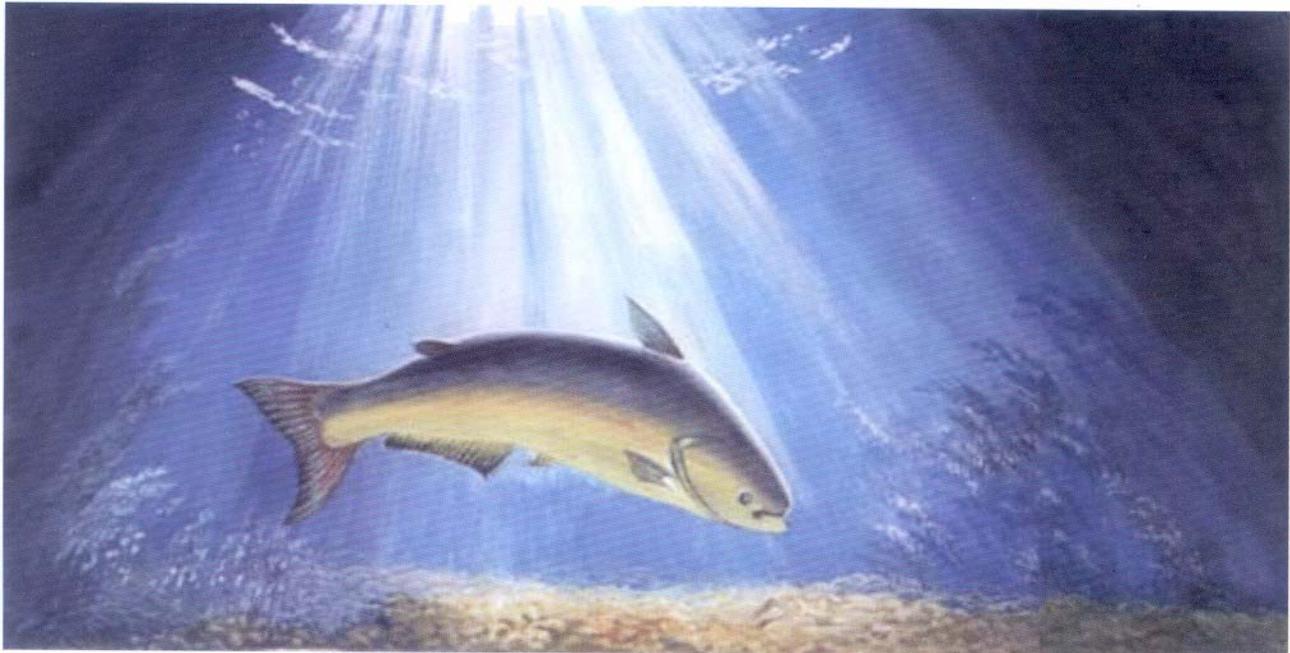


THE MEKONG GIANT CATFISH: A NEW SYMBOL OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN?

By ZebHogan*



Save Cambodia's Wildlife arranges for artists and writers to produce books on environmental education. This picture, painted by Cambodian artist Srey Bandol, was created for an upcoming book on the ecology and conservation of the Mekong giant catfish and other migratory fish species. For more information, please contact the organisation in charge, Save Cambodia's Wildlife (e-mail: wildlife@bigpond.com.kh).

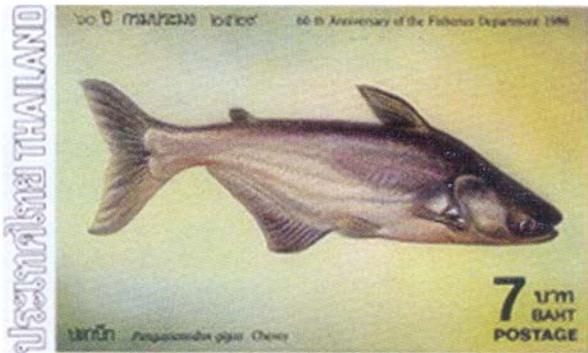
Animals often serve as powerful symbols of group identity. In the United States of America, for example, the salmon has emerged as a flagship species for regional solidarity and environmental responsibility. These symbolic animals are usually large, often endangered, and sometimes migratory. Wide-ranging species (such as the tiger) make effective flagships because they are known to a large number of people in many countries.

Endangered species can also stimulate public and political support for cooperative action to restore populations and protect habitat. In border areas, the protection of such species necessitates transnational cooperation and such cooperation has led to policy formation and the establishment of international regulatory agencies.

In the Mekong River Basin, the Mekong giant catfish is a model species for promotion of cooperation at the international level because:

1. The Mekong giant catfish is well-known throughout the Basin. The fish is migratory, transboundary, and endemic to the Mekong River.
2. Many people believe the Mekong giant catfish is a sacred fish. In Thailand and the Lao PDR, a complex ritual accompanies the fishing of this species. In Cambodia, the species is called 'trey reach' or royal fish, signifying the special status of the giant catfish in the Khmer heritage.
3. The Mekong giant catfish is **endangered**. Populations of the Mekong giant catfish have been declining for several decades. The fish, once captured throughout the Basin, is now very rare.
4. The Mekong giant catfish is one of the only Mekong species specifically mentioned in several international treaties and agreements, such as the IUCN Red

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Once a frequently captured fish throughout Thailand, the giant catfish has disappeared from sites where it was once catch. For example, in Nong Khai Province in the early 1900s, forty to fifty fish was caught per year. Since that time, however, the number of fish has declined. In 1967, Thai fishermen captured eleven fish in the Nong Khai area. By 1970, the giant catfish occurred only rarely as by-catch of beach seine fisheries. Today, very few *P.gigas* are reported from Nong Khai province

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5. National law supports the conservation of the Mekong giant catfish. It is illegal to capture the Mekong giant catfish in Cambodia and Thailand.

6. Scientific techniques exist to study the giant catfish. The Thai Department of Fisheries has developed a method to breed this species in captivity and studies are also currently underway to determine the status and distribution of the species in the wild.

7. While wild populations of the Mekong giant catfish appear close to extinction, research and conservation may provide a means to restore populations of giant catfish.

8. The giant catfish probably spawn in northern Thailand, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and possibly China. This is the same area that will be impacted by the controversial Mekong navigation project.

9. The Mekong giant catfish appear to migrate out of the Tonle Sap Lake and into the mainstream Mekong River at the end of the rainy season. This migration pattern is common among fish of the Cambodian Mekong and thus the protection of the migratory pathway may benefit an entire assemblage of migratory fish.

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An important and well-known fish in the Lao PDR, the present status of the giant catfish is unknown. In Luang Prabang the catch declined from twelve fish per year to just three in 1968. No fish were progress: a forum caught in 1972, 1973 or 1974. Since then, no significant catch of for transboundary giant catfish has been reported from the Luang Prabang area. In conservation in southern Lao PDR, giant catfish have been reported in the vicinity of Indochina Parks Khone Falls, but the status of the giant catfish here has not been assessed since 1993.