

Rivers in Jeopardy and the Role of Civil Society in River Restoration: Thai Experiences*

Wasan Jompakdee

*Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, Chiang Mai University,
Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand*

E-mail: wasan@dome.eng.cmu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Despite the traditional belief and respect in the goddess of Mother River (Pra Mae Kong Ka), all rivers in Thailand have been poorly managed and treated. River systems have been dramatically altered by land use developments, construction, channelization, pollution, encroachment, dams and reservoirs, etc. There has been a reduction in landscape quality, loss of wilderness areas and aesthetic beauty of natural rivers has vanished. Some species of flora and fauna have disappeared, exotic species have invaded, and the functional characteristics of the river system have been disrupted. Moreover, the headwater areas in upper watersheds which are the sources of our rivers and streams have been seriously degraded and misused.

In response to the need to save our rivers and their environments, the members of local communities partake their responsibilities in protecting and restoring their rivers. This paper describes the case study on the efforts directed to the application of engineering principles to the development of environmentally-sensitive approaches and the role of civil society using indigenous knowledge for managing and restoring the Ping River and its headwaters in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. The new policies of the Government in the conservation and development of river and canal environment are also discussed.

Key words: River system, Civil society, Watersheds, Exotic species

INTRODUCTION

The Ping River, one of the 4 major tributaries of the Chao Phraya River, is a main river which provides water for livelihood to northern and central regions of Thailand. With the length of about 740 km., it joins the Chao Phraya River at Nakhonsawan Province and subsequently drains into the gulf of Thailand in southern area of Bangkok.

Chiang Mai Province is the home of forests and mountains where headwaters and streams originate and form the Upper Ping River Basin covering an area of about 22,000 km². The longitudinal course of the river through Chiang Mai Province is about 250 km. It passes through the provincial town and villages which are residential areas of nearly one million population.

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