# Mekong Scales: Domains, Test Sites, and the Uncommons

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***Abstract:*** Inspired by Marilyn Strathern's fractal analyses, this article develops the notions of domain and scale making as a way of conceiving the Mekong uncommons. Juxtaposing the perspectives and activities of community forestry and ecotourism in Kratie Province with policy controversies concerning dam development on the Laos-Cambodia border, I depict each domain as an ontological test site that scales reality in its own distinctive way. Despite their incongruence, these scales gradually become interwoven due to the interactions of domains. These interactions make up the continuous actual becoming of Mekong realities. Rather than conforming to any general ontological schema, however, the outcome is the emergence of divergent, only partly commensurable, practical ontologies. Instead of adding up to a "whole" Mekong, what comes into view is the proliferation of the Mekong uncommons.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, community forestry, ecotourism, hydropower dams, Mekong, NGOs, scales, domains, uncommons, ontology

***Résumé :*** Inspiré des analyses fractales de Marilyn Strathern, cet article aborde les notions de domaine et d'élaboration d'échelles en tant que façon de concevoir les in-communs du Mékong. En juxtaposant les perspectives et activités de foresterie communautaire et d'écotourisme de la province de Kratie aux politiques controversées entourant le projet de barrage à la frontière lao cambodgienne, je dépeins chaque domaine en tant que site expérimental ontologique qui conçoit la réalité en échelles d'une façon propre et distincte. Malgré leurs incongruités, ces échelles s'entremêlent graduellement en raison des interactions entre les domaines. Ces interactions façonnent le devenir réel des réalités du Mékong. Ce qui en résulte, plutôt que d'être conformé à un schéma ontologique général, c'est l'émergence d'ontologies pratiques divergentes et en partie seulement commensurables. On voit apparaître, au lieu d'un ajout au Mékong en tant que « tout », une prolifération d'in-communs du Mékong.

**Mots-clés :** Cambodge, foresterie communautaire, écotourisme, barrages hydroélectriques, Mékong, ONG, échelle, domaines, incommuns, ontologie

From its starting point on the Tibetan Plateau, the Mekong River winds its way southeastward. Over a stretch of almost five thousand kilometres, the great river flows through the Chinese Yunnan province, briefly enters Eastern Myanmar, travels along the long border of Thailand and Laos, and cuts south through mideastern Cambodia, before turning into the delta system of Southern Vietnam and ending its journey in the South China Sea. The massive system sustains the lives of over 60 million people, innumerable species and varied ecologies. It also sustains the cosmologies – and the political and economic dreams – of political elites, businesses, NGOs and people living by, on and from the river.

In 1957, due to recommendations by the United Nations Economic Commission and pressure from the United States, the Mekong Committee was established as an intergovernmental body and charged with coordinating and planning the usage of the river basin. The countries most upstream, China and Burma, did not join. The committee advocated for the construction of multiple large-scale dams, most of which were not actually built. After various political struggles and organisational reconfigurations, the renamed Mekong River Commission (MRC) is currently committed to environmentally sound and sustainable management (Mekong River Commission n.d.). This commitment, however, is hampered by its lamentable inability to negotiate agreements between the constituent countries. While the dams originally intended to be built did not all materialise, the building of dams – which presently ought not to be built, since they run against the principles of sustainable river basin management – proceeds. This is the case, for example, for the controversial Don Sahong dam, to be located on the Laotian side of the Laos–Cambodia border. Meant to generate electricity, probably for export to Thailand and Vietnam, the Don Sahong dam is widely perceived to threaten the downstream livelihoods of Cambodian

people and animals. It has led to vocal opposition by members of multiple local and international NGOs.

It is said that the NGO per capita of Cambodia is second only to that of Rwanda, on the order of one per twelve thousand inhabitants. In the Boeung Keng Kang 1 district, they are almost everywhere. Cambodia certainly has many kinds of problems: land mines and other residues of the reign of terror in the 1970s, human and labour rights issues, poverty and child prostitution, as well as deforestation, climate change, and threats to biodiversity. At the same time, the country has changed dramatically over the last decade. Not too long ago, Phnom Penh was a fairly dangerous place, with weapons left over from the civil war still in abundance; now it is relatively safe. Also, as evidenced by the numerous Lexus cars cruising the streets, the GDP has been growing rapidly – some people, at least, are getting richer. Meanwhile, some NGOs have turned to Cambodia from wealthier neighbouring countries like Thailand and Vietnam. Around 3,500 NGOs are currently registered in the country.

Many such NGOs do important work under difficult circumstances. The World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), for example, is committed to environmental conservation and biodiversity protection. The Phnom Penh office concentrates on saving the threatened Eastern dry forests and protecting the Mekong River ecoregion. It engages in strategic planning with neighbouring country offices as part of the Greater Mekong program. It also collaborates with other NGOs and communicates with ministries and local populations.

WWF-Cambodia aims to protect different animals, from vultures and giant stingrays to saolas, but the core species of concern is the Irrawaddy dolphin, which barely survives in certain deep pools of the Mekong River between Kratie and Stung Treng near the Laotian border. The remaining dolphins, numbering only around 80, are at once symbols of the WWF's struggle for biodiversity and focal points of practical and political initiatives to prevent their extinction. In 2005, with government support, the WWF established the Cambodian Mekong Dolphin Conservation Project. In the summer of 2012, the Cambodian government limited fishing to a designated 180 kilometres of the river which would be controlled by river guards.

If dolphin protection is the aim of this initiative, however, that focus in turn raises questions about the lives of local people. Local NGOs, like the Cambodia Rural Development Team (CRDT) operating in Kratie Province, are keenly aware of this relation. Within the WWF, too, this move has catalysed a transformation from focusing on key species to emphasising the need for integrated ecosystems management, which aims to take into account the entwinement between people, forests, rivers and various animal species.

Kratie, the capital of the province of the same name in Northeastern Cambodia, is a rather quiet town of around 15,000 people, located on the eastern bank of the Mekong. Looking out from one of the many small tourist cafes dotting the riverside, one can enjoy sunrises and sunsets no less sublime during violent afternoon rainstorms than during lazy, sunny mornings. Behind the riverfront, food stalls, moto shops and small restaurants mix with government buildings and NGO offices. In the middle of the river, straight out from the Kratie pier, sits Koh Trong, one of many islands dotting the Mekong in this area. To reach this lush green island takes but a short ride on a rickety motorboat. The island now caters to eco-interested tourists. However, as elsewhere in the province, people on Koh Trong do not depend fully on this patchy, low-scale tourism. Since most people live by or on the river, they fish, and since the river is surrounded by forest, they also log. Fishing has become a problem because the Irrawaddy dolphins live in the area; and because deforestation threatens biodiversity, including the area's endemic species, logging has also become a problem. Ecotourism has not yet become a solution to these problems, but some, like the CRDT, hope someday it will be.

## Domains, Scales, Test Sites, and the Uncommons

The background for the descriptive snapshots offered above are studies of Mekong environmental infrastructures and knowledge making about the Mekong for policy or activist purposes, which I have conducted since 2014. Moving from the Mekong as a transnational river basin, to the capital of Phnom Penh, where organisations try to grasp its features and design interventions, to provincial Kratie, where some of these interventions take place, and down to tiny Koh Trong, these descriptions conform to a conventional sociological and anthropological imagination. Large-scale domains encompass smaller ones: local practices are nested within larger provinces located within nations, regions and so forth. Along these lines, Chris Sneddon and Coleen Fox (2006, 197, quoting Robbins 2003, 643) argue for a critical hydropolitics that recognises "meso and macro scale political and economic forces [that] set the context for local environmental action and interaction" and which pays attention to transboundary issues.

Yet there are other ways of thinking about scale. As Marilyn Strathern (1991) demonstrated in *Partial Connections*, complexity can be seen as fractal and, thus,

scale invariant (see also Jensen 2007). While a local livelihood initiative, for example, is clearly geographically "small," it is internally *as complex* as a much larger region or nation. Moreover, scales are also *produced*.

It is obvious that nobody is able to deal with the Mekong in all its dimensions. While the MRC deals selectively with hydrological issues and flood monitoring, the WWF office in Phnom Penh, unable to take on board all the challenges relating to Cambodian wildlife, focuses on river dolphins, vultures and a few other key species. These and other organisations each define specific domains of concern amenable to the kinds of interventions they want to engage. Such interventions, however, are likely to remain incongruent in terms of scale. International policy-makers, for example, may view river communities along Kratie as constituting a small domain relative to their large-scale climate change interventions. However, from the point of view *of* those communities, global policy barely even registers. The presence of adjacent logging companies or river spirits looms far larger.

The conventional idea of scalar encompassment fragments upon the realisation that scales are *at once* created within domains and imposed by them from the outside (Strathern 2000). Due to this play of "inter- and intrarelations" (Green 2005, 146) between and within domains, scales become interwoven (Green 2005, 162). As a consequence, rather than being nested, domains emerge as partially connected, with the effect that they must be analysed in terms of the mutually "problematic connections" they establish (Green 2005, 129) and their scale-*generating* effects.

The fact that scales are both continuously made and interwoven creates problems of description. To tackle this issue, I shift between and juxtapose perspectives and activities internal and external to different domains. In the case of Pun Chea community forestry, for example, I first discuss its establishment from the point of view of involved NGOs and then turn to consider what it looks like for the people living there. This allows me to consider how conflicting scales are produced internally within the domain. I continue by elaborating what the coexistence of incongruent scales means for the materialisation of community forestry. Finally, I consider what happens when such internally generated scales are projected outwards and "bump into" scales produced elsewhere (Green 2005, 143).

This mode of description generates a kaleidoscopic, if not dizzying, effect. Indeed, it may well be, as Strathern (1991, xiv) has argued, that what makes phenomena appear complex is "the ability to perceive more than one scale at the same time" or, textually speaking, in quick succession. Yet while something is thus gained from multiplying and switching between perspectives, information is also "lost proportionate to the new scale of looking at things" (Strathern 1991, xv). However, the sense of complementary gains and losses might also be taken as a description of what happens to people in the Mekong who themselves, too, at once imagine and construct domains and consider how they relate to other ones. All of this has consequences for thinking about the topic of this special issue: the uncommons.

Conventionally, *the commons* describes resources equally accessible to everyone. Indeed, the Mekong Commons already exists as an "independent website created for sharing and discussing critical perspectives on current issues of development, ecology and society in the Mekong Region" (Mekong Commons 2014). In what follows, however, I engage with the idea of the commons in a somewhat different manner. Taking *the commons* to mean shared presuppositions of what practices or worlds consist of, I contrast the term with *the uncommons*, which would thus be characterised by the lack of such presuppositions. The latter accordingly would describe situations where *the ground itself* is uncommon (compare with Cronon 1995). Arguing that the making of domains and their subsequent interactions continuously produce incongruent scales is thus also a way of questioning the notion of a "whole" common region like the one imagined by the Mekong Commons platform.

Since the uncommons is an argument about the making of different worlds, it has an obvious relation to the vigorously debated ontological turn in anthropology. While proponents aim to open anthropology up to alterity and excess, critics perceive in this idea nothing but a return to discredited ideas of essentialism and bounded cultures. In the present analysis, however, I find neither radical difference nor sameness. While there is certainly no general ontological difference to rule them all in the Mekong, this is not because it makes up a commons after all. Instead, it is due to the continuous proliferation of the uncommons within and across domains. In contrast with heated debates that centre on the existence of "large" ontological differences, what I am pointing attention to is a multiplicity of what might be called *micro-uncommons* were it not for the conventional scalar connotations of *the micro*.

The (uncommon) point, then, is that multiple practical ontologies are generated from, and transformed by, interactions within and across domains. Each domain can be seen as an ontological test site (see Jensen and Winthereik 2015; Ronell 2005) for experimenting with different "modes of being" (Kerin 1999, 100). In contrast to a scalar imagination, according to which the "small" is

always likely to be squashed by the large, this opens up the possibility that the scales may "tip" at surprising moments. Ontological politics (Jensen 2015; Mol 1999) is, in part, about identifying the tipping points where the "relative location" (Green 2005, 13) of domains – what specifies their size and their substance – is open to modification.

## Scaling Down: Imaginary Objects and Real Becoming

Annemarie Mol and John Law (2002, 2) have noted that "the process of scaling up poses many problems." But scaling down can be equally difficult. Everything hinges on the particular patterns of simplicity and complexity, commonality and difference that emerge as domains relate to one another.

Conversations with Leon, a senior-level employee in the Phnom Penh office of the WWF, make clear that time is a severe constraint on effective work – more so, even, than money.[1] The office is engaged in various projects that require funding, planning and implementation. Constant pressure to keep on top of project progress and ahead of the funding curve means that time for "strategic thinking" is scarce. The upshot is that initiatives tend to generate localised domains of concern that are not tightly integrated and may lack long-term feasibility. One such domain is located in Kratie Province: comprising a string of small village sites, it concerns community forestry.

The WWF takes an interest in community forestry for two interrelated reasons. When local people degrade forests, they erode their own income opportunities and also destroy biodiversity. As a result, they have to take work on nearby plantations (degrading forests even further), or they have to rely on more intensive fishing (threatening river dolphins). In contrast, should the forests regenerate, biodiversity will not suffer, and dolphins will be less likely to die in fishing nets. Thus, community forestry figures as a component in the WWF's turn to integrated ecosystems management.

Even so, it is not a major area of concern. The Kratie project is supported only by a one-off grant of $40,000 spent over a period of a year and a half. The ambition is simply to put in place forest nurseries, which people can continue to use after the project stops. Leon regrets this short-term commitment, but as he explained to me, "There is no way I can justify putting a lot of effort into maintaining small temporary initiatives, when I also have to oversee $1M programs. I have to prioritise or I will be fired quickly."

A critical observer might say that the small community forestry project mainly *symbolises* an interest in climate change. Nevertheless, the project is not wholly without content. It defines a domain and, in doing so, sets in motion a series of activities: NGO meetings, forest patrols and the tending of saplings. Notwithstanding the importance of symbolism, these events and their concrete effects must also be kept in view.

The philosopher A.N. Whitehead (1920, 19) insisted that events are "in some sense the ultimate substance of nature." As Steve Brown and Paul Stenner (2009, 25) note, the experience of events is defined "literally as the *becoming* of objective reality" (original emphasis). However, things get strange once we deploy the notion that events *make up* the "ultimate substance of nature" to analyse a domain comprised of biodiversity protection activities that work on the basis that nature is already a given.

The small village of Pun Chea is located about a two-hour bumpy car ride north of Kratie town. I travel by cab, accompanied by Samnang, a local field officer, who will show me the village tree nursery and translate in a meeting with the villagers. During the ride, Samnang talks about vulture restaurants, rice and ox banks, and other not quite Indigenous systems for creating integrated ecofutures. Contrary to most NGO employees I have met, he is an optimist about biodiversity in general and dolphin survival specifically.

We turn off the main road toward the riverbank. Houses on stilts dot the roadside amidst patchy forest. Oxen, pigs and chickens roam freely. We park next to the communal longhouse. Behind it sits an Oxfam latrine, a water pump and other equipment. There is also the tree nursery: some fenced areas with saplings and young trees.

The longhouse is at once a meeting space and the village shrine. Surrounded by incense, flowers, pictures and offerings, Buddha greets us upon entering. However, next to the shrine are artifacts of quite another order. On the walls hang project information posters. One shows a series of traditional and modern fishing nets, identifying which ones are allowed for fishing. Another exhibits the "project cycle" of community forestry: planning, demarcating, inventorying and patrolling. There are also maps of the village and surrounding areas. To the north, a foreign rubber company has gained an economic concession, while to the south, the village borders a foreign timber company. As we study these materials, several people arrive; they squat on the floor, chatting, smoking and spitting through the floorboards.

Eventually, the community forestry chief, a smiling elderly man, enters.

The village project began in 2005. Back then, the project had nothing to do with community forestry. The point was simply to patrol the borders of village land to prevent illegal logging. The tree nursery was created only in 2016 using WWF money. "What is the point of the nursery?" and "What will happen with the new trees?" I ask. Some trees, I am told, will be used to replant the common areas behind the village, while others will be given to villagers for their own gardens. Some will be given as presents to nearby villages.

According to the WWF, community forestry entails creating livelihoods less damaging to biodiversity. The tree sorts have been selected for their quick growth and economic value. The village elder, however, does not refer to income opportunities at all. He merely states that it is "good" for the village to have trees. "Why is it good?" I persist. "Older people can remember a time when there were more trees," replies one young man. The chief adds that more trees are good "because of climate change." But the question is clearly off the mark and fails to arouse any further interest.

Toward the end of the meeting, I thank the villagers and ask if they have any questions. Taking me for a WWF employee, they do. Shaking his hands vigorously in the direction of the Buddha, the village elder indicates the impropriety of having "business meetings in a religious house" and requests funds to build a new longhouse. A young man says he needs a moto for patrolling the forest and a camera to document logging offenders. Referring to encroachment on village territory by the adjacent companies, another man asks for "better marked boundaries and fences." A middle-aged woman asks why the WWF cares only about trees, not about local people. Another man cuts in: "What will happen when the project ends this summer?"

Though Pun Chea's small tree nursery appears, in some sense, as a symbolic gesture, it is also the concrete starting point for the efforts of the WWF and their partners. In this capacity, it makes up a domain, which thereby becomes a test site for experimenting with new realities. The CRDT supports local livelihood improvement. So does the WWF, on the assumption that such improvement paves the way for climate change mitigation and biodiversity protection. Meanwhile, the villagers of Pun Chea appear happy to take care of the trees, but their core concerns are different: they are interested in getting NGO resources and protection against loggers and plantations. The domain is at once internally variable, clearly demarcated, and open to an indefinite outside.

As far as the WWF is concerned, what goes on "inside" is linked to global struggles to contain the damage of climate change. There is a global nature, of which the forest of Pun Chea offers a local example. However, the WWF's own domaining of community forestry can also be seen as a way of extending nature in just that form. In turn, this elicits variable responses.

When villagers worry about encroachment or logging, these concerns can rather easily be embedded in the WWF's narrative of climate change mitigation. But the commonality does not run very deep. For the villagers, experiences with NGOs, loggers, tree saplings, foreign companies, and spirits of rice, water and forests are all parts of reality; yet only some of these experiences are reconcilable with the idea of a common nature that undergirds the notion of community forestry.

While waiting for the chief, people chat with my translator. They have just made offers to the spirit of rice to ensure a good harvest. The spirit is very fond of food and liquor, but it is not necessary for everyone to serve it. What is needed is to make a good-sized offering at the centre of the largest rice paddy field. The spirit feasts there, and good luck spreads in concentric circles, extending to smaller adjacent fields. It really loves wine, they repeat, laughing. Clearly, the idea of protecting environments is based on cosmological presuppositions concerning the "nature of nature" that are not shared.

Moreover, given the practical constraints of the project, the chances that community forestry will create better livelihoods seem slim. Considering the many challenges facing the people involved, as well as their limited means – including their limited resources for understanding each other – it is tempting indeed to view the project as primarily symbolic (compare with Neef, Touch and Chiengthong 2013). Yet, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992, 271) has written, "even if the object of becoming is imaginary, the becoming is real."

Even if community forestry is in one sense an "imaginary object" and, furthermore, one that can be assumed to remain imaginary, this does not prevent it from making partial connections which in turn produce *real becoming in other forms*. The train of activities, events and experiences set in motion by community forestry are both real and unpredictable. To continue exploring the implications of this, I turn to a geographically adjacent domain that centres on ecotourism.

## Passageways to the Uncommons

Specialising in ecotourism packages and trips on the Mekong, Cambodian Rural Development Tours is the

tourist arm of the CRDT. From the palette of tours, I choose a minimal solution: a brief ecotourism visit to the small island of Koh Trong, situated in the middle of the river, right off of the Kratie pier. Thus, I enter the domain of ecotourism.

For the CRDT, the central point of ecotourism is income generation. Concretely, visitors to Koh Trong pay a small sum for the experience of touring the isle, staying overnight with a family, and perhaps planting a tree. The WWF supports this endeavour, because it assumes that low-key tourism will make fishing less appealing and will thus lead to fewer dolphin deaths.

Early in the morning, I take a five-minute, thousand-riel ride in a small motorboat to Koh Trong, carrying a basic map provided by the CRDT office. Upon arrival, I head to the community centre. I rent a bicycle there for two dollars and ride along a well-paved road, passing nicely-built stilt houses and small shops selling fresh coconuts and various dishes. Entering a stilt house marked "homestay," I greet the woman in charge. After dumping my luggage on a thin mattress, I am served rice, fish and tea. Afterwards, I head out to explore the island.

*Exploration*, however, is a bit grand. For one thing, my map clearly identifies all sights of interest on the eight-kilometre trip: a small temple, a "Vietnamese floating village" and a pagoda. For another, the island is obviously not suited for exploration by bicycle, since it has just one partially paved road. Even so, the ride is pleasant until a heavy downpour turns the road to mud. Swearing as I skid around, I arrive at the "Vietnamese floating village" – a series of dilapidated boats. Now drenched, I pass the small pagoda. Nearby is the island's only "resort," which offers accommodation for upwards of 80 dollars per night. I have coffee and dry myself in silence, as I am the only visitor. Overlooking the big garden and empty pool, I ponder whether the fledgling ecotourism enterprise will be able to hold its ground against this form of tourism.

Back in the main room of the homestay are a hammock and some mattresses, a small table, a donation box and an explanation of a few phrases in Khmer. Aside from the owner, residing in the house are an elderly lady, a few small kids and a young couple. They all leave me alone. While I sit by myself in the front room, the family chats, argues and listens to radio in the back. Try as I might to feel at home, the experience is awkward. Time moves very slowly. After dinner, the family hangs a mosquito net around my mattress, still in silence. It gets dark early, and I doze off listening to the distant sound of Khmer television dramas. On my way to the pier before six o'clock the next morning, I meet the owner, who is revving up her moto. She bids me farewell, mentioning that she is on her way to Phnom Penh for business.

These descriptions are testimony to a conjunction of "experiences" on Koh Trong, viewed not simply as a geographical location but as a domain of intersecting practices, aspirations and imaginations. The involved actors, from the WWF and CRDT employees to people living on the island and temporary visitors, are all engaged in different "activities of realisation" (Brown and Stenner 2009, 25), continuously actualised as a labour of division (Brown 1997).

Prior to visiting, Leon told me with considerable excitement that places like Koh Trong were "like a paradise" for hurried and harried professionals like himself. "They don't have Internet!" he exclaimed. "There is hardly a mobile phone connection!" Indeed, it was his sincere hope that things would continue in that way. Anthropologists, of course, are routinely observant of the hidden power relations embedded in expressions such as these (Carrier and Macleod 2005; King and Stewart 1996). The natural ethnographic remedy is a focus on the life-worlds and experiences of local people, which thereby come to instantiate Whitehead's (1920) "becoming of objective reality." Asymmetrically, local people are seen to "have reality," whereas NGOs simply project their flawed imaginations onto villages and landscapes.

There is no doubt that Leon's excitement for the (presumed) lack of electricity on Koh Trong projects a culturally specific vision for how local people and ecotourists together might "take responsibility for nature" (Oyama 2000, 149). In fact, these hopes have already been dashed, for during my visit, people were on the phone incessantly, and Khmer dramas ran until bedtime. Even so, noticing the limits to Leon's "diversity of reference in knowing" (Oyama 2000, 145) is different from discounting his vision and the experiences on which it draws. The becoming of objective reality through experience is not the prerogative of local people, for, after all, NGO employees, tourists and policy-makers have these experiences too. To repeat Viveiros de Castro's (1992) formulation, even if the objects are imaginary, the train of becoming they set in motion is real. Realising that culture, rather than a "bastion to be fortified," is a "passageway" (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 305), it becomes necessary to understand the kinds of passages constructed and where they lead.

Leon assumes that the domain of ecotourism, at least in principle, instantiates a commons – that is, a shared domain from which tourists, local people and

dolphins all stand to gain. At the same time, the viability of ecotourism depends on it being experienced by urban dwellers as sufficiently different from their everyday electrified lives. Difference of a particular kind thus undergirds the commons he hopes can be established. Conversely, what threatens ecotourism *as* a common domain is the lack of a certain kind of difference.

If one goes to Koh Trong with a romantic notion of wilderness in mind, disappointment might quickly ensue. The problem is that the domain simply does not seem *that different* from its surroundings. For one thing, it is only five minutes by boat from Kratie town; its roads are paved, and its houses are neat. As well, people living there do not act discernibly different from people in town. This similarity counteracts Leon's vision for ecotourism as a domain, the efficacy of which depends on particular differences between visitors and hosts. The viability of ecotourism is threatened once ecotourists, bent on experiencing certain kinds of (exotic) difference, come into contact with locals, who, in their predilection for things electric, show themselves to be "too much like us" (Strathern 1996).

Paradoxically, then, too much similarity in a place where what is needed to hold a domain together is precisely difference also generates an uncommons.

## Cross-Domain Comparisons

Test sites gain their qualities in a double(d) process. On the one hand, people define their own concerns. On the other hand, they define and act on those of others. This produces a series of cross-domain comparisons. Wondering why animal species are more worthy of protection than local people, Pun Chea residents respond to what they think is the WWF's perspective. Setting up homestays, people on Koh Trong try to adopt the viewpoint of foreign visitors. Supporting these efforts, Leon imagines both what incentives might look like from the point of view of the islanders and the appeal an unelectrified experience might have for potential ecotourists. Bumping into one another, these comparisons create a kaleidoscopic effect. Domains come to appear at once "fragmented and interrelated": simultaneously "the same and different" (Green 2005, 17). This effect is not only perspectival, however, for it gives rise to complex exchanges within and across domains and to different kinds of material effects.

As far as Saeed, the program manager at the WWF's Kratie office, is concerned, the most important task is the development of a strategy of integrated ecosystems management and services, where analysis and intervention take place at the level of the landscape as a whole. The strategy is visualised in a triangular model where livelihoods, enforcement and public awareness form the angles, while the environment sits at the centre. If any of the angles are missing, the environmental centre – exemplified by turtles and dolphins – will suffer. Adopting this strategy poses problems, however. Local staffers, I am told, have difficulties with long-term strategic thinking. It is also very difficult to understand what might motivate villagers to change their behaviours. On top of these local problems, another fundamental challenge relates to the fact that implementing the new comprehensive strategy depends on resources that must be procured from faraway places – in this case, from a Swiss funder. And since Swiss funders can be assumed to know little about Cambodian contexts, there is an urgent need for translating concerns across domains. The practical question is therefore how WWF-Cambodia can create a sufficient sense of commonality to ensure the flow of money on which its work depends. Successful applications depend on imagining what funders in places like Switzerland might view as supportable activities.

Reference to threatened dolphins or vultures is necessary to signal the importance of the proposal, of course; yet there is no direct relation between declining dolphin populations and European money. Needing to establish commonality in a different manner, applications signal their fundability by adopting "pre-fabricated discourse" (Smith 1978, 59) adapted to the preoccupations of funders. This is part of the work done by Saeed's triangular model of ecosystems services, which, even as it is not very specific about Kratie's unique situation, nicely conforms to the "holistic" concerns of contemporary environmental donors. Skirting the issue of domain differences, the WWF thus dispatches generic application discourse in one direction, with hopes that it will elicit the return travel of funds that will allow it to continue its work.

Eating curry at the Balcony, which overlooks the Kratie riverside, I ask Anne, a Dutch woman in her early thirties, how she ended up working for the CRDT. Several years ago, she came to Kratie to study CRDT's early explorations of ecotourism at Koh Phdao. At the time, Anne had not believed in the concept, because "almost all responsibility was delegated to the islanders." She supposed that the CRDT would quickly need to take over. But after months of fieldwork, she concluded that the initiative actually worked. Several years later, Anne was travelling in Cambodia and decided to stop by the office. When we spoke, she was in charge of business management and development on a temporary contract.

As a non-profit organisation, the CRDT depends on donor funds. This produces a problem that Anne perceives as a general one in Cambodia: donor funds are in fact readily accessible as long as one skilfully recombines prefabricated discourse; yet the consequence is that NGOs fail to "establish their own base." Anne tells me she wants to change this situation by turning the CRDT into a for-profit organisation. Her aim is not to make money but rather to enable self-sustainability, creating a way out of the present situation, where everyone is constantly scanning for funds instead of thinking for themselves. Her colleagues, however, are skeptical: they see her ideas as threatening the organisation's grassroots image.

"What we 'see,' and how we consequently behave toward it, will depend on what we see something *as*," wrote Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1978, 48; original emphasis). In our conversation, Anne compares her vision for CRDT with that of the WWF, its regular partner. According to the "biodiversity calculation" (Lowe 2006, 51) of the latter, ecotourism can "substitute for the harvesting of wild sea creatures," like the dolphins (121). Anne, however, finds the WWF's excessive fondness for these creatures distasteful. In particular, she is disturbed by the way in which the dolphins are turned into a moral spectacle: "Those dolphins are always on display," she says; "it is like posters of starving African children."

Whereas the CRDT emphasises livelihood improvement, the WWF's strategy highlights the importance of "enforcement." But to Anne, the image of river patrols confiscating and burning illegal gillnets is repugnant. Moreover, whereas Leon, Saeed and Anne all agree that a decrease in annual dolphin deaths is a good thing, their rationales are almost opposite. While Leon and Saeed view a decrease in mortality as inherently good, Anne notes that it is the dolphins that bring in tourists, and thus income.

Anne goes further: "I don't really care about the dolphins. There is so much more here. And is it our job to decide how they should live?" This question lies at the heart of contrasting development visions, which are at once operative in the visions and missions of different NGOs and in the approaches of academic disciplines. Do we prioritise biology or culture, history or ecology, people or their environments, social and political issues or natural ones? (Oyama 2000, 96). In line with CRDT's philosophy, Anne is critical of the idea that behavioural change should be induced by "us" on "their" behalf. She sees turning the NGO into a for-profit organisation as unproblematic, *if* this transformation supports the empowerment of local people. In contrast, she views attempts to change people's lives with the primary aim of supporting biodiversity as ethically suspect.

Making these arguments, Anne repeats a well-known critique, presented with equal vigour by anthropologists of development, activists and politicians in developing countries. Western development has detrimental environmental consequences that are by now painfully obvious. At this exact moment, the West therefore feels sufficiently enlightened to dictate to others that they should not develop in a like manner. In other words, Westerners managed first to gain the benefits from development, resources for which were extracted from other countries, while, second, they attempt to solve the global environmental problems wrought by their development by preventing others from accessing its benefits.

Yet Anne is also aware that a strong version of this politics of non-interference holds paradoxical consequences. What, really, is CRDT's mandate to intervene in local affairs? Indeed, if the villagers really want to cut down their forests and overfish to their best ability, should they not be allowed to do so?

Though the CRDT and the WWF work together to establish domains of community forestry and ecotourism, the underlying premise is uncommon. Moreover, the challenges they face in constructing these domains relate both to what is uncontrollable from within and from without. From within, Anne contemplates the tension embedded in supporting local communities in making their own choices, even when they appear (self-)destructive. Also from within, Saeed pragmatically observes that there is no way of avoiding upscale resorts, like the one on the island of Koh Trong, even though they may undermine the ecotourism effort.

However, the problem of how to deal with uncontrollability from without is far more difficult, for it takes us to other Mekong scales and *their* problematic interactions. Indeed, Saeed and Leon worry constantly about unpredictable intrusions from other domains – like the repercussions expected with the building of upscaled dams.

The very idea of an integrated strategy can be seen as a way of grappling with the unpredictable relations between scales and domains. Yet although developing such a strategy may help to procure Swiss funding, it does not guarantee ground-level control of projects that are influenced by activities unfolding elsewhere. Faced with this unavoidable problem, WWF managers tend to emphasise the many small, good things that are happening. However, they also struggle to imagine how exactly they will add up to something larger than their parts.

Gregory Bateson (1972, 433) saw "knowledge of the larger interactive system" (quoted in Oyama 2000, 151)

as equivalent to wisdom. It is striking to observe the similarity between this wisdom and Saeed's vision for integrated management. We might then say that the limits of the WWF's "wisdom" lies in its inability to grasp and respond to the multidimensional flow of the river – a vast interactive system that connects and separates domains, actors, visions and politics. Yet this criticism seems largely irrelevant, since obtaining sufficient knowledge of this large-scale interactive system is practically impossible. Whereas Bateson's generalised wisdom conjures a beautiful ideal, no one is able to know, much less control, these interactions. Even with the awareness that domains interact and overflow, practical wisdom depends on scaling and operationalisation within them.

Meanwhile, just north of the Laotian border, plans for building the Don Sahong dam proceed. According to reports made by the WWF and others, this dam is likely to lead to the direct or indirect demise of the river dolphins.

## Scaling Back Up: Natural and Fictive Discourse

In the spring of 2006, the Lao government hired a Malaysian engineering company, Mega First Corporation Berhad, to examine the feasibility of the Don Sahong hydropower project. On behalf of Mega First, PEC Konsult and Australian Power and Water conducted feasibility studies and an environmental impact assessment. Based on these reports, a concession agreement was signed in early 2008. Five years later, in 2013, Laos notified the MRC of its intention to go ahead with the dam.

The Don Sahong dam is among the dozens of hydropower projects proposed, planned or under construction in the lower Mekong. Meant to generate 260 megawatts, mostly for export, it has generated controversy in equal measure. One reason, as the WWF noted in its 2014 brief, is that, being located only two kilometres from the Cambodian border in the Si Phan Don area, "the dam will block the Hou Sahong channel, one of the main dry season channels that comprise the Khone Falls section of the Mekong" (WWF 2014, 1). Alongside damages incurred during the construction process, many predict that this blockage will lead to dire consequences for the livelihoods of both humans and animals living downstream.

That Laos simply notified the MRC of its plans is indicative of a near collapse of the regional commons built up by the Mekong Agreement. Since 1995, this agreement has required Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam to jointly review dam proposals and reach consensus. This process deteriorated in 2012, when Laos rejected requests from other member countries to delay building of the Thai-funded Xayaburi dam until more was known about its environmental and social impacts. The decision to ignore Cambodian and Vietnamese protests against the Don Sahong, bypass the Mekong Agreement and proceed followed this new precedent. In effect, a political reshuffling of Mekong scales has been set in motion.

Whereas the Mekong Agreement was meant to guarantee consultative processes and ensure environmental protectors of the lower Mekong, the Lao decision partitioned the Mekong according to national boundaries. At issue is more than a matter of a different scalar imagination, for building the dam will have partly unforeseeable material effects in a range of domains downstream. Regional energy politics, too, induce scale changes.

To proceed with the dam, the Laos government made a procedural argument for bypassing the MRC process. Specifically, it argued for a suspension of the "prior consultation," obligatory for dams on the Mekong mainstream, since the Don Sahong would be located on a side channel. The WWF indignantly replied that this contrasted with all previous information. The earlier circulated "Basin Development Plan" and "Strategic Environmental Assessment," both endorsed by the Lao government, had been explicit that the dam would be located on the main stream. Here, we are witness to contests over geographical scales played out at the level of policy briefs and reports.

As suggested by the name "Si Phan Don" (the 4,000 Islands), the area where the contentious dam is built consists of a maze of channels and small islands. The landscape features thus render the question of what *is* the mainstream rather ambiguous to begin with. Yet by augmenting this "natural" fuzziness at the textual level, Laotian policy documents further blurred the geographical boundaries, until it became possible to reopen the seemingly open-and-shut question of the whereabouts of its fairly massive dam. These documents thereby effectively enabled the Lao government to straddle "the border that separates natural from fictive discourse" (Smith 1978, 50). Indeed, whereas Laos claimed to simply report on "natural facts" – like geographic location – their NGO critics insisted that these facts were nothing but "political fictions." Where energy politics meets geography, we thus find ourselves once again in the uncommons.

The WWF and International Rivers launched full attacks on the environmental assessments and other forms of documentation circulated by the Lao government. The 14-page *Summary of Scientific Reviews from Three International Fish Passage Experts on the*

*Don Sahong Dam EIA and Technical Reports Related to Project Design and Mitigation Measures* (WWF-Cambodia 2014) lists a plethora of fictions. The summary notes that the authors of the dam's environmental impact assessment mistake the site location by several kilometres, and the assessment challenges claims about fish populations and behaviour, the effects of proposed technical solutions, the implications of the dam for downstream water flow and ecosystems services, and existing agricultural and fishing practices. Moreover, it remarks critically on inadequate community and stakeholder engagement. Altogether, the assessment exemplifies "sloppy and incomplete research" (WWF-Cambodia 2014, 1), presents "faith-based" mitigation measures and is characterised by "unrealism" (2). The conclusion states that there is no doubt that the dam will have dire consequences for people living downstream, for wildlife generally, and for dolphins specifically.

In response, the Lao ambassador to Cambodia declared that construction of the dam would be delayed until the end of a six-month consultation process. Meanwhile, however, the environmental manager of Mega Berhad stated in an interview, "I am at the project site and I can advise you that construction has not been suspended" (Barron and Sokheng 2014; see also *Bangkok Post* 2014). The uncommons rears its head once more. There is uncertainty not only about the dam's whereabouts but also about whether it is under construction.

## The Mekong Pristine

At the biodiversity test site in Kratie, some 150 kilometres south of the contentious area, most of the remaining 80 dolphins live in deep pools. As they do not migrate, their location is predictable. Since they have to surface every few minutes to breathe, they are easy to spot. They are also tourist magnets.

From Kratie, the closest pool can be reached via tuk-tuk in 40 minutes. Stalls sell food and dolphin merchandise by the riverside. At the dusty parking lot, drivers lie half asleep in makeshift hammocks. Upon arrival, tourists are immediately hailed and led to one of the dozens of small colourful boats waiting to take them to the dolphin pool.

Approaching the pool one quiet afternoon, my captain turns off the motor and quietly begins paddling. A grey back emerges, followed by a loud snorting sound, as the dolphin takes in air for a few seconds before vanishing. But over there is another one. Up and down they go together, seemingly playing. For just a few moments, we are all alone except for the dolphins. The Mekong is altogether serene. Then the quiet is pierced by the sound of motors, mixed with shrieks and laughter. Several boats emerge, full throttle, with young British travellers yelling in excitement as they approach.

Next to the dolphins, for just a moment, we seemed to be in a natural, pristine world, entirely different from the fictional one constructed by environmental assessments and policy controversies. However, this is also the effect of domaining. For one thing, the Mekong pristine is the core image on which the WWF's ecotourism proposal depends. But local people selling tourist experiences, too, cater to and help enact the pristine as a natural fiction. Briefly, it was mine, too, as I enjoyed the serenity of the river.

Obviously, there is no direct analogy between the discourse on dam development produced by the Lao government and skewered by the WWF and its own writings on biodiversity conservation and the Mekong pristine. And yet, reusing the WWF's critical language, the reader might well find certain aspects of its reports to be also "vague," in some senses "unrealistic," and, to an extent, "faith-based." Indeed, in the effort to use biology as an unproblematic, natural basis for the design of integrated ecosystems management and the protection of pristine realms of animals and people, the WWF too straddles the borders between natural and fictive discourse.

Rather than aiming to pull the rug from under the WWF, the point is that there is no escape from working this border. Whether one is an NGO professional, a dam developer, a policy-maker or a boatman, it is unavoidable that "the kinds of interactions in which we participate influence the Nature we design" (Oyama 2000, 143). Even if everyone is involved, the designs are different, nature multiplies and the uncommons emerges.

## The Mekong Uncommons

This article has examined a variety of Mekong settings, from Pun Chea community forestry to regional energy politics. Rather than locating the small within the large, I have analysed these domains as ontological test sites that generate their own scales and realities. In turn, events and experiences generated within these test sites set in motion a series of comparisons that become integral to changes both within and between domains (compare with Gad and Jensen 2016). As the scales and realities of different domains become interwoven, the Mekong emerges as an uncommons.

That, of course, is not what such domains are meant to be (ontological test sites) or do (generate the uncommons). Indeed, from the point of view of most actors and organisations, domaining, while it has a diversity of

purposes, remains centred on assumptions of what is, or ought to be, common.

The trajectory of the controversial Don Sahong dam, for example, unfolds within what Chris Sneddon and Coleen Fox (2006, 189) call a "cooperative geopolitical space" that organises the world into nation-states with rights and obligations. In contrast, the WWF, International Rivers and other NGOs view the health of the river basin as a whole as primordial to national politics and international trade (compare with Sneddon and Fox 2006, 189–190).

Though both the characteristics of nature and culture and the balance between them is subject to dispute, nobody doubts that there is a shared nature. As made clear by the WWF's exasperated response to the claim that the Don Sahong is being built on a tributary, one can get the facts of geography right or wrong, but one cannot relativise the scheme. That geography nevertheless *was* relativised in the controversy therefore speaks not only to the fuzzy boundaries between natural and fictive discourse but also to that between words and worlds. It elicits regional policy-making as an uncommons where nature and geography cannot necessarily be taken for granted as grounds. Outside this domain – for example, back among the villagers of Pun Chea – the very idea of nation-states engaging in games of "political realism" about "natural resources" would likely be exotic to the highest degree.

Even within a single domain, it is impossible to identify any general ontology, since each is constituted by a "multiplicity of entities, influences, and environments" (Oyama 2000, 3). Within and across domains, innumerable interactions generate events and experiences, constituting what A.N. Whitehead (1920) would call the actual becoming of Mekong realities. In conjunction, they (do not) add up to the Mekong uncommons.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser for the invitation to the "Uncommons" seminar held at the University of California, Davis, 28–30 May 2015. Thanks also to the participants for their interesting comments and to reviewers for their constructive suggestions. This research has been supported by the JSPS Kakenhi Grant Number 24251017.

## Note

1 Leon and all other names in the text, except public figures, are pseudonyms.

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