions of people far downstream. The book connects glaciers, dams, sediment movement, flood pulses, fisheries, agriculture, navigation, public health, and international politics in one broad picture. Its importance also lies in the way it shows the human costs of river development. Dams can provide energy and economic benefits, but they can also trap sediment, reduce fish migration, alter seasonal floods, damage delta regions, and force local communities to resettle. For farmers and fishers, these changes can threaten food security, income, cultural identity, and long-established ways of life. The book also reminds readers that river health is connected to war, pollution, arsenic contamination, deforestation, and climate variability. Overall, this book matters because it argues for a more responsible and interdisciplinary approach to river management. It shows that decisions about rivers must balance engineering, ecology, social justice, public health, and cooperation between countries. Its central message is that resilience is essential, because change is the only certainty in river systems. This makes the book timely, practical, and valuable for students, researchers, and policymakers alike.

INTERVIEW

Q: What is this book about?

A: This book examines the Tibet (Qingzang) Highlands, which contain the headwaters and drainage basins of many of Asia's major rivers. These include the Irrawaddy, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Yellow, Yangtze, and Lancang-Mekong rivers. The Tibet Highlands (Figure 1), with their tens of thousands of glaciers and distinctive geographic and ecological features, function as a major "Water Tower" by storing water and sustaining river flow. The region (Figure 2) is also often described as the Third Pole because its ice fields contain the largest reserve of freshwater outside the polar regions.

The primary objective of the book is to assess the environmental and human impacts of mainstem and tributary dams across these six great river systems, as well as current plans for further hydropower development. Future dams should include fish ladders and navigation locks in order to reduce adverse impacts on fish populations, natural resources, navigation, and local livelihoods. The book also argues for stronger international collaboration, whether through the Mekong River Commission (MRC) or through bilateral and multilateral agreements, in order to support sustainable transboundary river development.

When new dams are constructed in transboundary watersheds (Figure 3), additional communities are likely to be resettled. Significant environmental and social impacts are therefore already evident. The countries concerned will need to take further steps to prevent or mitigate these harms and to ensure that livelihoods are restored after resettlement. These rivers remain important not only as waterways, but also as providers of ecosystem services for agriculture, tourism, fisheries, and other sectors. Environmental organizations have raised continuing concerns about the ecological effects of hydroelectric dams on these biodiverse river systems.

Q: Why did you decide to write this book specifically?

A: In 2022, I spent five weeks in Vietnam, where I lectured at Can Tho University on Agent Orange, which was contaminated with dioxin TCDD, and Agent Blue, which contains cacodylic acid, an arsenic-based herbicide. Agent Blue was used by the South Vietnamese government during the Vietnam War to destroy rice and other food crops and to force parts of the rural population into the slums of Saigon or into hamlets. During that visit, I also studied sources of arsenic in groundwater in the Mekong Delta.

At that time, I observed that the Mekong Delta as a whole was subsiding because of reduced sediment deposition from the Mekong River and its tributaries. Mainstem and tributary dams in China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos were trapping sediments and reducing flood pulses. I therefore decided to investigate the causes of this land subsidence and to expand the analysis to all six major river systems of Southeast and East Asia, including the Irrawaddy, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Yellow, Yangtze, and Mekong-Lancang rivers.

Figure 1. Elevation map showing lowlands in green and mountain areas in brown. Photo credit: World Atlas; map credited to Mic Greenberg.

Figure 2. Village in the Tibet Highlands in the Himalayas, with snow-covered mountains in the background. Photo credit: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

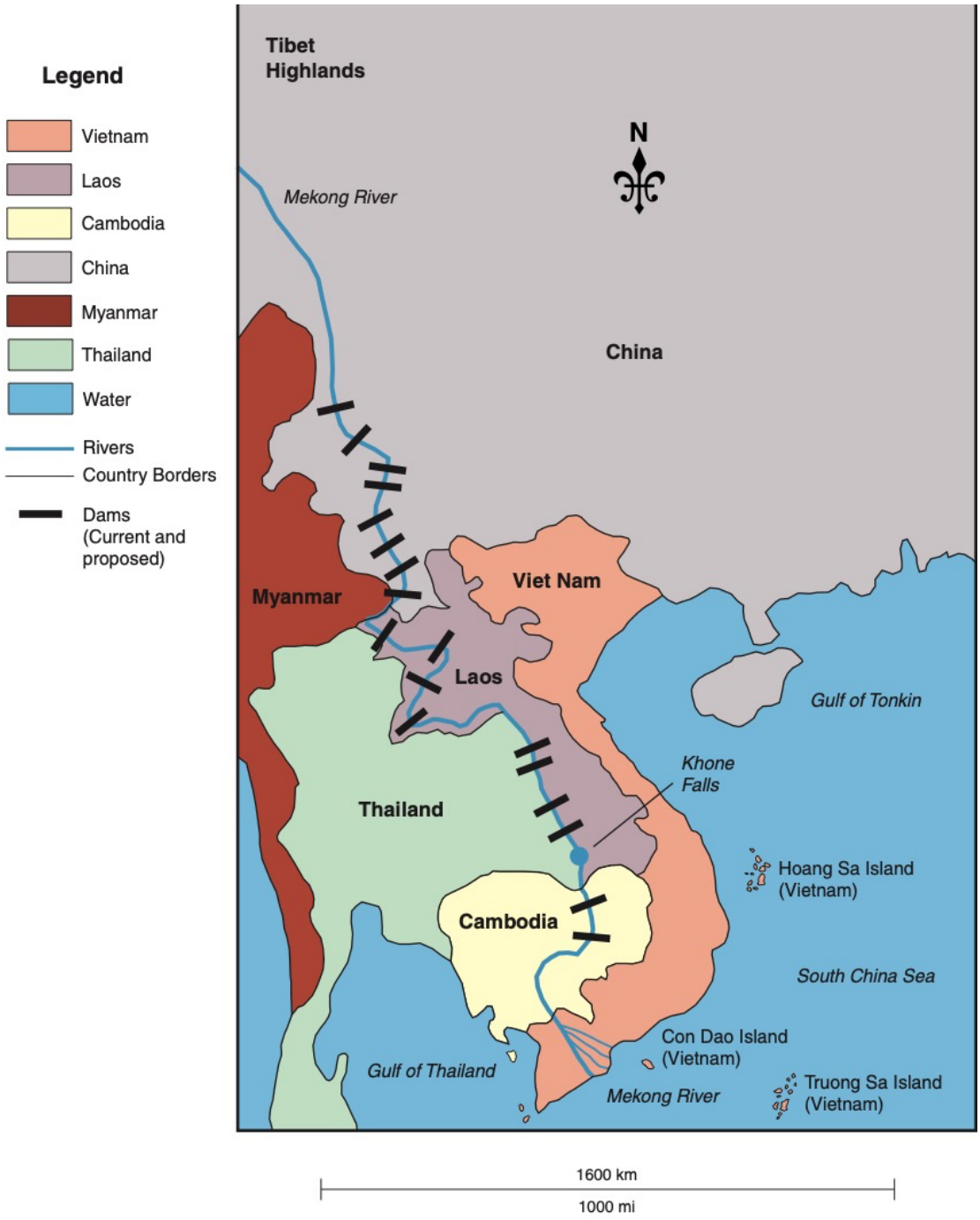

Figure 3. Locations of Lancang-Mekong mainstem dams in China, Laos, and Cambodia. Map credited to Mic Greenberg.

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Q: What makes this topic scientifically important?

A: One of the central objectives of the book is to assess the environmental and human impacts of the Lancang-Mekong mainstem and tributary dams, together with the plans for additional hydropower development based on the river's role as a major energy lifeline. The book argues that stronger international collaboration is needed to address the sustainable transboundary development of the Lancang-Mekong system.

Future dams should include fish ladders and navigation locks in order to reduce environmental impacts on fish populations, natural resources, navigation, and livelihoods. When new dams are built within the transboundary watershed, additional communities will need to be resettled, and these communities may face inadequate compensation, food insecurity, and increased disease burden. Preventive and restorative measures are therefore essential.

Dams are only one of several threats to the long-term sustainability and resilience of these river systems. Climate change, upland deforestation, and the irrigation demands of a growing population are also major challenges. Because the river is transboundary, management decisions taken in one country reverberate throughout the region. The MRC remains a critical institution and should be strengthened so that competing interests can be negotiated more effectively. Large-scale infrastructure may be necessary in some circumstances, but ecosystem protection must be integrated into all stages of decision-making. The sustainability of both the projects and the ecosystems concerned must remain a central criterion.

Q: Which regions or case studies are central to the book?

A: A central case study is the Lancang-Mekong River system across China, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. More than 60 million people depend on the river and its tributaries for food, transportation, water, and other necessities of life. The river supports one of the world's most diverse fisheries, second only to Brazil's Amazon River.

The Lancang-Mekong and its tributaries are already heavily dammed, particularly in China, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, and many additional dams are planned or under construction. Dams can intensify the effects of periodic drought in the basin and can block the river's pulse effect, which distributes water and nutrients across floodplains and the delta and is therefore essential for both farming and fisheries.

The headwaters of the Lancang are located in China, and its waters are treated there as a national resource. China has tended to regard the Lancang, Yangtze, and Yellow

rivers as domestic resources rather than shared ones. The crucial difference is that the Lancang flows from China into and through other countries rather than directly into the sea. China and Myanmar have not joined the MRC as full members, although both have been Dialogue Partners since 1996. Over the past three decades, China's Lancang policies have reflected its national resource priorities, while also engaging individual transboundary countries through environmental, conservation, and economic agreements.

The primary objective of this study was to assess the environmental and human impacts of all Lancang-Mekong mainstem and tributary dams and the plans for additional hydropower development. Future dams should include fish ladders and navigation locks, and stronger international collaboration is recommended. Further dam construction will require additional resettlement, and substantial environmental and social impacts are already visible.

Q: What were the most difficult aspects of the research?

A: The greatest difficulty was conducting direct fieldwork in the Irrawaddy watershed. I was unable to travel to the Irrawaddy River and Delta, and I had great difficulty identifying a co-author who could travel there because of political turmoil and civil war.

Q: Did anything during the research surprise you?

A: Yes. I was especially struck by the environmental impact of the civil war in Myanmar. As Myanmar entered its fifth year after the military coup of February 1, 2021, the country had descended into a bloody civil war. That conflict displaced people and imposed severe pressure on Myanmar's natural resources. Resources once viewed as untapped wealth, including timber, minerals, and other valuable assets, are now being exploited both to finance the war and to generate profit for a limited number of actors.

Citizen journalists inside the country have documented hidden costs of the war, including deforested hillsides, poisoned rivers, displaced communities, and the destruction of local conservation efforts. Myanmar's forests and wildlife are among its greatest natural assets, but they have been steadily degraded by mining, illegal charcoal production, and expanding online wildlife trade. At the same time, many villagers, having lost employment or farmland because of the war, have been pushed toward illegal logging, poaching, and other environmentally destructive survival strategies.

Marine ecosystems have also been affected. Because villagers can no longer access traditional turtle sanctuary areas under military control, sea turtle populations have declined sharply. Conservation efforts that once protected these endangered species have been disrupted, leaving coastal and marine ecosystems more vulnerable.

Q: Which environmental processes described in the book are the most underestimated?

A: One of the most underestimated processes is the spraying of Agent Blue, an arsenic-based herbicide, on rice crops during the Vietnam War and the subsequent leaching of anthropogenic arsenic into Mekong groundwater.

The use of tactical herbicides in southern Vietnam began as an initiative of the Republic of Vietnam government. Part of that government's policy was to relocate rural populations into "strategic hamlets," which were considered easier to defend than existing villages. This policy also allowed for the destruction of rice crops, which were viewed as a potential food source for the North Vietnamese Army. The Republic of Vietnam government insisted on the use of Agent Blue to destroy rice crops in southern Vietnam, and President Kennedy eventually approved its testing on food crops, according to Lindsey Arison III in The Herbicidal Warfare Program in Vietnam, 1961–1971.

In the early 1960s, the Republic of Vietnam's Khai Hoang Program was designed to make the battlefield more visible by clearing foliage and eliminating food crops. This program, from 1962 to 1965, was supported by the US military. Agent Blue missions involved handlers in civilian clothing, aircraft without US military markings, and circumstances in which captured personnel would not be acknowledged as US military members. Most handlers were Vietnamese. No adequate warnings or safety equipment were provided, and neither military personnel nor civilians were warned against drinking water from rivers where Agent Blue had been sprayed. They were not informed of the contamination or of the toxic health risks associated with the herbicide they were handling. Approximately 3.2 million liters of Agent Blue, equivalent to 468,008 kg of arsenic, were sprayed or dumped by the Republic of Vietnam military with support from the US military during the extended Khai Hoang Program from 1962 to 1971.

Q: How are environmental systems connected with political or military processes in this topic?

A: A clear example is the contribution of the Republic of Vietnam and the United States military to arsenic contamination in the Mekong Delta.

Groundwater in Vietnam already contains naturally high arsenic concentrations because arsenic-rich soils and geologic parent materials release arsenic into groundwater. However, the use of arsenic-containing Agent Blue during the Vietnam War, followed by later industrial development, greatly increased the availability of arsenic in soils and groundwater. Between 2000 and 2019, the Vietnamese government subsidized approximately 700,000 shallow tube wells, and groundwater became the primary source of drinking and irrigation water in the Mekong Delta. In some places, arsenic concentrations in groundwater have reached as high as 3050 μg/L. Most of this arsenic occurs in the +3 and +5 oxidation states, which are the forms most readily available for bioaccumulation.

This case shows how military decisions, agricultural policy, hydrology, and public health are tightly interconnected. Environmental systems do not merely receive damage from political or military action; they can also transmit those consequences across long temporal scales and through multiple exposure pathways.

Q: What should readers understand after reading this work?

A: Readers should understand that much can be learned by observing and studying the interaction of human and natural systems in river landscapes. These cases show

that change is the only certainty in river systems. Many factors drive that change, and the connectivity between soil and water generates both vulnerability and opportunity. People also differ greatly in how they value and use river landscapes. Managing for resilience is therefore the best way to prepare for future risks and catastrophes.

Q: Who is this book intended for?

A: The book is intended for both public and private landowners and managers associated with the great rivers of Asia. It may also be useful to soil scientists, sociologists, conservationists, wetland specialists, human and physical geographers, urban planners, public health specialists, economists, geomorphologists, geologists, hydrologists, agronomists, foresters, and more generally to readers with a sustained interest in river systems.

Q: Which chapter is personally most important to you?

A: For me, the most important chapter is Chapter 3: Managing Yellow River Watershed Development and Agricultural Use to Reduce the Environmental Impacts of Flooding, Soil Erosion, Siltation and Pollution.

The Yellow River (Figure 4) flows from west to east across China and makes a large curve through the northern provinces. It is the second-longest river in China, after the Yangtze, and the sixth-longest river system in the world. It passes through Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, and Shandong.

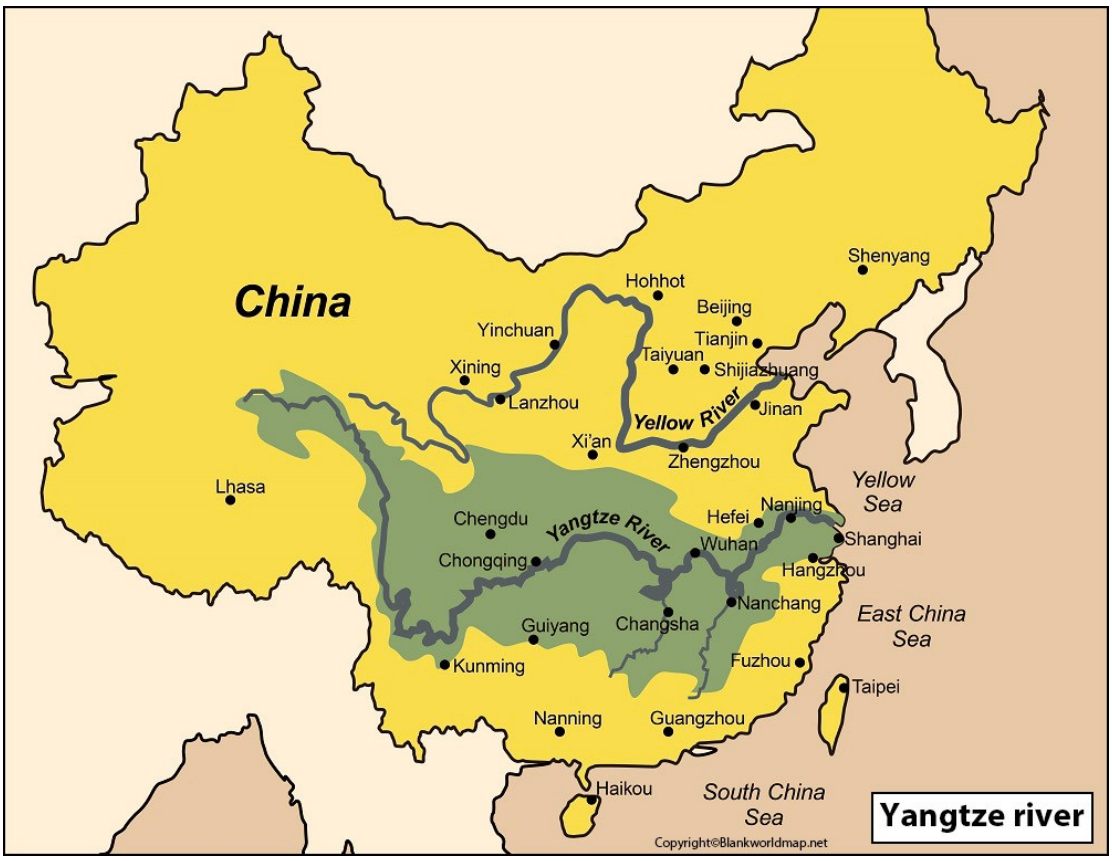

Figure 4. Map of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers in China.
Photo credit: Travel China Guide.

The primary objective of this chapter is to assess the long-term environmental impacts of watershed development and agricultural use on flooding, soil erosion, siltation, and pollution.

The destruction of forests has transformed many grasslands and woodlands into desert landscapes, exposing thick loess deposits. The Yellow River carries an average of 1.6 billion tons of sediment annually. Severe pollution has rendered approximately one-third of the river unusable because of factory discharges and sewage from rapidly expanding cities. Given the global significance of flood-related soil erosion and sediment transport, sustainable watershed management has become an urgent priority. To achieve this, it is first necessary to understand the mechanisms behind these changes. The chapter describes management actions relevant to the long-term evolution of the Yellow River watershed and may serve as a useful reference for related studies.

Q: How does this book relate to current energy, environmental, and food security challenges?

A: The Yangtze River (Figure 4) contains some of the world's largest reservoirs (Figure 5) and provides livelihoods for millions of people. Many factories and cities discharge sewage, industrial waste, fertilizers, and pesticides into the river. Pollutants accumulate in reservoirs, where they can form heavily contaminated sediment layers.

Figure 5. Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River. Photo credit: Wadslin Frenelus.

The Yangtze is also described as contributing more ocean plastic pollution than any other river in the world. Pollution levels in the Yangtze and its tributary rivers and lakes have risen, while overgrazing and excessive tree cutting in the middle and upper

basins have increased silt loads. Land reclamation has also reduced the surface area of lakes and wetlands.

The related article is concerned primarily with developing, managing, and maintaining the Yangtze watershed as a long-term lifeline. It provides information relevant to future research on the environmental management of the Yangtze and its surrounding systems.

Q: Are the problems discussed in the book improving or worsening today?

A: In my view, they are worsening. The transboundary Mekong River is shared by six Southeast Asian countries: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. One objective of the relevant paper was to assess the impacts of Mekong River development and modernization projects on the livelihoods of farmers and fishers in Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

A high proportion of the rural population of the Mekong basin depends on the river and its tributaries for food security, livelihoods, and cultural identity. Although rice farming and fisheries remain major income sources, many livelihoods combine on-farm and off-farm activities. Agricultural specialization, intensification, and hydropower development on the main stem and tributaries are rapidly altering traditional patterns of household food security, income, and ways of life. Rural transformation projects therefore need to assess much more carefully how modernization changes the ecology of the Mekong River and, in turn, the capacity of rural populations to adapt.

Development policy must recognize, value, and support the role of rural populations in sustaining a stable and affordable food system and in maintaining river ecosystems. Interventions are needed to prevent large-scale agricultural intensification, water diversion, and excessive hydropower construction from degrading the Mekong Basin's soil and water resources. These processes threaten small-scale landholding systems and reduce the capacity of farmers and fishers to provide food both for their own households and for growing urban populations.

At the same time, the Mekong presents major opportunities for hydropower, particularly for Lao PDR and Cambodia, where it could contribute to infrastructure development and economic growth. However, modernization can also concentrate food production in large commercial farms and supply chains, leaving smallholders behind. To avoid this, policy measures are needed to reduce barriers to inputs, improve access to credit and markets, support environmentally sustainable technologies, strengthen agricultural extension, facilitate appropriate mechanization, and protect land tenure rights.

The tensions among competing sectors and among different valuations of river resources are not unique to the Mekong. Similar tensions can be observed globally. The Mekong Basin is experiencing social, economic, and biophysical pressures associated with settlement, industrialization, climate change, and differing political priorities. In the United States, the US Army Corps of Engineers has authority to manage flooding and balance river functions such as navigation, agriculture, industrial use, drinking

water, and ecosystem protection. The Mekong Basin faces similar challenges, but under the added complexity of six sovereign states with divergent goals. The MRC was created to coordinate and protect the river, but its effectiveness depends on the authority granted to it by the states involved. This remains a difficult governance challenge.

Q: Climate change and increasing climate variability are making river systems less predictable in many parts of the world. How might these changes affect the great rivers of Asia, especially flood frequency, drought risk, sediment trapping, soil erosion, agricultural productivity, and the long-term reliability of waterways?

A: A central challenge is to build on the knowledge of rural populations and to rethink the scale of development so that both human and biophysical resources can be carried forward in ways that address rural needs and sustain regional quality of life. If large-scale agricultural intensification, dam infrastructure, and water diversion continue unchecked, they will reduce small landholdings and undermine the capacity of farmers and fishers to meet household food needs and to generate surplus production and income.

Q: How has the decision to build dams on the Mekong-Lancang River and its tributaries affected farmers and local communities in adjacent uplands, and were their voices adequately considered in the decision-making process?

A: In my view, they were not adequately considered.

Farmers and fishers along the Mekong and its tributaries possess knowledge of past river conditions and can adapt to changes in river pulses and livelihoods. However, they need resources, training, and public policies that build on that knowledge rather than displace it. They also need social, political, and economic signals that affirm the value of their work and their contribution to community well-being.

Development projects and modernization, as currently conceived, threaten the food security, incomes, communities, and ways of life of rural populations. To mitigate the conflict between modernization and the long-standing cultural practices of farming and fishing, it is necessary to understand these occupations not only as economic activities but also as the basis of livelihood systems and community continuity. New technologies do not transform nations by themselves; transformation depends on how people respond to them and how they use them to pursue individual and social goals. In Laos, for example, some farmers embraced new technologies fully, while others adopted them more selectively in ways consistent with traditional worldviews. This entire continuum is both viable and valuable.

Agricultural intensification, large dams, roads, bridges, and other infrastructure can expand output, generate power, and yield returns on investment. However, the social and environmental consequences of modernization often leave many people behind. The Mekong River and its adjacent lands are home to some of the poorest populations in Southeast Asia, with average annual incomes below US$2,000. These

communities depend on floodplain agriculture and riverbank fisheries. In Laos, fertile soils are concentrated in narrow floodplains. Dams inundate fertile lowlands, and resettlement into uplands often places rural populations on poorer soils that are less suitable for the rice and vegetable crops they know how to cultivate. They must then learn new agricultural methods, different fishing strategies, and new equipment. Such transitions require time and resources that many households do not have. Riverbank fishing and recession agriculture provide food, income, and cultural continuity. Resettlement often reduces food security and pushes people into cash economies in which electricity, water, and food must all be purchased from very limited household incomes.

Q: Your book shows that river management is not only a scientific or engineering problem, but also a political, legal, economic, and social one. Even in a country with advanced science and strong public institutions, decisions about energy development can have unintended consequences. What does this reveal about the limits of expertise in managing large river systems?

A: It shows that the effects of dams on the Mekong's seasonal pulse, fish diversity and abundance, and downstream water availability are only beginning to be understood. Substantial and systematic research is still needed on the interactions between river systems and livelihoods. Researchers have called for stronger evidence linking decisions to impacts on natural resources, ecosystem services, and human well-being.

Closing the gap between interdisciplinary river science and the social and human sciences is essential if we are to develop knowledge, tools, and practices that allow farmers and fishers to realign their livelihoods while sustaining economic and social well-being. Development and management efforts must recognize, value, and support the role of rural populations in maintaining a stable food system and in protecting river ecosystems.

Interventions are needed to prevent the degradation of Mekong Basin soil and water resources caused by large-scale agricultural intensification, water diversion, and excessive hydropower development. These pressures threaten sediment and nutrient delivery, freshwater supplies, peak flows in the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers, fish spawning, saltwater intrusion in the Mekong Delta, land subsidence in the delta, and the capacity of small-scale farmers and fishers to feed both their own households and growing urban populations.

Q: Which future research directions emerge from this work?

A: I decided to expand this research on the great rivers of Southeast Asia to include both the Saigon River and the Mekong River and Delta.

Q: If you could recommend one major change in river and floodplain management policy based on this book, what would it be?

A: The central recommendation would be to manage for resilience, because resilience offers the best preparation for future risks and catastrophes that cannot be fully predicted.

Q: If readers remember only one idea from the book, what should it be?

A: Change is the only certainty in river systems.

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The Editorial Board of the journal "Pollution and Diseases" wishes you continued scientific success, new discoveries, and inspiration in your work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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