



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

Historic agreement signed to save the critically endangered migrating giants of the Mekong.... but is it enough?

On 29 March 2006, the fate of the world's largest freshwater fish took a turn for the better. The historic decision to end targeted hunting of the Mekong Giant Catfish in Chiang Khong, northern Thailand was a result of years of dialogue with relevant parties. As a partner of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) has been instrumental in leading the giant catfish conservation efforts in the Mekong Basin.

Occurring widely throughout the Mekong Basin in the past, the Mekong Giant Catfish *Pangasianodon gigas* has become increasingly rare and catch has declined to almost none in some years. Tipping the scale at 293kg, the specimen caught last year in northern Thailand was the largest officially reported to date and possibly the world's largest freshwater fish. Although believed to migrate for thousands of kilometres upstream to spawn, almost nothing is known about the ecology of this species.



Over the years, fishers have continued to catch giant catfish in two primary locations within the Mekong Basin. In Cambodia, these giants are caught when they migrate out of the Great Lake (the Tonle Sap) into the Mekong at the end of the rainy season. The fish are caught as by-catch in the large bagnet fisheries of the Tonle Sap River. On the other hand, the fishers of Chiang Khong have specifically been targeting the giant catfish over the years despite it being listed as Critically Endangered by IUCN (2003) and Appendix 1 of CITES. In Thailand, this has been possible through a special arrangement with the Thai Department of Fisheries (DOF) where the eggs and sperm are extracted from the wild fish that are caught during their spawning migration. This is then used by the Thai DOF for their artificial breeding programme in order to improve the genetic stock of the giant catfish raised in the hatcheries, however this year they no longer require input from the wild stock.

The crash in Giant Catfish Fishery in Northern Thailand and the historic agreement

Based on Chiang Khong catch records over the past 20 years, the highest number caught was 69 individuals in 1990. The catch has since been declining till the giant catfish fishery finally crashed in 2001 with no fish caught for three years in a row. Despite the severe decline in catch, there was still debate about whether the catfish populations were actually declining, with some parties arguing that the fish were just becoming more difficult to catch but reasonable numbers still present. For this reason there was a reluctance to give up the fishing. However, in March 2006, the fishers of the Giant Catfish Club in Chiang Rai Province, northern Thailand signed a historic agreement to give up the 'hunt', although certain conditions were tied to the agreement.

Compensation, culture, tourism and research

Arguing that fishing for the giant catfish has been a practice embedded deep in their culture over the years and huge investments were made for their nets, local fishers asked to be compensated for their nets. They set the price for their nets, and both local and international organisations raised funds to compensate the fishers. They also requested that considerations be made for 'demonstrating' giant catfish fishing at a very small scale for the purposes of culture preservation, tourism and research.

A JOINT UNDP - IUCN - MRC GEF-FUNDED PROGRAMME



CAMBODIA



LAO PDR



THAILAND



VIETNAM



Cambodian bagnet designated for research only

Further down south, below the majestic Khone Falls of the Mekong, the Cambodian Department of Fisheries has been making a comparable effort to conserve the wild populations of the Mekong Giant Catfish. In 2005, the Cambodian Department of Fisheries and the MWBP formed a partnership to create the world's first freshwater conservation concession.

Recently pioneered as an innovative means to protect endangered species, the freshwater conservation concession is designed to reduce the exploitation rate of fisheries by obtaining the commercial rights to fishing in a specified area. In this case, these fishing rights have become limited fishing rights – the option to alter or cease commercial fishing in favour of research and conservation.

Habitat modifications and large scale water infrastructure projects – a looming threat

Overfishing is only one of the threats to the population of the critically endangered giant catfish. While there are many other causes of the decline in giant catfish numbers, the rapid environmental changes in the basin have all had an impact, such as the construction of large scale water infrastructure and river modifications for the purposes of improving navigation. The natural hydrological pattern of the river and its pulses are critical for the life cycles of migratory fish and maintenance of fisheries as a whole. Changes in water levels through operation of dams are already negatively impact fish populations and therefore the ecological integrity of the Mekong. Will the only known spawning ground of the Mekong giant catfish be blasted to make way for huge commercial vessels to sail down the Mekong from China?

Coordinated by MWBP, the species conservation action planning process for the Mekong Giant Catfish attempts to engage in all levels of dialogue and decisions that affect the survival of the charismatic giant catfish in a quest to maintain the ecological integrity of the Mekong for biodiversity and livelihoods.

A small step forward....

On the evening of Friday, 9 June 2006, in the meeting hall of Had Krai District, Chiang Khong, Thai fishers and community members gathered. These local fishers, as a sign of dedication to His Majesty the King, have collectively decided to stop hunting the Mekong Giant Catfish, and were pledging their commitment by handing-over their fishing nets.

The hand-over ceremony marked the outcome of years of ongoing dialogue between stakeholders, including fishers, community, NGOs and government. Senator Tuenjai Deetes, who has played a key role in this decision, was joined by representatives of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP), in leading the hand-over ceremony. As part of the agreement, fishers were compensated for handing-over their nets, with a large symbolic cheque being granted.

The District Chief proudly noted that, "We are turning a new page; we are moving from hunting to conservation". Members of the Mekong Giant Catfish Club also stated that they intend to preserve their knowledge of Catfish fishing, but were happy to give up the hunt in honour of the King.



For further information please contact Alvin Lopez (alvin@mekongwetlands.org)