

the MEGAFISHES PROJECT

The MegaFishes Project represents the first worldwide attempt to document and protect the world's freshwater giants. The project will involve a network of more than a hundred scientists in 17 countries. The goal: to assess the conservation status of giant catfish, stingrays, gars, carp, salmon, sturgeon, and other freshwater fish species that grow to at least six feet in length or 200 pounds. Researchers also hope to identify the planet's largest freshwater fish. Project work is planned for Asia in 2007; Australia, Africa, and Europe in 2008; and the Americas in 2009.

THE PILOT YEAR

The project team is spending the pilot year 2006 working on expeditions to the Mekong and Selenge/Baikal (Mongolia) and laying the ground work for future missions to rivers throughout Asia, South America, and North America.

RESULTS

As a result of project leader Dr. Zeb Hogan's work with the governments of Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, it is now illegal to capture the Mekong giant catfish in those countries as of summer 2006.

Cambodia: The MegaFishes Project has teamed with the Cambodian Department of Fisheries and the Mekong Wetland Biodiversity Program to create one of the world's first freshwater conservation concessions – a special fishing area in the Tonle Sap River aimed at protecting some of the world's largest freshwater fish species, including the giant stingray and giant barb. Dr. Hogan worked with the local organization, Save Cambodia's Wildlife, to produce a children's book on the conservation of freshwater biodiversity. The book is beautifully illustrated by Cambodian artists and printed in Khmer and English. The book intertwines a story of the seasons of a giant catfish's life with those of a young Cambodian boy named Samnang. When the huge fish, who becomes a friend of Samnang's, is caught by fishermen, the boy persuades the men to let her go because the fish "is special and very rare."

Thailand: In the Golden Triangle of northern Thailand, project biologists have established a network of over two dozen fishermen to help track the migration of the giant fish of the Mekong. They hope to discover the fish's spawning grounds and other behavior critical to the fish's survival. Together with the Thai Department of Fisheries and the Mekong Giant Catfish Fishermen's Club, the MegaFishes Project bought, tagged, and released a Mekong giant catfish in honor of the king of Thailand's 60th anniversary of his ascension to the throne. In addition, there was a net buy back in Thailand in June 2006. This was timed around the annual ceremony to worship the "giant catfish god" and done in honor of the king. Fishermen from Chiang Khong agreed to stop fishing for giant catfish and put 68 fishing nets, worth over 1.3 million baht (\$34,000 USD), on sale as a symbol of their commitment.

Mongolia: The project has teamed up with a local Mongolian group, the Taimen Conservation Fund, as well as academics and recreational fishers to protect the endangered giant Eurasian trout, *Hucho taimen*. Scientists are working to understand the ecology of the taimen so that special catch-and-release fishing zones can be created to generate money for local community-based management. The project is also working with the Montana-based organization, the Tributary Fund, to rebuild a Buddhist monastery to honor the river, life, and cultural traditions that the river sustains.



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...for information on how you can help fund the MegaFishes Project.

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Call Toll Free: (800) 373-1717

WRITE US:

National Geographic Society
Office of Development
1145 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

FURTHER INQUIRIES:

Elizabeth A. Stevens, Development Officer
(202) 862-8636 or estevens@ngs.org

Bill Warren, Director of Foundation Relations
(202) 862-8653 or bwarren@ngs.org

Kristi Maasjo, Senior Manager, Corporate Relations
(202) 862-8254 or kmaasjo@ngs.org

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