The Central Section: The Plains

The Central Section of the Mekong River flows downstream from the China-Myanmar-Laos border to Phnom Penh in Cambodia. This part of the river forms the border between Laos and much of northern and northeastern Thailand.

Here the river is muddy and wide—generally two hundred yards across—and the surrounding plains are flat and fertile. Rice is the major agricultural product; people have constructed elaborate irrigation systems with waterwheels and other means to bring water out of rivers and into fields. In other places, they have dug immense reservoirs like those that once sustained the great “hydraulic civilizations,” such as those surrounding Wat Phou in Laos or Angkor Wat in Cambodia. The central and southern parts of the Mekong, sometimes called the world’s rice bowl, feed their own populations and export rice to the world.

(Above) In the middle sections of the Mekong, the river and even its tributaries are wide and irrigate the surrounding fields. Photo by Frank Proschan. Smithsonian Institution.

(Right) Urban areas, such as Cambodia’s capital city Phnom Penh, have grown up along the central section of the Mekong River. Photo © 2007 Jorge Villano, all rights reserved.