The Technical Advisory Board (TAB) established in June 2000 requested that more information be made available on the status of the Giant Mekong Catfish. Below are some facts compiled by the MRC Cambodian Capture Fisheries Component.

**Endangered Species**

Some important fish species such as *Pangasianodon gigas* (Giant Mekong Catfish) and *Catlocarpio siamensis* (Giant Mekong Barb) are considered endangered. Their capture is not allowed under the Cambodian Fisheries Laws.

However, every year between late October and early December a few of these species are still caught in the *dai* (bag-net) fisheries. They are sold quietly to middlemen who later transport them to Thailand or sell them locally for home consumption or processing.

**The Last Two Fishing Seasons**

In the 1999 fishing season the Fisheries Department of Cambodia (DOF) gave the order to buy any captured specimens of the Giant Catfish in order to find out how abundant they still were. Three specimens were purchased. Two of them, a male (2.28 m, 163 kg) and a female (2.35 m, 176 kg) had already died and were prepared as museum exhibits. The third fish of 250 kg was released alive. The Component heard about another one (190 kg) that was sold for consumption.
In the 2000 fishing season the fish were again purchased. This time funds were made available by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Also the DoF and the MRC Component for the Management of the Freshwater Capture Fisheries of Cambodia (CCF) cooperated. Dai owners were contacted individually and asked to immediately inform the Component by telephone of the capture of a Giant Catfish, or Barb and other large catfish to allow verification of its good health, buy it and re-release it. The released fish were given a tag for future identification if captured again.

Altogether 11 Giant Catfish were caught this season. Sizes varied between 135 and 268 kg. Six were found to be in good condition and released. In addition, the Component learned of the capture of 13 Giant Barbs, six of which could also be bought and released. The Giant Barbs were smaller (8-120 kg), but more expensive per kg.

It appears that more fish were caught this season than last, perhaps mainly because the dai fishers were better informed of the buy-and-release scheme.

15 Rows for dai Fishers
There are 15 rows and 63 dai units in all the bag-net fisheries in the Tonle Sap River. The first row is near Phnom Penh City and the fifteenth is 35 kilometres north of Phnom Penh. They operate from October to March each year when the water flows from the Great Lake and its surrounding flood plains to the Mekong River and many fish species migrate in large numbers downstream through the Tonle Sap to the Mekong. Of the 15 rows nearly all giant fish are caught in rows 1 and 2. At the location of these rows the river is somewhat narrower and the current faster. Also the river is relatively deeper just upstream of row 2.

There is international concern about the continued survival of the Giant Catfish. The species is still being captured in most of its range despite this being illegal. Hence, the support of the WWF and other organisations. The DOF is presently considering closing rows 1 and 2 from October until the middle of December. However, this would prevent continued research on the species in Cambodia, whereas the buy-and-release scheme does not harm the fisher's livelihood, allows research to be done and generates public interest for a wider conservation effort of the species.

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