

MEKONG RIVER PANGASIIDAE CATFISH MIGRATIONS AND THE KHONE FALLS WING TRAP FISHERY IN SOUTHERN LAOS

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ABSTRACT

Laos is heavily dependent on natural resources to support the livelihoods of the bulk of its human population. Wild capture fisheries in the Mekong River and its tributaries are particularly important for providing rural Lao people with income and are their main source of protein. This article examines an important Mekong River fishery in the extreme south of Laos for migratory pangasiid catfishes and other species at the beginning of the annual rainy season. Four years of catch-effort fisheries data for a pair of large wing traps are presented. Although over 100 other species are caught in the fishery, the pangasiid catfish *Pangasius conchophilus* was by far the dominant species in catches. Peak catches for the wing trap fishery are not correlated with lunar cycles. Catch data, and 'local ecological knowledge' of fishers, suggest that these fish migrations are associated with rising river levels at the beginning of the rainy season. Changes in hydrological conditions in the Mekong River and its large tributaries caused by the construction of large hydroelectric dams could seriously impact critically important fish migrations and associated fisheries.

Key words: artisanal, Cambodia, capture fisheries, freshwater fisheries, straddling stocks, Laos.

INTRODUCTION

In Laos and throughout most of the Lower Mekong River Basin, fishing and farming in small subsistence-oriented communities remain the way of life for most people, and fish and other aquatic products are the most important source of animal protein. As Laos is a landlocked nation, the Mekong River and its tributaries are the main source of wild capture fisheries.

Many local activities and traditions—rice cultivation, fish harvesting, water festivals—are timed to the seasonal rise and fall of the Mekong. Every year around May the Mekong River begins to swell as snow melts in the Tibetan mountains and, more importantly, monsoon rains arrive in the middle and lower parts of the basin. As water levels and currents increase, many fish species become especially active, and most exhibit migratory behavior of varying degrees (BAIRD *ET AL.*, 2003; BAIRD *ET AL.*, 2001B; BAIRD, 2001; BAIRD *ET AL.*, 1999A; RAINBOTH, 1996; SINGHANOUVONG *ET AL.*, 1996; ROBERTS & BAIRD,

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Figure 1. The study area: Khong District, Champasak Province, Southern Lao PDR

