



## Briefing Paper

### Twenty Years of Tholathi Island —Factors in the Success of the Fish Conservation Area Yuka Kiguchi, Mekong Watch

Tholathi Village (Island) in Khong District of the southern Laotian province of Champasak is along the part of the Mekong River known as Siphandon (meaning 4,000 islands), which has an abundant fishery. Over the past 20 years, the villagers have been maintaining a fish conservation area there. According to the island's residents, by establishing the fish conservation zone they have been able to maintain favorable fishing conditions in the village's vicinity up to the present time. No continuous quantitative measurements have been conducted in the area applying scientific methods to corroborate the villagers' claims, but because the villagers have taken the initiative over the long term to maintain the fish conservation area and because it has been possible for the fishing industry to continue, it is considered to have, in fact, been effective at preserving the resources.<sup>1</sup> Here, using observations and interviews with local people, we examine the reasons for the effectiveness of the conservation zone.



Fig. 1: The Siphandon region (composed from a Google Earth map).

#### Tholathi Village

**Location:** near the Cambodian border in Khong District, Champasak Province, Laos. The village (island) is said to have a history of more than 200 years.

**Population (July 2014):** 93 households, 576 people (of which 304 were female).

**Occupations:** farming, fishing, handicrafts (*thep kao*: wooden boxes for glutinous rice). Fifteen of the households are self-sufficient in rice throughout the year, but the rest rely on income from fishing or other sources to purchase rice. Recently, 30 to 40% of the villagers have left for Thailand temporarily as migrant workers.

**Nutrition:** Glutinous rice is the staple food. Side dishes consist mainly of fish. Meat is consumed about once or twice a month.

#### **How the Conservation Area Came About**

This conservation area was created in 1995. When fish conservation zones were being established throughout the Siphandon region with the support of the Lao Community Fisheries and Dolphin Protection Project (LCFDPP)<sup>ii</sup> the village agreed for a deep pool in the river to the east of the island to become a conservation area. From the twelfth month to the seventh on the lunar calendar (approximately November to June), corresponding to the dry season, fishing or the emplacement of fishing gear is prohibited in this area, and violators are fined. During the rainy season, the water level rises and the rate of flow increases, making it impossible to fish in this pool, so in essence, the area is closed to fishing year round.

The current head of both villages, Mr. N, and the former head, Mr. P, say that 20 years ago, an incident occurred in which residents from another area engaged in reckless fishing and transporting of *Pa Kwang* (*Bosemania microlepis*), a kind of fish that lived there. It was about the time when the village leaders began to be concerned about extirpation of the *Pa Kwang* that the government informed them about a project being launched to establish conservation zones. The leaders consulted with the villagers, and decided to create a conservation area, called *Wan Saguan* (“protected pool”), encompassing the pool and its surroundings to the east of the village, including places where the *Pa Kwang* spawned<sup>iii</sup> and lived, and the government approved this. The project involved execution of a ceremony called *Buwat Wang* (“Pool Priest”)<sup>iv</sup>. The villagers have the impression that fish numbers began increasing about three years after the conservation area was established. Moreover, several fish species that temporarily went missing, such as *Pa Un* (*Probarbus* spp.) have returned recently.

Participation by the village’s younger generation and children in the village’s seasonal festivals and assisting the Buddhist priests, and the solidarity of the community could be ascertained from interviews as well. The influence of the conservation area is becoming more pervasive among the villagers. The conservation area is within view of the village, so it is in a good location for monitoring by the villagers (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The Tholathi Island conservation area (composed from Google Earth map).

### Geographical and Social Characteristics of the Conservation Area

The conservation area consists of a pool where large fish congregate, but there were other reasons for the villagers to choose that place. Downstream from the village spreads a type of inundated forest called *pa khai*, meaning “forest of *khai* shrubs.” The *pa khai* can be seen in Fig. 2, which shows a thin line of greenery extending along the island’s southeastern side. Some fish species feed on the *khai* shrub’s flowers, and it has been confirmed as place where fish hide when it is inundated.

According to the villagers, fish find that inundated forests like this make good habitat, and they are also known to provide spawning grounds for some fish. The conservation area includes *pa khai*, and there is a broad band of *pa khai* downstream from it.



**Fig. 3: *Khai* shrubs.**

It is also said that the island's name, Tholathi, derives from the name of a legendary hero, Tholapee. Once upon a time, it is said, the water buffalo king lived in this area. Because it had been foretold that he would be killed by his son, he had any male calf that was born killed. Once, one of the buffaloes, fearing that her calf would be killed, gave birth while hiding in a cave so that the king could not see it. She bore a male calf named Tholapee who, after many trials, grew up to overthrow the king. It is believed that the cave in the story exists in the conservation area's deep pool. Also, spirits are believed to reside in the forest adjacent to the pool, called "Mahesak," which is considered sacred. The people were originally awed by the forest, and did not fish very much in the vicinity of the conservation area.

### **Reasons for the Conservation Area's Success**

There are three reasons for thinking the conservation area can be maintained and conserve resources sustainably. The first is its environmental situation, with a spawning area and safe places for growing fry in and around the conservation area, which gives it an effective protective function. Many conservation areas on the lower reaches of the Mekong River have been established at deep pools, where their effectiveness is anticipated in reducing fishing pressure on the fish that gather in deep pools during the dry season. In the case of Tholathi Island, the conservation also includes spawning grounds of many fish, including the *Pa Kwang*. Furthermore, the inundated forest called *pa khai* downstream from the conservation area is also seen as important to the environment and the fish's habitation.

The second reason is that the animistic beliefs and folklore of the villagers limit their fishing activities. Because of this, the people fear divine consequences for infractions, and stronger criticism of violators has been observed in the village than would normally be seen towards people simply breaking conservation area rules.

The third reason is that it was established as an official conservation area with recognition from the national government, so the means to restrict violations by people from outside the village are available. Animistic beliefs and folklore provide control over the behavior of the villagers living there, but in many cases, visitors from outside have no consideration for this. By establishing the place as an official conservation area, it provided the village the ability to effectively restrict access from outsiders.

These three factors are surmised to have a synergistic effect, increasing the successfulness of conservation. The success of the Tholathi Island conservation area is thought to arise from the combination of environmental factors and social factors. To achieve sustainable management of fish conservation areas in the Mekong Basin, not only is natural scientific knowledge important; the religious beliefs and tales shared within each community need to be put to good use.

## References

Baird, I. G. 2001. *Towards sustainable co-management of Mekong River inland aquatic resources, including fisheries, in Southern Lao PDR*. Pages 89–111 in G. Daconto (eds.), Siphandone wetlands. CESVI Cooperation and Development, Bergamo, Italy.

Baird, I. G., B. Phylavanh, B. Vongsenesouk, and K. Xaiyamanivong. 2001. *The ecology and conservation of the smallscale croaker Boesemania microlepis (Bleeker 1858-59) in the mainstream Mekong River, Southern Laos*. Natural History Bulletin of the Siam Society 49:161–176.

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<sup>i</sup> One village near Tholathi that also has the same kind of conservation area has suffered from decreasing fish, causing many villagers abandon the fishery.

<sup>ii</sup> More details on the Siphandon region can be found in Baird (2001) among the references.

<sup>iii</sup> The *Pa Kwang* produce sounds during their breeding season, so they are known as a “vocalizing fish.” There are places in the pool where the Pa Kwang sing during March through May of the lunar calendar, indicating that this is a spawning site.

<sup>iv</sup> Buddhist ceremonies are conducted for trees or places to recognize their consecration as “priests” in a religious procedure originating in Thailand as part of conservation activities. In Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, where there are many Buddhists, harming a priest is regarded as a serious religious offense, so there is psychological resistance among would-be despoilers to cutting down consecrated trees or destroying holy sites, and social criticism of such behavior is apt to be higher. Also, holding these ceremonies provides a way of promoting knowledge of the sites and objects of conservation to people in the surrounding area.