



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

Nam Songkhram Basin Fish Festival, Sri Songkhram

The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) joined the Nam Songkhram Basin Fish Festival on 7-9 October 2005. This annual event is the main calendar event of Sri Songkhram District and draws large crowds of people from across the district and further afield. The festival is also largely promoted by authorities and focuses on showcasing local culture, traditions and products.

This was the third year that MWBP has participated in the festival in which each *tambon* (sub-district) sets up an exhibition area, with a local-style house showing traditional tools, implements and handicrafts, plus an area for selling locally produced goods and products (i.e. *One Tambon One Product* or OTOP goods).

This year the Fish Festival was the biggest to date, featuring a mix of cultural, musical and sporting events, alongside entertainment shows, food stalls and a popular fair. The highlights included world championship boxing, a grand parade of giant model fish around the town and a concert with famous names from the Thai popular music scene. Thousands of people attended these events to watch the sporting and entertainment action on stage, watch the procession and tour the various exhibition booths. The normally quiet market town became a hive of frenetic activity and celebrations for three days.

The MWBP Demonstration Site Project Office, in cooperation with Thai Baan Researchers and other local partners were closely involved in the planning and implementation of aspects of the festival. MWBP built a stage for performances of Isaan folk music, dancing and other entertainment, while an exhibition tent featuring poster boards on local wetlands-dependent livelihoods, biodiversity and other information about the MWBP activities was open to the public. Children visiting the exhibition stall were given colour pencils and paper and encouraged to draw pictures based on the River Songkhram, small gifts and prizes were offered for the best. Meanwhile, village women from Ban Yang Ngoi, one of MWBP's target villages for Thai Baan Research, provided tired and thirsty visitors to the MWBP area with three types of herbal tonics, with the herbs being sourced locally from the community forest and home gardens.



The Thai Baan Research network built a large bamboo raft which was floated down the Nam Songkhram River from Ban Tha Bor to Sri Songkhram with a two metre long, life-like model *pla koon* (Wallago micropogon) at its bow. The *pla koon* was chosen by the Thai Baan researchers due to its rare status (in the Nam Songkhram), striking appearance and its fearsome reputation as a predator of other fishes. Once the *pla koon* arrived at the Sri Songkhram town bridge, it was hoisted onto a decorated pick-up truck and joined

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the parade of other model fish in a two hour procession to the District Hall. The covered raft will be used in future as a place to hold meetings and receive Project visitors at a mooring in Ban Tha Bor village.



A new event at the 2005 Festival, which proved popular was a competition for members of the public to display rare or “beautiful” fish to the public in aquaria. While the Fancy Fish category was open to any fish from around the world, the Rare Fish competition was limited to fish found in the Nam Songkhram Basin, and drew some weird and wonderful specimens not often seen in catches. This included an eel species known locally as *ian huu* (cf. *Anguilla marmorata*), a predatory cyprinid, trout-lookalike called *pla sanaak* (*Raiamas guttatus*) and impressive featherback species *pla dong lai* (*Chitala blanci*). Fittingly though, the fish that won the first prize in the Rare Fish category was a large, black *pla koon*.

Once again, the MWBP Demonstration Site, in close partnership with local villagers, has contributed to engaging the public in awareness-raising conservation activities, knowledge dissemination and drawn attention to the importance of riverine wetlands in the livelihoods of local people, especially the role of wild fish and capture fisheries in providing income and food security to thousands of families throughout the Lower Songkhram River Basin.