The Siphandone area of the Mekong is one of the richest fishing grounds in Lao PDR. Prior to the 1980s, catches were abundant, but used only for family subsistence. Increasing populations, new gears and high prices have increased the fishing effort. Now communities are turning to co-management to ensure the sustainability of their fisheries.

In terms of biodiversity and culture, the southern Lao province of Champasack is one of the country's richest. Rice yields are high and fish are abundant, particularly in Khong district. One of ten districts in Champasack, it is also known as Siphandone (four thousand islands) and includes the spectacular Khone Falls. Thanks to its unique geographical and ecological conditions, Siphandone is not only home to more than 72,000 people but also farmland and diverse aquatic habitats. In the dry season from November to April, most of the islands are used for growing rice and vegetables. In the wet season from May to October, more than half the islands are flooded, providing feeding and spawning grounds for many fish species.

Fishing is one of Siphandone's most important activities. Most households are engaged in fishing,
both for subsistence and as a means of earning income. One study in 2000 found that 80 per cent of the fish from the Khong district went to the local market in Champasack with the rest going to Vientiane and Thailand.

### Fishing in the Old Days

Wild capture fisheries in Khong Island are associated with traditional cultures and beliefs. Fishers use fishing time not only to catch fish but also to exchange news and culture within their villages or family. Boun Ban village celebration days usually take place at the end of the year when the rice harvest is completed or in the Lao New Year in April. Rural people prohibit fishing during the full moon (van sin), believing it can bring bad luck. Some deep pools are declared vang sak sid — deep pools for the spirits who protect and watch over villages.

Fishing in Siphandone was traditionally for subsistence only. Elderly fishermen in Ban Hat village say fish were abundant and easy to catch 30 years ago. Since everybody caught enough for their families, fish had low monetary value and were not found in markets. People who did not have time to go fishing themselves could ask a neighbour for a fish. This was part of Lao traditional custom — sharing not only fish but also labour for agricultural work. Fishing was the main activity for adults. Normally, the husbands or other head of household would fish while the wives and children took part in the processing.

Fishermen used traditional fishing gear that did not harm brood stock. In Ban Don Houat in the 1960s, for example, only two cast nets existed. These were made from native trees and took almost a year to make. The mesh size was large (20 to 30 cm) and the nets were used to catch big fish for traditional cultural ceremonies. For regular consumption, only hooks were used to catch fish near the riverbank closest to the village. People could even use their hands to catch fish in the roots of trees as fish migrated. The abundance of fish is reflected in the Lao proverb kang mo wai pa ten kuan eng, which means: put the pot on the fire and the fish will jump in themselves.

In the dry season, dogs would bark at the sound of hundreds of pa soi (Henicorhynchus sp.) migrating upstream. To catch enough for a small jar of fermented fish, a fisherman with a boat did not need any gear — he simply splashed the water with a paddle and the fish jumped into the boat. Big fish of up to 80 kg were also found 30 to 40 years ago. Fishermen from Ban Hat, Hatxaykhoum and Don Houat reported finding Mekong freshwater stingrays (Himantura chaophraya, known locally as pa fa lai) including many specimens more than 100 kg, Jullien’s barbs (Probarbus jullieni, or pa eun) and small-scale croakers (Boesemania microlepis, or pa kuang).

### Changes since the mid-1980s

The declining catches of some species was first noticed in the early 1980s. In general, however, catches were still good. Nylon cast nets and gill nets existed but they were expensive and not everybody could afford them. Paddleboards were common and a few motorboats existed but were mostly used for transport. Fishing was still under control and no harm had come to brood stock or particular species. Management was traditional, based on rules of district or provincial agricultural offices that mainly dealt with problems related to trans-boundary fishing rather than local community issues.

Over the past two decades, the development of upstream water resources for power and irrigation has partly affected the aquatic resources and people of Khong district. In addition, a study in 2001 found that removing vegetation from riverbanks and islands to cultivate crops had probably accelerated erosion. Bank erosion has affected villages across the district. With water flows fluctuating in the wet season and a 30-fold difference between water discharges in the wet and dry seasons, the riverbanks are moving closer to gardens and houses.

The improvement of roads has made it easier to access cities, and electricity has made it possible to preserve fish for longer transportation. According to a 2003 study, more than half of the fish caught in Khong Island were being transported to the Pakse and Vientiane markets and possibly Thailand as well.
Fisheries resources are now threatened by overfishing to meet strong demand. As fishermen compete with sophisticated fishing practices and more boats and gear, yield and species composition have declined. Fishing gear is available at affordable prices and the number of motorboats used for fishing has increased. On average, each household owns at least two or three nylon gill nets and one nylon cast net. Fishing now involves the whole family including women and children. The catch is not only for consumption, but also for trade – meaning that larger and more valuable species are being targeted.

Fish are no longer given as gifts. Fishing is now for trade and the exchange of goods, and it now takes more effort to catch fish for home consumption. Aware of the difficulties, local communities began looking at mitigation measures to protect and conserve their resources for sustainable development. In the early 1990s, government institutions concerned about environmental degradation started developing a database of fish biology and the socio-economic value of fisheries. This followed the endorsement in 1989 of the Prime Minister’s Decree 118 on management and conservation of aquatic animals, wild animals, and hunting and fishing.

At the same time, non-governmental organisations were promoting the conservation of aquatic resources and played an important role in establishing community-based management systems. With financial support from the Lao Community and Dolphin Protection Project villagers began to protect dolphins in Hangkhone village in 1993. Other villages in Khong Island learnt from the project village and began to realise that only protected brood stock and restricted fishing gear would help them to sustain the exploitation of fisheries resources. More and more villages joined the project.

Siphandone now uses a community-based management approach where local communities establish their own fish-conservation zones based on the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry’s decree on the Conservation of Wildlife and Aquatic Animals. Rules forbid certain fishing methods and the catching of certain aquatic animals like frogs in the spawning season. Local and national authorities have acknowledged and supported the village rules and the co-management system whereby fishermen and the ministry share responsibility for protecting natural resources. Today, local communities believe that the reappearance of some fish species is the result of their effective management within fish conservation zones. As a result, the basic regulations of fisheries conservation villages – such as prohibiting electro-fishing, the poisoning and scaring of fish and certain types of fishing gear – have become a general rule for fishing in the Siphandone area.

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Further reading:


