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## Interview with David Hand Fisheries Biologist U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong (SIM)  
Laos Peoples' Democratic Republic, 2015-2016



**CONTEXT IN LAOS:** Laos PDR is one of the five countries in the Lower Mekong region. The Mekong River is home to over 800 species of fish that serve as the primary source of protein for the 60 million people living in the river basin. Due to generous amounts of capital in nearby China, Singapore, and Thailand, Laos PDR has planned to construct up to 9 hydropower dams along its portion of the river. These dams could have negative effects on fish migration patterns, which could drastically decrease annual fisheries catches. The governments of the Lower Mekong countries are under increasing pressure to implement environmental and social safeguards for hydropower development.

**DOI-ITAP ASSIGNMENT:** David Hand traveled to Laos and Thailand as part of two teams of technical experts providing technical assistance under the Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong Program (SIM), a DOI-ITAP project funded by USAID. David served as an expert in the area of fish migration.

### What was your role in the Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong (SIM) Program?

I've had two main roles in ITAP's SIM work in Laos PDR. I first traveled to Laos in January 2015 as a fish migration expert to provide technical assistance to the Laos Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Living Aquatic Resources Center. My role was to assess the current state of knowledge, identify knowledge/technical gaps, and craft a long-term research agenda for the Laos government to address the knowledge gaps to better inform future sustainable hydropower development in the country. My second role was to host two Laos government biologists, in early 2016, at our research facility in Vancouver, Washington, as part of a three month internship in the USA. During their four week stay with us, we gave the Laotian biologists training in data management and analysis techniques, fisheries statistics, and different ideas on fish tagging and fish sampling design. We also had the opportunity to bring them on a field exercise to the Oregon coast where they contributed to developing a study plan, sampled fish populations, and analyzed data.

### How was your experience during preparation for this assignment?

I had a great experience. Since the beginning it was clear to me that I was going to be well supported both in preparation for the project and in country. The Project Manager provided us with a lot of support and would answer any question. The DOI-ITAP staff was able to reserve all my flights with ease, and the in-country-coordinator was very helpful in setting up meetings. When my flight was delayed due to weather, ITAP's travel staff was able to change my flights swiftly. During the assignment, I learned a lot about the challenges facing the region from a literature review, and even more so from the encounters we had with our Laotian counterparts.

## Describe your most rewarding experience during your participation in the SIM Program?

I think for me the most memorable experience was hosting the two fisheries biologists from Laos. We spent four weeks together developing a personal relationship. I was impressed by how much they really wanted to learn, improve their technical knowledge, and bring those skills back to Laos. We spent a week on the Oregon coast, sampling fish populations in an estuary. During the last day of their stay, our guests showed their gratitude for their training by making a traditional Laotian meal for us. It was bittersweet to see them go. Another memorable experience was when, at the request of the US Ambassador to Laos, we met with the engineers in the Ministry of Energy and Mines to assess the current state of fish passage facilities at Xayaburi Dam, the first mainstem dam being built in Laos. We wrote up a brief report to provide to the engineers information on fish passage technologies and potential fish passage improvement for the dam facilities. It was professionally rewarding for me to have the report sent and the technical staff respond because of the technical exchange we made on this information.

## What was the impact of this experience at your professional and personal level?

Participating in these projects has opened my eyes and made me appreciate that there are common challenges that we all face in the conservation community. On a personal level, going to another country and getting to know the different cultures, different institutions, and different challenges that they face made me learn how to approach these problems from a global perspective. We should not be there to tell our foreign counterparts what to do. I've learned that the best way to approach these conservation challenges is to develop a personal relationship with the technical staff, and focus on collaboration. Professionally, I learned that as guests of a foreign country, you need to be able to consider other perspectives.

## What would you tell someone who is considering participating in a DOI- ITAP assignment?

Before you decide to join an ITAP assignment, realize that you are guests of the country you will be working in. As an ITAP technical expert, you need to understand that you won't save the world, but you can make a meaningful contribution. Each country faces unique challenges, and while experiences in the U.S. can be useful, they may not provide perfect solutions to the challenges of the country you are working in. It takes commitment, patience, and flexibility to be an ideal ITAP technical expert. At the same time, there is a lot of support available to you from your teammates, the in-country-coordinator, and the ITAP project management staff.



Hydropower dam construction in Southeast Asia has complicated the delicate riparian ecosystem of the Mekong Basin. Countries such as Laos and Cambodia are weighing the pros and cons of profits from energy generation and negative environmental effects on this shared watershed. Left Photo: Laotian biologist, Vannida Boulaphan, working in the field. Right Photo: Xayaburi Dam, first mainstream dam built in Laos (*both photos by David Hand*).

### Contact information

Barbara Pitkin, Director | [bpitkin@ios.doi.gov](mailto:bpitkin@ios.doi.gov) | <http://www.doi.gov/intl/itap>

**International Technical Assistance Program, Office of International Affairs, US Department of the Interior**  
1849 C Street, NW, MS-3530 Washington, DC 20240 Tel: +1 202-208-3048 Fax: +1 202-208-3983