

Escaping Foreign Donor Nature Worship

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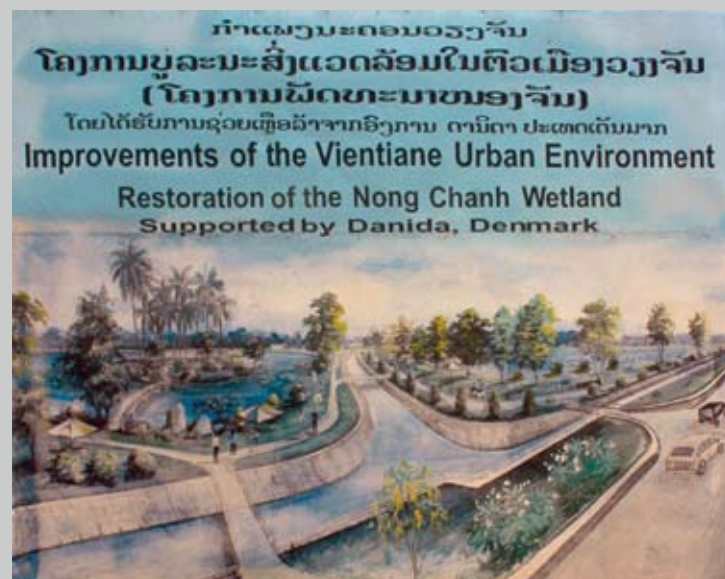
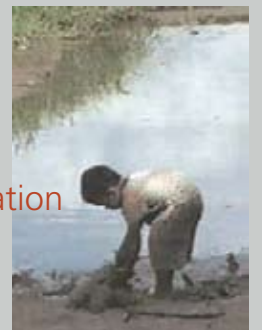


No question that throughout monsoonal Asia, preservation of urban waterways is a very tough sell. In 1995 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) published its definitive “Wetlands of Laos”. The survey of Nong Chanh marsh in Vientiane showed several hundred families, mostly semi-aquatic squatter households, being supported in part by harvesting the nong’s living aquatic resources (fish, frogs, invertebrates, plants), and that the ecological production value of Nong Chanh could approach \$1 million annually. IUCN proposed that Nong Chanh ought to be conserved as an irreplaceable scientific and educational natural study area in the heart of the Capital; and also for its “free infrastructure services”: i.e., wastewater processing, flood detention and groundwater recharge, microclimate amelioration.

In due course, the Danish International Development Agency (Danida) —a bilateral funder noteworthy for its high-concept environmental projects in Laos— stepped up to the plate. Between 2001 and 2005, the Danish government largely completed the ponds, earthworks and replantings, plus —as a requirement for being granted the Lao lead ministry’s permission to undertake the restoration scheme— had at great expense resettled and rehabilitated hundreds of the former residents, many of whose families had been living on Nongchanh as undocumented immigrants since the 1960s. But by 2007, the Danish wetlands restoration was off and the Sino-Malaysian waterslide park was on.



Digital Conservation Facility Laos



A minor Orwellian touch was the dispatch of a hit team to take down the defunct Danida project site signage the very day that the first article appeared on the new waterslide theme park in the Vientiane press; the 7 March 2007 cover story in the government-controlled, French-language *Le Renovateur*: “a refreshing dream soon to become a reality. . . a charming greenspace even drawing tourists from Thailand. . . So get ready to work on your breast stroke. . . The dog days of summer are about to take a soaking.”

