

## 1-4. The Mekong River: The World's Largest Freshwater Fishery

### Consumption of Freshwater Fish in the Mekong Basin

According to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) statistics, 750,000 tons of freshwater fish are caught every year in the four countries of the Lower Mekong. Field surveys, however, estimate around 2.1 million tons per year, equivalent to 18% of the global freshwater fish catch. Calculating from the FAO statistics, the annual consumption of freshwater fish per person in the Lower Mekong is 13.8 kg, while the global average is a mere 2.3 kg. The annual consumption in Cambodia is 19.4 kg, the highest in the world. Summarizing further 20 freshwater fish surveys, the average annual consumption per person leaps to 32.3 kg for Cambodia, 24.5 kg for Laos, 24.9 kg for Thailand, and 34.5 kg for Vietnam.



According to FAO data for 2000 to 2003, of the animal protein consumed per day, the proportion supplied by freshwater fish was 49.8% in Cambodia, 38.31% in Laos, 16.19% in Thailand, and 12.87% in Vietnam, which can be seen to be extremely high when compared with the global average of 5.78%. Cambodia and Laos are especially conspicuous in this regard.

### Mekong River Fisheries

Recent data show that catches in Mekong basin fisheries are estimated to have an annual economic value of between USD 2.1 billion and USD 3.8 billion, and between USD 4.2 billion and USD 7.6 billion at retail prices (ICEM 2010).

In the vicinity of the Khone Falls in southern Laos, the Mekong River mainstream fishing industry supports more than 65,000 households. The average household in this area is thought to catch an annual average of 355 kg of fish, and consume 249 kg of fish. The total catch in the area close to the Khone Falls is estimated at 4,000 tons, worth between USD 450,000 and USD 1 million (Baran, Jantunen, and Chong 2008).

Some sources estimate that the freshwater fish production in Cambodia, including fish farming, accounts for between 11.7% to 16% of the GDP, while another source estimates between 8% to 12%. While these figures are all estimates, and it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics for small-scale fisher-folks, the importance of the Mekong River fisheries can be understood from these approximate data (ICEM 2010).

### Fish Support Daily Life and Culture

At present, fish from the Mekong River Basin are being distributed across international borders due to the development of refrigeration facilities and transportation networks. In fact, fish were an important item of exchange in the barter that took place before the establishment of the current distribution system.

Until about 50 years ago, the exchange of fish and rice took place over an extensive region, including southern Laos and northeastern Thailand. In the era when a subsistence lifestyle was virtually universal, people spent much of their time gathering in order to secure food. In villages where the main vocation was farming, it was difficult to find time to obtain supplementary foods (to eat with rice) during the busy farming seasons of rice seedling transplantation and rice harvesting. At the same time, in riverside villages where fish were available in abundance, fish were caught and processed into fermented or dried foods, which the villagers then actively exchanged for the goods they needed. Food was thus distributed across the region by barter.

These exchanges not only had practical aspects, but also social and cultural significance. A northeastern Thai woman in her 70s relates that in her youth she would make large amounts of dried and fermented foods, load them onto an ox cart and often set off together with a friend without first deciding on a destination. She would then negotiate with people she met along the way to exchange the fish products she had brought with her for rice and other agricultural products. There was no fixed exchange rate for rice and fish, so when she had a surplus she would give more to the other person, and if she was in short supply she would negotiate with the other person to obtain larger amounts of rice. It was explained that what was important in these negotiations was to be openhanded.

At the time, neither rice nor fish were distributed through the market, and so it was not possible to turn them into cash. It can therefore be supposed that the people felt that there was no point in having a fixed numerical exchange rate. Moreover, since rice and fish cannot be preserved for long periods of time, rather than hoarding large amounts and then see it rot and go to waste, the social circumstances were such that the best way to prepare for the unexpected was to give generously to others, thus heightening one's reputation and strengthening interpersonal relations. We also learned from the interviews that setting off to an unknown village, engaging in exchanges, and making new friends with the people there was considered something enjoyable to be looked forward to. People who became friends through such exchanges called each other *siaow* (meaning something like "a close friend") and frequently exchanged visits with each other. After a while, a marriage might take place between the two families, thereby strengthening the social link through a transformation from friend to relative.

Now that fish can easily be sold for cash, many elderly people lament the days when fish could be shared through exchange, but even today, when fish catches are good in southern Laos the fish are given out to friends and relatives. In the villages of northeastern Thailand, when the fish catch is small and the cost of the gasoline to take the fish to market cannot be recouped, the fish are sold in the village at a very low price. The fish of the Mekong Basin even now play an important role in strengthening social relations, and support the food security of people who have limited opportunities to gain cash income.

#### References

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