

Darwin Initiative

Half Year Report (due 31 October each year)

Project Ref. No.	14/053
Project Title	Development of a conservation strategy for the critically endangered Mekong giant catfish
Country(ies)	Lower Mekong region (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam)
UK Organisation	Imperial College London
Collaborator(s)	Network of Aquaculture Centers in Asia-Pacific (NACA); Mekong River Commission (MRC); UNDP/IUCN/MRC Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Programme (MWBP); FAO Fisheries Department; Royal Cambodian Department of Fisheries; Lao Department of Livestock and Fisheries; Royal Thai Department of Fisheries.
Report date	31 October 2006
Report No. (HYR 1/2/3/4)	HYR 1
Project website	www.aquaticresources.org/darwin14053.html

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – September) against the agreed baseline timetable for the project (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up).

Overall progress of the project has been good. The quantitative assessment of conservation status and options has been completed, and discussed at a major workshop in Laos in August. Genetic analysis of the captive population is progressing and the development of detailed breeding plans will commence later in the year. The conservation strategy process is thus entering into its final phase.

Collaboration with a wide range partners through the Giant Catfish Working Group established by the project has enabled us to assemble a far more comprehensive set of historical fisheries data than initially expected. This has allowed a fairly robust quantitative assessment of population status and trends. This has provided no evidence of long-term population decline, rather it appears that the population has been small (about 240 mature fish) but stable for much of the 20th century. Only in the 1980s and 1990s has intensive fishing (driven largely by the initiation of the captive breeding programme and associated publicity!) led to a dramatic reduction of the population by about 80%. Fishing intensity on the giant catfish has since declined to a very low level, and the population is likely to be recovering.

The impact of fishing on the population is now well understood. As the analysis shows, fishing posed a significant threat for the past 20 years, but this is no longer the case as low catch rates, economic development, and latterly compensation payments from conservation NGOs have led to a virtual cessation of fishing for the species. Unfortunately, habitat degradation has emerged as a new and very significant threat over the past five years. In-river navigational improvements and new dams on the upper Mekong/Lancang threaten in particular the giant catfish's suspected spawning habitat in the very north of Thailand. Spawning habitat protection has thus become an important element of the conservation strategy, but uncertainty about the characteristics and location of critical habitat may limit the effectiveness with which this can be pursued. The captive population of MGC maintained by the Thai Department of Fisheries thus provides a vital 'insurance', safeguarding the survival of the species should it become extinct in the wild. Careful management of the captive population therefore remains another key element of the strategy.

