

***Troubling the Water: A Dying Lake and a Vanishing World in Cambodia.* By Abby Seiff. Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, University of Nebraska Press, 2022. Softcover: 130pp.**

*Troubling the Water* is a timely and important account of the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia, where a unique and critical ecosystem in the trans-boundary Mekong River Basin directly supports 1.5 million Cambodians and one of the world’s largest inland fisheries. Abby Seiff is a journalist who worked in Southeast Asia for almost a decade, serving as an editor at Cambodia’s two main English-language newspapers at the time, *The Cambodia Daily* and *The Phnom Penh Post*. Based largely on reporting trips undertaken between 2016 and 2017, her book investigates the deterioration of the Tonle Sap Lake’s ecosystems and natural resources, telling a story that rings familiar with researchers who also study the lake: “Everyone told us the same thing: the water was lower than ever, the fish were smaller than ever, there seemed to be none in the lake” (p. 9).

The scale of the problems faced by Tonle Sap Lake inhabitants is immense, and these problems are deep-rooted and intertwined in complex ways. Chapter One demonstrates the centuries-old significance of water around the lake and its floodplains. It also shows parallels between how extreme drought contributed to the decline of the Angkor kingdom and the contemporary decline of the lake’s fisheries. Chapter Two traces a lost age of fish abundance, and the impact of the French and Khmer Rouge regimes on fisheries management. Chapters Three and Four explore the drivers of fishery decline, dissecting the complex interrelationships and tensions between conservation, commercial fishing, illegal fishing, deforestation and corruption. The trans-boundary dynamics and implications of hydropower development in the Mekong River Basin are also examined. Chapters Five to Nine explore the challenges that various vulnerable and marginalized communities face in adapting to these environmental changes. In these chapters, the author highlights the vicious cycles of debt and precarity arising from the lack of alternative and sustainable water-based livelihood options, social safety nets and government support.

The strength of Seiff’s book lies in her evocative, poignant and immersive descriptions of people, their stories and life that takes place in tandem with the Mekong’s flood pulse. This allows readers to clearly visualize and empathize with the struggles that lake communities face. The tensions that they navigate between

their increasingly precarious water-based lives and their desire for land is another important and often-understated dynamic that clearly comes through in Seiff's storytelling, demonstrating the multi-faceted complexities associated with natural resource-based livelihoods. In recent years there has been increasing attention to how climate change and hydropower development have contributed to record-low water levels and fish decline in the lake. However, as Seiff rightfully points out, this environmental degradation must be contextualized in a long history of post-conflict dynamics, vested interests and the tensions between conservation and illegal fishing.

Seiff draws upon a wide range of sources in weaving together this account of the lake's decline. She utilizes Zhou Daguan's thirteenth-century account of Angkor, accounts from the French colonial period, Khmer poetry, scientific reports, academic journal articles and media stories from Cambodia. From an academic perspective, the book should be situated within literature analysing the politics emanating from multi-scalar and multi-sector governance and institutional arrangements around the lake, which consequently create relatively weak levels of adaptive capacity. Perspectives from political ecology have also been key in unpacking how contestations over access to natural resources produce vulnerability. *Troubling the Water* can be read in conversation with *Floating Lives of the Tonle Sap* by Mak Sithirith and Carl Grundy-Warr, which details the impact of the controversial fishing lots system on livelihood insecurity and adaptive strategies. It is also important to pay attention to how fishing and farming are interlinked in livelihood strategies around the lake and its floodplains. More broadly, these issues should be situated within the wider dynamics of environmental change and land tenure insecurity, which draw important linkages between debt, environmental change and migration across the country.

This is a well-researched book, but further attention to academic debates can reveal the complexities behind some of these issues. For example, the assertion that the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission (MRC) is "ultimately ... toothless" (p. 51) may gloss over the tensions that the MRC navigates between the limitations of its mandate and its role as a scientific knowledge producer. Another issue revolves around the tragedy of the commons, which sits somewhat uneasily in Seiff's analysis of causes behind the lake's decline. Seiff points out that "[g]reed and mismanagement, confused priorities and petty corruption, and the tragedy of the commons have all conspired to damn the Tonle Sap" (p. 9). This "tragedy", as theorized by Garrett Hardin, is frequently mobilized

in popular narratives to explain an almost-inevitable depletion of natural resources.

However, it is based on problematic assumptions which view humans as self-interested rational beings and Malthusian theory that posits an inverse relationship between natural resources and population growth. Theorists such as Elinor Ostrom have counterargued that the commons can be successfully managed through institutional means, especially at the local level. Therefore, a “tragedy” is not necessarily inevitable, and the degradation of the Tonle Sap fishery should instead serve as a cautionary tale around the difficulties of rebuilding community institutions once they have been dismantled for vested interests, which Seiff recognizes in considering how the legacy of the Khmer Rouge resulted in “[t]he severing of communities, institutional destruction and sweeping trauma [that] would shape the country for decades to come” (p. 29).

It is true that delays in the Tonle Sap River’s annual reversal due to the combined effects of hydropower dams and a severe and prolonged drought in recent years are unprecedented, and by the end of *Troubling the Water*, a bleak picture of the lake’s future remains. Nonetheless, we must recognize the resilience and agency of lake communities, especially if the right forms of interventions are provided. There are also stories of mobilization and resistance in challenging various forms of environmental injustice. It is perhaps fitting to return to this quote at the beginning of the book: “It is hopeless at times, but it is not *only* hopeless. There are many brave, inventive people carving life from the margins—though it must be said that far more are slipping through the cracks through no fault of their own. So much could be done to help them and to mitigate against the worst of the catastrophe” (p. 11). At the same time, we can also draw lessons from the past to inform future steps towards that end.

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