



PHOTOS BY IAN BAIRD

Villagers cooperate to catch migrating *Pangasius catfish* using scoop nets in the Khone Falls area of the Mekong River.

Inland Community Fisheries in Southern Laos

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Since 1993, a series of aquatic resource co-management workshops have been ongoing, established by the Lao government and fisheries agencies for village farmers in the Khong District in southern Laos, aiming for a sustainable use of inland capture fisheries resources. This article describes the mechanics involved and the participants' perspective, as well as reporting the outcomes and progress of the workshops so far.

Inland wild capture fisheries resources based on the bounty of the Mekong River basin are extremely important to the 4.6 million people in the landlocked country of Laos. This is especially true for the over 60 000 people in

Khong District, Champasak Province, which borders Cambodia to the South, and is best known for the islands in the middle of the Mekong River locally known as 'Siphandone', or the four thousand islands. In that most of

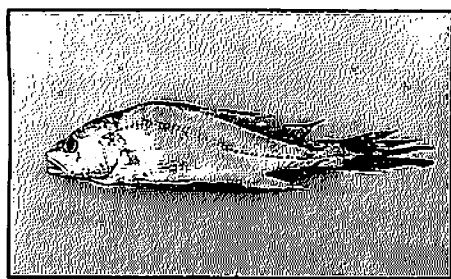
the 135 rural villages in the district are situated on these islands or along the banks of the Mekong River, it is not surprising that almost every family in the district catches fish for daily consumption and income. Apart from

semi-subsistence rice paddy agriculture, fishing is the most important occupation in Khong District. However, family fish catches have been declining over recent years.

The Lao government has come to recognize that many villagers in Khong District have a considerable amount of traditional knowledge about aquatic life and problems related to its exploitation. It has become clear that it would be a mistake to try to institute a top-down management system in order to regulate the use of these resources. Even if the government had enough knowledge about the complicated ecological and socioeconomic factors affecting aquatic resources, as to enable them to draft a set of regulations designed to deal with the key issues (which in fact they don't have), it would still be extremely difficult and excessively costly to enforce them in remote areas.

With the above points in mind, a process for facilitating and promoting a co-management aquatic resource management system has been developed by the Champasak Province Agriculture and Forestry Division (CPAFD) (which is in charge of overseeing fisheries issues in the province), the Khong District Administration (KDA), and the Lao Community Fisheries and Dolphin Protection Project (LCFDPP), an NGO-supported government project which has been based in the village of Ban Hang Khone in Khong District since January 1993.

Since late 1993, when the first fisheries management and conservation planning workshops were organized in various communities in Khong District (see *Naga*, October 1994, p.



Boesemania microlepis, about 170 g. This species is benefitting from the conservation of deepwater habitat.

10-12), a co-management system has evolved and been adapted to take local realities into account.

While the LCFDPP initially concentrated its efforts on working with just the twelve villages in Khone Sub-district, in late 1994 the project expanded to include many other vil-

lages in Khong District. After the project's first set of target villages received government consent to officially set up their own aquatic resources management and conservation plans, many village leaders from communities outside of Khone Sub-district became interested in managing and conserving their own fisheries and other aquatic resources, and the LCFDPP began being flooded with requests from villages wanting to get involved. So far, 44 communities in Khong District have set up and implemented fisheries and aquatic resources management rules.

As part of the process to develop a governmentally acceptable system for co-management, in mid-1994 the project staff helped draft an official Lao language recommendation pamphlet in order to create a tool for assisting communities and governmental bodies by outlining how villages could voluntarily and legally make up their own management systems for fisheries and other aquatic resources, even without the project's assistance. Since then most of the over 900 villages in Champasak province have received copies of the pamphlet, although the Khong District program is the most established and successful.

In Khong District, the KDA and CPAFD have specified an approval process before formal village fisheries and aquatic resource management workshops can be initiated. The first step is for community leaders to make a written request for the LCFDPP's assistance in organizing a workshop.

Once a formal request is received by the project (either directly, or through the District), the project begins to plan. Tentative dates are set after meeting with village leaders, and plans are sent to the District for approval. Once they have been approved, they are sent to the province, where the CPAFD approves them. The provincial Governor gives the final approval, after which time the workshops are officially allowed to take place.

The village fisheries and aquatic resource management workshops in Khong District are one day long. The project staff arrive at the



Villagers attending a fisheries and aquatic resource management workshop at a local Buddhist temple in a rural area.

host-village one day prior to the workshops to ensure that all necessary arrangements have been made (i.e., have neighboring village leaders been invited? Has the village had adequate meetings with all members of the community in preparation for the workshop?, etc.). The LCFDPP staff will also meet with villagers to answer their questions, clarify various areas of concern or confusion to the villagers, and provide information about scientific fisheries data collected by the project. The project staff invariably sleep in the village on the night before the workshop.

Since virtually 100% of the families in the communities are semi-subsistence farmers and fishers, they are able to set their own schedules and make time for the workshops. At least one member from each family in the host-village attends. Males tend to be better represented in the workshops than are females, although 30% of the participants are women.

Workshops have two main parts. In the first part, two of the LCFDPP staff and a representative from the Agriculture and Forestry Office of Khong District make speeches in which they outline the importance of sustainably managing fisheries and aquatic resources for present and future generations, and the importance of ensuring that all participants feel free to openly contribute their ideas during the second part of the workshop. The successes and failures of other villages in Khong District are outlined, and ways of making the planning process go smoothly are suggested. The following discussions are normally quite lively, and various opinions are generally given regarding the appropriateness of various management and conservation

measures. The villagers, all of whom are lowland Laotians, generally come to consensus in a large number of areas.

Village leaders from neighboring villages are always invited to the host-village's workshops and are asked to give their opinions regarding the appropriateness of the rules decided on by the host-villagers. Finally, the host-villagers are not allowed to make discriminatory rules which give themselves greater rights to resource exploitation than their neighbors. This point is important, as outsiders are more willing to accept village rules if they know that host-villagers are also obliged to abide by them.

Under Lao law, village rules are fully recognized, and village administrations are entitled to enforce them on their own. Some villages opt for a soft approach, in which warnings and social pressure put on violators are used to ensure that rules are abided by. However, the vast majority of villagers are surprisingly adamant that stronger measures are required to ensure that the future benefits of those who abide by them are not eroded by a few violators. In those villages, fines are usually used as the main instrument for enforcement, along with the confiscation of fishing gear and in some cases fish catches as well. Although villagers are commonly in favor of setting fines as high as 10 000 or even 20 000 kip per offense (US\$1 = 920 kip), the Lao government requires that fines not exceed 5 000 kip per offense. In cases where there are repeat violations, village administrations may decide to formally charge offenders and send the cases to the District court for decision.

After all the potential measures for management have been discussed to the satisfaction of the villagers, the recorders of those rules agreed upon during the workshop read the final set of rules back to the villagers so any additional amendments can be made, and finally, the document become 'village law'. Once the workshop comes to an end, everybody in the village enjoys a 'solidarity meal' paid for by the project but prepared by the villagers.

It is important to point out that the village rules development process is flexible, and as villagers gain experience regarding the usefulness of individual measures, they have the right to amend their rules at village meetings organized by themselves (and without the involvement of the project), providing that the majority of the inhabitants of the village are in favor of the changes.

Since beginning the program, the

LCFDPP and the KDA have made a considerable effort to monitor the experiences of villages which have gone through the workshop process. As expected, the effectiveness of the rules in terms of enforcement and achieving village mandated goals has varied depending on the village.



The teacher fisher, as he is known to villagers, has extensive knowledge about the life cycles of indigenous fish and ways to conserve them.

It is notable that no two of the 44 villages which have gone through the process have ever decided on the exactly same measures. That shows how important it is for rules to be locally developed. The conditions in even neighboring villages are often significantly different, in terms of ecological and geographical conditions, as well as socioeconomic and cultural conditions.

The LCFDPP has also been facilitating solidarity in the communities and between villagers and the project by adding a grass-roots community development component to its activities. Rice banks have been set up, animal raising revolving funds have been established, wells have been dug, schools have been repaired, and women's activities have been promoted. In all cases, villages have contributed labor, locally available materials, funds, and most importantly, their ideas and group organizational skills.

In terms of the actual impact that conservation and management measures have had on

fisheries and other aquatic resources, it must be recognized that many positive results will not be measurable for years. Furthermore, some measures may only slow the decline of resources rather than halt it or increase populations, further making analysis of effectiveness of various measures difficult. Moreover, the project, the District and the villagers are aware that many natural and human factors, such as seasonal flood levels, forest destruction, industrial pollution, and the construction of large dams in the basin are largely beyond their control and may cause declines of particular resources in the future. In those cases, only basinwide cooperation in managing certain highly migratory fish populations and other resources will ensure that aquatic resources are not degraded further.

Villagers from Ban Tholathi reported in mid-1995 that they had not found so many juveniles of the species in their catches for well over 20 years. They were also found in other nearby villages like Ban Sala, where they had been completely absent from catches for as long as anyone could remember.

Villagers from Ban Tholathi have also reported finding large numbers of juveniles of the large fish species *Mystus microphthalmus*, or 'pa kheung' in their catches this year.

In Ban Tha Kham, and other villages on Don Som Island, villagers have reported significant increases in black water rice paddy fish species such as *Clarias* sp. and *Channa striata*. They attributed catch increases in October and November 1995 to rules the villages began implementing in late 1994 and early 1995. They included the banning of the catching of black water fishes in May and June, when the first major rains begin and individual fish in spawning condition migrate up streams to penetrate newly vitalized wetlands.

Because of the great diversity of measures designed to deal with localized problems in the villages, they cannot all be described here. Suffice to say that many of these measures have great promise and are based on simple reasoning and sound ecological principles, as observed by villagers over long periods of time.

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