

Can the Mekong fish trade be preserved as a source of rural jobs?

The fish trade is a key source of income for tens of thousands of people in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Thailand, but this source of income is under serious threat. Results of a new trans-boundary study reveal that the size of the fish trade in this area has been previously underestimated, or has grown in recent years, compared to baselines. Results of this study also show that the trade is a major contributor to employment in the region. However, these vital fish stocks are threatened by destructive fishing methods, pollution from unregulated chemical use, rising demand, and development in the region.

IUCN research shows that these resources, and the livelihoods of the people who depend on them, could be maintained through the following measures:

- Stronger enforcement of country-level fishery laws
- Greater protection, and expansion, of existing fish conservation zones
- Increased transboundary communication and cooperation on trade regulation

Scope of the problem

The fish populations of the Lower Mekong Basin face imminent threats from irresponsible fishing methods, pollution from unregulated chemical use, rising demand for consumption, and development along the river (Mekong River Commission Technical Paper #10). IUCN participated in a three-country research project to investigate the fish trade along one of three major trans-boundary routes in the region—between Stung Treng, Cambodia; Champassak, Lao PDR; and, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand. This research estimates the fish trade from Cambodia to Lao PDR to be 530 tonnes per year, a trade that was previously estimated to be only 87 tonnes per year by LARReC (Phonvisay and Bush) in 2001.

The trans-boundary trade of fish between Lao PDR, Cambodia and Thailand directly generates substantial employment for fishers, traders, and exporters. Over 20,000 people are directly employed in the fish trade along the Stung Treng to Lao PDR route alone, and fishers rely on the sale of fish for a substantial portion of their household income—23%, 70%, and 50-100% for fishers in the Cambodian, Lao, and Thai study areas, respectively. For traders and exporters, the fish trade makes up an even greater portion of household income. It also indirectly supports truck drivers, ice sellers, fishing gear makers and others.

Most people who work in the fish trade are economically disadvantaged rural villagers with limited alternative employment options. This being the smallest of the three major trade routes (the other two exporting fish from Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia to Thailand), the thousands of people identified in this study provide a representative sample of the many rural people living in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Thailand who stand to lose their livelihoods if a decrease in fish stocks occurs.

Implications

- The study results establish the fish trade as a major source of rural employment. A healthy fish population in the Mekong River is vital to maintaining economic prosperity among the people of the Lower Mekong Basin.
- The fisheries legislation passed by the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Thailand individually to regulate and police the trade and transportation of fish is positive but incomplete, and has not been strongly enforced. Fishers, traders, and even officials interviewed were not always aware of what the laws are and therefore compliance is still low.
- The threats to the Mekong's fisheries are international.
 - The fish trade sector is not well regulated or standardized among Lao PDR, Cambodia and Thailand. This leads to administrative arbitrage, trade inefficiencies, unfair practices, and a lack of a coordinated response to difficulties or environmental threats.
 - Legislation at the individual country level alone is inadequate—regional cooperation is required.

The research team makes the following key recommendations, detailing how best to ensure the continuing abundance of fish in the Lower Mekong Basin, based upon this study:

Key recommendations

For Lao PDR, Thailand, and Cambodia:

- Strengthen and simplify law enforcement through capacity building for the fish trade stakeholders and the local officials.
- Consider a trans-boundary fish trade agreement between the three countries.
- Raise public awareness about the economic importance of fisheries through mass media.
- Improve trans-boundary information sharing.
- Improve multi-sectoral collaboration within the different ministries in each country.
- Encourage the creation of Fisher and Fish Trader Associations at national and trans-boundary levels.
- Include the employment and incomes generated by the fish trade sector and the vulnerability of stakeholders in the cost-benefit analysis of development projects for the river.

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