



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

Fishers hand-over their nets: historic ceremony to mark the end of Mekong Giant Catfish hunting

On the evening of Friday, 9 June 2006, local people, district officials, and programme managers from the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) took part in a ceremony to close the chapter on hunting of Mekong Giant Catfish in Chiang Khong, located along the border with Lao PDR in northern Thailand. The event immediately followed a celebration in honor of His Majesty the King of Thailand's 60th anniversary on the throne.

The ceremony was the culmination of talks that began in 2004 to conserve the threatened species, *Pangasianodon gigas*, known to Thais as "Pla Beuk," which was listed as Critically Endangered by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 2003. Earlier this year, on 29 March, an agreement was struck between the Mekong Giant Catfish Club – a group of 68 families that hunt the fish in April and May – and other concerned parties (The Thai Department of Fisheries, MWBP, WWF, local government, etc.) to stop hunting the fish, provided compensation would be issued to the MCG club for each of its 68 nets. MWBP, IUCN, World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF), National Geographic, the Mekong River Commission, Wildlife Fund Thailand (WFT), and Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) committed to sharing in this expense. Local NGO's, namely the Rak Chiang Khong Group; the River for Life Project, SEARIN; and the Hill Area Development Foundation (HADF), provided key support.



Nine monks at the front stage of the meeting hall led a prayer following words from Chiang Rai Senator and member of the Subcommittee on Natural Resource Security Tuenjai Deetes; the District Chief, Sutep Teawtrakul; Tawatchai Rattanasorn, MWBP Thailand National Programme Coordinator; and Peter-John Meynell, MWBP team leader. The event concluded with an oversized cheque being handed over to Giant Catfish Club leaders by Senator Tuenjai and the MWBP representatives, and a cutaway portion of one exhibited net exchanged in turn.

The actual agreement is a one page document between the Government of Thailand and the Chiang Khong Giant Catfish Fishing Association (GCF club) that commits the club to stop catching the Mekong Giant Catfish (for consumption or trade) yet entitles them a period each year to conduct, with a limited number of boats and nets, "a public demonstration catch" to preserve the traditional culture and methods of catching the fish. A maximum of two fish may be caught then released live back into the river. Fish may be tagged for research purposes. The government confirms that no licenses will be issued for fishing of Pla Beuk from 2006 onwards.

A JOINT UNDP - IUCN - MRC GEF-FUNDED PROGRAMME



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