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Policies critical to solving wetland management woes

Rare aquatic animals face extinction threat**SURASAK GLAHAN**

Nakhon Phanom _ The government's flood prevention scheme on the Songkhram river has put rare aquatic animals, including the giant Mekong catfish, under threat of extinction, water management experts have warned.

David Blake, adviser to the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP), said the construction of weirs on the lower Songkhram river, aimed at protecting the riverside land from seasonal flooding, was "the wrong idea" and could lead to a sharp reduction in the fish population in the river.

The MWBP is a five-year Mekong river basin management project for Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam _ the four lower Mekong countries.

It is being jointly implemented by the World Conservation Union and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Speaking during a recent inspection trip to the Songkhram river, Mr Blake said the land along the river banks had been inundated for centuries, making it a fertile wetland and a crucial spawning and feeding ground for many species of aquatic animals.

"The floods had not harmed the land but enriched them with nutrients and aquatic species," he said.

The weirs, initiated by local politicians three years ago, had not only obstructed the migratory route of aquatic animals, but also depleted biological diversity of the wetland in the Songkhram river basin, he said.

Many large-size dams built upstream in Udon Thani province had also blocked the natural water flow and caused severe inundation

in other areas.

The 420km-long Songkhram river is the longest tributary of the Mekong river. At the peak of the rainy season, some 500,000-600,000 rai of land along the lower reaches of the river is inundated for two to four months.

During this period, fish migrate from the Mekong to the Songkhram river before moving into the floodplains, where they feed and spawn before moving back to the Mekong river in winter.

According to the MWBP's research, the lower Songkhram river basin is home to 124 species of fish, six species of turtle, four species of shrimp, 10 species of mollusc and four species of crab.

Fourteen fish species, including the giant Mekong catfish, are threatened with extinction.

Construction of weirs and dams has destroyed the migratory route, habitat and spawning grounds of many species, threatening the very survival of these creatures, said Mr Blake.

These flood prevention devices had blocked nutrients flowing from upstream to the wetlands, depriving the fish of a suitable spawning ground, he explained.

"The giant Mekong catfish as well as some other rare species are at risk of complete extinction unless something is done to restore the ecological system of the Songkhram river basin," Mr Blake said.

The dams and weirs had also increased the velocity of the water flow, causing more flooding and bank erosion downstream.

Peter-John Meynell, of the UNDP, criticised the government for misleading the public that a flood was always destructive and that large-scale dams were needed to mitigate flood damage.

Mr Meynell pointed out that the wetland management plans of the governments of the Mekong countries had never been really integrated because the value of wetlands had never been really taken into account by them.

"It will get more complicated if Thailand, Laos and other countries start to build more dams. That is where the real devastation is," he

said.

Nawarat Krairapanond, an environmental expert from the Office of the Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, conceded the government had implemented the national wetland management policy without consulting local people, academics or environmental organisations.

Moreover, there had been no legislation on wetlands protection, while related laws had been loosely applied.

He suggested that the government set up a national agency to supervise wetland management. The new body should work closely with local people and ecologists.

"Policy making from the central administration alone will never be successful," he said.

"Local researchers may be able to present analytical information but without transforming the information into policies, proper wetland management would never happen," he said.

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