



# Community Fisheries

## ComFish - Supporting Food Security and Aquatic Biodiversity



Lao PDR's freshwater fisheries, unlike marine fisheries, cannot move to waters beyond the Mekong River Basin if fish stocks collapse.  
Is Lao PDR's fishing industry secure?

# Life of the Mekong River

## The Mekong River

The Mekong River and its tributaries in Lao PDR form an intricate network of waterways that are part of the Mekong River Basin, which spans areas of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The basin provides home to over 1,300 fish species and a host of endangered species, including the critically endangered Mekong Giant Catfish, Siamese Crocodile, Asian Giant Softshell Turtle and the Irrawaddy Dolphin.

The Lower Mekong Basin is the second largest inland fishery in the world. The Mekong River Commission estimates the inland fisheries of the Lower Mekong Basin contribute to two percent of global fish catch for both marine and freshwater fisheries.

Wild capture fisheries are worth over US \$2 billion per annum to all Mekong nations. In Lao PDR, fisheries are estimated to contribute six to eight percent of the gross domestic product.



Increasingly rare and endangered aquatic animal like Asian Giant Softshell Turtles are protected by village aquatic resource management plans.

## People and Biodiversity

Lao PDR's rapidly growing and largely rural population relies on healthy wetlands and waterways to provide food and trade.

Fish account for up to 80 percent of the animal protein in people's diets. Per capita, Lao consume approximately 40 kilograms of fish each year.

In southern Laos, over 80 percent of households participate in fisheries, accounting for around 20 percent of household income.



Fish processing for export to market.

Throughout Lao PDR the fishing practices adopted by local communities are shaped by different cultural beliefs and local ecological knowledge.

Some communities and ethnic groups regard specific habitat as holding spiritual value and protect the environment near these habitats - for example fishing and hunting of Siamese crocodiles is prohibited around sacred wetlands.

Other communities enforce fishing regulations to protect critical aquatic habitat and maintain wild fish stocks.

# Supporting Aquatic Biodiversity

## The Challenge

The challenge is to supply increasing market demand without depleting wild fish stocks.

Lao PDR's fishing industry relies entirely on the health and biodiversity of the Mekong River and its tributaries. This natural resource sustains some of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in Lao PDR, as well as the urban market.

Currently, Lao PDR's fisheries are under massive pressure to feed the country's expanding population. As these fisheries are freshwater, they do not have the luxury of fishing further offshore if the Mekong fish stocks collapse.

Fishermen across Lao PDR claim their valuable fish stocks and biodiversity are in rapid decline. Infrastructure developments like dams and roads, over-fishing during the dry season for trade, and the use of destructive fishing gears like explosives and poisons are damaging crucial aquatic habitats and depleting fish populations for trade.



Women harvest biodiversity as important component of household food security.



Measuring the depth of pool in the river

## The Proposed Solution

ComFish (Community Fisheries) works in with the Lao Department of Livestock and Fisheries, local communities and government agencies along six Mekong tributaries, in Bolikhamxay, Khammouan and Savannakhet Provinces.

ComFish aims to develop community river management plans that conserve aquatic health and biodiversity while meeting market demand.

These sustainably managed fisheries are generating greater income for fishermen and providing long-term food security for communities basin-wide.

At a national level, ComFish is helping integrate the knowledge and experience of rural communities into fisheries policy and management strategies.

ComFish is made possible with support from New Zealand's International Aid & Development Agency (NZAID) and Oxfam America.

## Community Fisheries Phase II

ComFish Phase II is currently under development. Phase II will expand on work achieved in Phase I by developing community river management plans across Lao PDR. It will help communities increase their long term economic returns from capture fisheries by strengthening management practices through the establishment of community fishing networks.

### Objectives

- Extend fisheries co-management plans throughout Lao PDR
- Empower communities to manage their fisheries sustainably
- Professionalise the fishery sector through the establishment of cooperatives
- Help establish government policy and technical capacity that supports aquatic resource management plans

# Securing a Sustainable Future

## Project Activities

### Fish Conservation Zones

ComFish has worked with local government agencies and communities along tributaries of the Mekong River, since 2005, to establish over 20 Village Aquatic Resources Management plans aimed at protecting critical aquatic habitats, and boosting economic return to communities.

Each village management plan draws on the ecological knowledge of local people to develop management objectives and regulations.

For example, areas that provide fish spawning grounds and refuge for migratory fish populations are often identified by local people as critical habitats, and management plans are structured around protecting these areas.

ComFish helps facilitate dialogue between fishing communities and local government to identify problems and opportunities in river management.

By sharing local knowledge with policy makers the project aims to ensure fisheries are developed in a way which draws on the experience and concerns of local fishing communities.



Villagers elect a sign board announcing local management regulations.



The ecological knowledge is used to describe aquatic resources and define management plans.

WWF Laos is a part of the WWF Greater Mekong Programme, working to promote sustainable environmental management across the Greater Mekong Subregion.

WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

- conserving the world's biological diversity
- ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption

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