

## Sapped

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Tonle Sap Lake. Photo: Nicolas Axelrod/Ruom

### Troubling the Water: A Dying Lake and a Vanishing World in Cambodia

Abby Seiff

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It's late afternoon and the muddy track through the centre of the village is bustling. Around me vans and cars are moving slowly, loaded with ice bins, large red-and-white containers strapped to roofs and trunks, filling the inside of vehicles. From the driver's seat, with the window down, the smell is unmistakable—fish! It should come as no surprise: Chong Kneas is a market hub of the Tonle Sap, Cambodia's 'Great Lake', with thousands of tonnes of fish passing through it each year.

The wet monsoon of 2022 has been an extreme one and the lake is brimming, its water lapping at the house foundations below the bank. Nearby, the temple hill of Phnom Krom has become a virtual island, the rising water touching its edges for the first time in a decade. The Tonle Sap is high and the market street is buzzing—all appears well. But the reality is very different.

The future of the lake is in jeopardy: fish numbers are plummeting, its flooded forests have been plundered and the annual pulse of water that lies at the centre of the Tonle Sap's fecundity has been compromised. It is a story—its origins, events and implications—that lies at the heart of Abby Seiff's *Troubling the Water: A Dying Lake and a Vanishing World in Cambodia*.

Lying near the centre of Cambodia, edging five of its largest provinces, the Tonle Sap has been described as the kingdom's 'beating heart'. To understand the extent of this significance one only needs to journey to the walls of the Bayon temple, inside the Angkor Archaeological Park. There, documented in stone, one can see fish, turtles and crocodiles drifting beneath boats on the lake, while on a nearby relief a trio of sarus cranes engage in a synchronised dance. The engravings depict a rich and plentiful lake, one whose productivity remains as important to Cambodia today as it was in its Angkor past.

The origins of the Tonle Sap's prolificacy have been well documented. At its centre lies an annual wet season pulse of water, caused by the backward flow of its main outlet (the Tonle Sap River), which leads the Great Lake to swell from six to eight times its normal size, inundating an enormous floodplain in the process. The pulse precipitates an injection of nutrients, sparking an explosion of life and biomass that pass through the food chain, with humans a primary beneficiary. The effect is, Seiff writes, 'a finely tuned ecological miracle'. Unfortunately it is a miracle, she acknowledges in her next line, which is rapidly unwinding: 'Pull a single thread and it will begin unraveling. We, as it turns out, are pulling all its threads at once.'

Ke Sovann is conscious of the changes on the Great Lake. An environment education and eco-tourism manager for Osmose, a Siem Reap-based organisation, he works closely with its fisher communities, including inhabitants of its famed 'floating villages'. 'In the past, fishermen could catch up to a hundred kilos of fish per day; now it is reduced to about ten to twenty kilos, and some days even no fish. Most of the people living on the lake rely on fish to make their living. If no fish, they have to find another way to survive.' The fall in annual lake levels, Ke notes, is of special concern. 'The Tonle Sap's water has decreased each year . . . 2019 and 2020 were the lowest amounts since I know about the Tonle Sap. It has made life hard for the fishermen.'

It is the changing world of the lake's fishers and their dependents that provides the focus of *Troubling the Water* (the title is taken from a Cambodian proverb). In concentrating on this group Seiff is less interested in documenting the minutiae of ecological decline. Instead, drawing on skills honed as a journalist, she centres on what the changes in the Tonle Sap mean for a people intricately linked to its wellbeing. The result is a story that is both real and sobering: an unwinding tragedy that buffets the reader as they make their way through its pages.

For source material Seiff draws on notes gathered from field visits and interviews undertaken between 2016 and 2019. From this research she is able to elicit a succession of finely crafted chapters, which read like dispatches, each themed around an issue and the people affected by it. Accordingly, from these accounts we learn how fishing practices have changed and catch rates have declined, the inequities of fisheries law enforcement and the demoralising impact of poverty, debt and the burdens of the microloan industry. It is a smart approach, each dispatch adding to a broader picture of the challenges facing the fishers of the lake. And arriving at the book's end, the resounding image is of an existence that has become untenable, the repeated dream being a 'piece of land' and a job 'away from the lake'.

The author does not shy away from discussing what has caused the 'threads to unravel', either. Many of these are not specific to the Tonle Sap and are repeated across other endangered ecosystems—climate change, deforestation, overharvesting, poaching and wetland reclamation—while others are unique to it and the wider Mekong catchment: the impact of dams on the water dynamics of the lake and changing fishery management practices.

Back in Siem Reap, Ke Sovann is also aware of what dam development has meant for the Tonle Sap. It is an impact, he emphasises, that goes beyond the issue of water levels: 'Dam construction remains a big problem for fish, as some species, especially white fish, need to move from the upper Mekong to the Tonle Sap, but the dams are blocking their journey.'

The observations and experience of Seiff, Ke and others highlight the scale and complexity of the issues facing the Great Lake and the 'wicked'—a policy term for such complexity—challenges they pose to the lake's management. Is there a future for the Tonle Sap and the fishers that still call it home?

*Troubling the Water* accomplishes something special, not only by bringing the Tonle Sap's plight to greater attention, but also ensuring that the human voice, so often lost in such accounts, is brought to the forefront. But in contemplating the issues it raises we should judge our response carefully. The book can leave readers feeling numb and overwhelmed by the lake's plight, with little reason for optimism; it may seem easier to 'give up' and walk away. Instead, we should regard the book as a clarion call, one that summons us to fight for the Great Lake and all those who call it home. After all, if we withdraw from this fight, what will we let go next? And what future can we expect for us all?

Wayne McCallum is the author of *Mekong Solitaire*.

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