



Community Engagement in Indigenous Communities to Promote Waterway Resilience and Sustainable Fishing, Mun River, Thailand

Mr Mark Gibson¹

¹MRG Water Consulting Pty Ltd, Sunnybank Hills, Australia

Since the construction of the Pak Mun Dam in 1994, there has been ongoing tensions regarding declining fish catch and loss of fishing livelihoods in the lower Mun River between local villagers and government agencies. Despite 22 years of political struggles between the parties, there are still deep divisions and mistrust between the parties. In 2015, nine fish conservation zones, (FCZ's) were established by local villages along the lower Mun River. Fishing in these areas are prohibited and the villages often feed the fish in these areas to encourage fish numbers.

Initial discussions in December 2015 revealed that these FCZ's represented the latest move by local villagers in a series of politically motivated community actions. Although the local villages were enthusiastic about the new FCZ's, there was little research data to show that these were providing benefits to the villagers or increasing fish catch or fish diversity in the lower Mun River.

This research project found that the impact of the FCZ's on fish numbers and catch was positive. Most of the survey participants felt that the numbers and diversity of both migratory and non-migratory fish in the lower Mun River had increased due to the FCZ's.

It was found that the FCZ's also provided other benefits such as unity amongst the villagers and educated villagers on sustainable fishing practices.

The project examined the roles of government agencies and found that there was continuing suspicion, opposition and anger towards them from the villagers. The representatives of government also conveyed exasperation and frustration when discussing the actions of villagers regarding the FCZ's.

An established Non-Government organisation (NGO) has focused on supporting the villagers and have not opened communication with the government. The clearly opposing roles of government versus the villagers/NGO mean that the FCZ's operate below their potential.

The research found that FCZ's are an effective integrated water management (IWM) tool that can be considered for wider use in Thailand and other countries, as they increase fish catch and diversity and are able to adapt to hydrologic and seasonal conditions. They also allow participation of all socio-economic levels in deciding their size, locations and governance and they reinforce the IWM concept that fresh water environments are essential to sustain life and need to be protected and managed.

The paper gives some key recommendations on how to bridge the gap between the parties and use key IWM principles to improve the current performance of the FCZ's, as well as their governance, operation and monitoring.