

Press release: Experts gather to save giant catfish

Genetics & biodiversity

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Experts have gathered in Bangkok to devise a plan to save the giant Mekong catfish from extinction. The giant catfish, one of the world's largest freshwater fish and an icon of the Mekong River, is deemed to be close to extinction in the wild. Its precarious status is thought to be due to excessive fishing and, to a lesser extent, damage to its natural habitat.

The meeting will help coordinate various conservation initiatives that are underway in Mekong basin countries by both government agencies and private conservation organizations. Current efforts to save the catfish include captive breeding and restocking programs, and buy-back schemes where fishermen are paid to release captured fish alive. With only a handful of fish caught each year, very little is known about the biology of the giant catfish. Even the location of its spawning grounds remain a mystery.

Last chance to see: The giant Mekong catfish is disappearing from the wild. Photo: Zeb Hogan.

In the past there has been little coordination between conservation initiatives and their effectiveness is unknown. The new project aims to change this by bringing together the major players to develop an overarching conservation strategy for the giant catfish. Participants include the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific; the Mekong River Commission (MRC); the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Program operated by the United Nations Development Program, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and MRC; the Imperial College of London; and the Fisheries Departments of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. The project, which aims to develop a comprehensive conservation strategy within two years, is co-funded by the Darwin Initiative.

Pedro Bueno, Director General of NACA, says: "This is an exciting regional initiative to save one of the world's most endangered fishes from extinction. The catfish doesn't know national boundaries, and we need to work together within the Mekong basin to conserve it effectively. Bringing together expertise in all aspects of conservation, from fisheries management to captive breeding, will help us to develop a joint strategy to conserve this magnificent animal."

Additional measures to conserve the catfish could include modifying fishing practices to reduce accidental catch, establishing protected areas, genetic analysis to determine if there is a single or multiple stocks, conducting a genetic inventory of captive populations and establishing a 'gene bank' of frozen eggs and sperm.

A print-quality version of this photograph is available for [download](#).

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