Pollution from large-scale agriculture, erosion from logging, and massive dam and road projects challenge the health of the Mekong River. Environmental problems often result from the economic imperatives of individual nations. Cooperative efforts to solve some of them are recent: in 1992, the Asian Development Bank initiated programs to assist six countries in the Mekong River region. As a result, the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam established the Mekong River Commission. China and Myanmar later became "dialogue partners."

Following the guiding principle of the commission, the World Wildlife Fund established the Greater Mekong Program in 2002 with the goal of protecting wildlife and natural resources while providing a sustainable future for the people of the Mekong. In the same spirit, over the past three years, the Mekong River: Connecting Cultures Festival program brought together a network of experts from five countries to develop and review the program. Seventy-five Mekong-region researchers attended training workshops. During their fieldwork, they conducted hundreds of hours of interviews and took almost 20,000 documentary photographs. These efforts reinforce the region's identity as a cultural, economic, and environmental zone.