

PURE RELIGION

Making the Mekong a Cleaner Place

The Mekong River is the 12th longest river in the world. Its headwaters begin in the Tibetan Plateau and wind some 3,000 miles through six countries in southeast Asia. This river provides food, water, and vital transportation for more than 60 million people.

It is also the river that Max and Annalene Swenson admired each day as they walked from their apartment in Vientiane, Laos, to a school where they taught English. Although Elder and Sister Swenson were a long way from their home in Orem, Utah, they loved the country and people of Laos. They loved their assignment as humanitarian service missionaries to teach English to government officials and to Laotian English teachers.

As they walked along the river each morning, they commented on how beautiful the river was, but they also noticed how much litter had been strewn along the way. One could scarcely walk to the bank of the river without wading in the thick garbage that marred the view.

One morning, the Swensons decided they would do something about all the litter. So, they put on rubber gloves, got a pair of long tongs, and grabbed a few large garbage bags—and they began to clean.

Day after day, they attacked the litter that lay along the banks of the Mekong River. And day by day, the trash that littered the banks began to diminish.

Passersby stopped and watched. “What are you doing?” they asked.

“We love your beautiful country,” the Swensons replied, “and we want to help keep it beautiful.”

Gradually, others wanted to help. A taxi driver and his daughter started helping. College students chipped in. A reporter for a French newspaper brought his son and they, too, began to help. On another day, a half dozen young children who were living on the street helped pick up trash as well.

Eventually, city officials began to notice the activity, and they wanted to help as well. When they asked what they could do, the Swensons said: “As fast as we pick up the litter, more is thrown on the ground. If we can supply the trash cans, would the city be willing to empty the garbage regularly?”

The city officials felt they could do that, and the Swensons, with the help of a grant from Church Humanitarian Services, purchased 40 garbage cans and set them up at strategic locations along the riverbank.

The Swensons didn’t stop at the Mekong, however. As they walked the streets of Vientiane, they gathered up litter along the way. Citizens and business owners began to notice what they were doing and, everywhere they went, Laotian people smiled. Businessmen went out of their shops to greet them and give them the “thumbs up” sign. The spirit of cleanliness became infectious, and the business owners began sweeping more carefully in front of their shops.

“We felt we were contributing in a small way,” Sister Swenson says. “We had time, and we saw a need.”

Elder Swenson agrees, “We felt we were making a quiet difference.”

