



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

MEDIA RELEASE

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Nam Songkhram River Basin Fish Festival Promotes Local Livelihoods and Wetland Conservation

The annual fish festival of Sri Songkhram district, Nakhon Phanom province will take place from 7-9 October 2005.

The festival, officially called "The Nam Songkhram River Basin Fish Festival", will feature various attractions such as Thai boxing, takraw, mini-football, an Isaan folk song contest, theatre, a rare fish display contest, and the highlight giant model fish parade. Additionally, there will be displays of local products (OTOP) from each Tambon in Sri Songkhram district.

The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP)* will host an exhibition booth and organise activities to present aspects of local livelihoods and their relationship with the Nam Songkhram river and flooded forest.

The MWBP booth will provide the public with information collected during a two year local ecological knowledge study called Thai Baan Research. The booth will feature a documentary film, posters, photos, and a panel discussion. Visitors can participate in various activities promoting conservation, such as drawing and molding, folk singing, tasting traditional herbs from the flooded forest and fish products from the Nam Songkhram River.

"The annual fish festival is a great opportunity to promote local livelihoods and wetland conservation," said MWBP National Programme Coordinator, Tawatchai Rattanasorn. "By involving the community in fun and educational activities we can raise awareness about wetland issues and how the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme is working in the province to address these issues through capacity building", he continued.

This year MWBP staff and partners will enter a *pla koon*** look-alike into the model fish parade. It is one of a number of fish species which have declined rapidly in recent years, some to the point of local extinction. The *pla koon* is reportedly still caught in the Mekong, but has not been seen for several years in the Nam Songkhram River. The model fish will float down the river from Ban Tha Bor to the Sri Songkhram town bridge on 8 October 2005, and then be lifted onto a vehicle for the parade around the streets to in front of the District Hall.

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*The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (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), The World Conservation Union (IUCN) 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 some of the most critical issues for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in the Mekong wetlands. MWBP aims to strengthen the capacity of organisations and people to develop sustainable livelihoods and manage wetland biodiversity resources wisely. It is a five-year (2004-2009) intervention at three levels – regional, national and local – with demonstration wetland sites in each of the four countries: in the Songkhram river basin, Thailand; in Attapeu province in southern Lao PDR; in Stung Treng, Cambodia; and in the Plain of Reeds in the Mekong Delta, Viet Nam.

***Pla koon* (*Wallago micropogon*) is a migratory fish that is found in the Lower Mekong Basin. They previously migrated to the Songkhram River for spawning in May before returning back to the Mekong River in October or November. The fish did not permanently inhabit the flooded forest or Nam Songkhram River, but only came to nest in deep pools. It lived in thick branches/brush in deep pools. Earthworms, small fish, and other small aquatic animals were the *pla koon*'s favorite food. Local fishers once caught *pla koon* up to approximately 52 kilograms, while the average fish weighed 5-10 kilograms. In the past, if fishers caught a *pla koon* over 20 kilograms in weight, they would make a sacrifice at that place to bring luck for the future. This is because the fishers believe that it has a guardian spirit, similar to the giant catfish. The local fishing gears commonly used for catching *pla koon* were baited hooks, gillnets, bamboo traps, cast nets, stationary trawl nets and seine nets.

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