

The Plight of the Mekong Giant Catfish



Fact Sheet of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

The Mekong Giant Catfish (*Pangasianodon gigas*) symbolises the ecological integrity of the Mekong River and the abundance of other fish species that people have come to rely on for their livelihoods throughout the basin. Its huge size makes it one of the largest freshwater fish in the world and it may grow up to three metres and weigh up to 250 kilograms. The giant catfish holds rich cultural significance in the Mekong region, but its population in the wild is rapidly declining. In 2004 the IUCN Red List adjusted the status of the giant catfish to Critically Endangered.

The plight of the catfish indicates the intricate nature of the whole Mekong River Basin. The complexity of the Basin results in the health and population of giant catfish in lower parts of the Basin being affected by changes in upper parts of the Basin, and vice versa. Because the giant catfish serves as an indicator of the ecosystem health and fisheries of the Mekong River, its current status is of great concern to IUCN – The World Conservation Union (IUCN).

While there are many causes of the decline in giant catfish numbers, the rapid environmental changes in the basin have all had an impact. It is therefore essential that any development initiatives consider the potential impact across the whole basin, and that they are based on review of alternative options, consultation with local people, and comprehensive impact assessments.

In order to address the critical status of the giant catfish, and in recognition of the need to collaborate to accomplish this, IUCN has partnered with the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Programme (MWBP). MWBP is a joint programme of the four riparian governments of the Lower Mekong Basin – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam – managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), IUCN – The World Conservation Union and the Mekong River Commission (MRC), in collaboration with other key stakeholders. With funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), UNDP, the Royal Netherlands Government, MRCS, the Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) and other donors, the programme addresses the most critical issues for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in the Mekong wetlands.



The giant catfish is one of four flagship species of MWBP, chosen to be representative of the biodiversity of the region. It is a trans-boundary migratory species found in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand, thus providing an opportunity for regional cooperation on fisheries management issues. MWBP aims to address conservation and management issues affecting the giant catfish through the development and implementation of Species Conservation Action Plans (SCAP).

There are other innovative and effective initiatives aiming to increase the population of the giant catfish, such as the Thai Department of Fisheries' breeding programme. However, the long-term success of these initiatives to establish wild populations of the giant catfish depends on being able to address the greater influences surrounding the reasons for the giant catfish population decline in the wild and capture fisheries in general.

MWBP is addressing giant catfish conservation and the issues surrounding the giant catfish decline by:

- Working with all stakeholders to decrease the catch of wild Mekong Giant Catfish;
- Supporting, in cooperation with project partners, a science-based captive breeding and reintroduction programme; and
- Identifying and managing critical habitats.

Interventions that have already been carried out to support the aims are:

- The production of the Mekong Giant Catfish Status Report, brochure and poster;
- Development of a framework for the development and implementation of the SCAP;
- Preparation for detailed telemetry research on the migration patterns and spawning behaviour of the Mekong Giant Catfish and other associated large migratory catfish;
- Assessment for improving catfish handling procedures in Cambodia;
- Assessment and monitoring of catch economics at the bagnet fisheries in the Tonle Sap river, Cambodia; and
- Monitoring and assessment in Chiang Khong, Thailand and Upper Mekong, Lao PDR.

Through MWBP, IUCN will continue to focus on giant catfish conservation. Future plans have already been made to:

- Collate input from Department of Fisheries for the Species Conservation Action Plan;
- Build support for the 'Buy and Release' programme in Cambodia;
- Improve the landing and handling facilities for the giant catfish;
- Host a multi-sectoral SCAP catfish meeting involving national and regional levels;
- Work with the Darwin Initiative Project to provide technical assistance for the captive breeding programme in Thailand; and
- Conduct a giant catfish migration and spawning study in Northern Thailand.