

Session IV – Reducing the Mekong Delta’s Climate Change Vulnerability Through Regional Cooperation and Local Adaptations
11:45 AM

Linking and Addressing the Combined Effects of Lower Mekong Main Stem Dams and Climate Change on the Mekong Delta

Geoffrey M. Blate, Ph.D.

Climate Change Coordinator, WWF Greater Mekong Programme, Hanoi, Vietnam,
Email: gblate@wwfgreatermekong.org

Abstract

This talk will aim to link previous talks and stimulate panelists and other session participants to discuss the combined effects of development pressures and climate change on the Mekong Delta. The talk will focus on the potential ways climate change will compound the impacts of the proposed lower Mekong River mainstem dams on the Mekong Delta. These combined impacts are not yet definitively understood, which is the rationale for the panel discussion. What seems clear, however, is that climate change is bringing rising seas, saline intrusion, more severe storms, warmer temperatures, and altered rainfall and hydrological patterns. These are all concerns given the large human population and economic importance of the Delta. However, mainstem dams pose an equally grave threat because they will block the sediment that builds the delta and nutrients that feed its productivity. Reduction of sediment trapped by dams would decrease the capacity of the delta to replenish itself, thus making it more vulnerable to sea level rise, saline intrusion and coastal erosion. The dependence of most Delta residents on ecosystem services, and in particular the Mekong River’s natural flood pulse to provide fertile soil, fresh water, and productive aquatic ecosystems, suggests that adaptations should aim to maintain this flood pulse, especially given because many farmers have developed innovative adaptations to cope with floods. One challenge in this regard is that human transformation of the delta and the upstream dams threaten the integrity of the river and delta. Vietnam is moving to mainstream adaptations into planning and management at all levels and sectors to address these threats. To stimulate discussion, I will suggest that what is also needed is regional coordination of responses to climate change and greater regional cooperation on toward more sustainable development.