
Tonle Sap Lake: A Livelihood At Risk

By Ang Pasang Rai

A unique and incredible natural phenomenon that provides 40-70% fish proteins and irrigation water for almost half of the population of Cambodia is the Tonle Sap Lake. It's also the largest lake in the South-East Asia. It's of vital importance for livelihoods to diverse groups of dependant on fisheries such as fishers, boat builders, marketers and middlemen.

As a solution to the management of fisheries resources to address many of the present issues around the Tonle Sap Lake, Community Fisheries (CFs) have been introduced. The data shows that around 38% of the population around the lake lives below the poverty line which is highest in Cambodia. Community Fishery Management aims to sustainable and equitable use of natural resources around the lake with the hope to raise the living standards of local communities particularly poorest and most vulnerable enabling them to protect and manage their local resources and increase equality of access.

According to the Community Fisheries Development Office (CFDO) in the Department of Fisheries (DoF), 264 CFs were registered at the beginning of 2003 in Cambodia. And there were 107 community fisheries located around the Tonle Sap Lake. A 13% out of these had rules and regulations while 6% had a map of boundaries and 5% were legitimately recognized at the Provincial level. The establishment of CFs varies from the government to wide range of organization in an uncoordinated manner.

One of the community fisheries around the Tonle Sap Lake is located at Sdey Ponlech village, Kampong Ampel commune, Kampong Tralach district in Kampong Chhnang Province. The village has 150 households. There are four lots of community fisheries and all [CFs] are facing the same problem of decrease in fish stock.

“About 99% percent of the population of this village depends on agriculture while 1% depends upon fishing.” said Village Chief Mr. Sok Chheng 53, showing recently planted rice on flooded land along the shore of Tonle Sap Lake.

“The main reasons of decrease in fish stock in this area are environmental pollution, depletion of flooded forest and illegal fishing” said Mr. Ouk Sameth, Director of Phnom Neang kang Rei Association (PNKA).

The PNKA began has been working with the communities since 2002. It has involved in the management of 13 community fisheries in the Tonle Sap Lake. It is working closely with Provincial Department of Environment and Depart of Fisheries for the protection of natural resources and environment. Its activities



Mr. Ouk Sameth, Director, PNKA

include raise awareness among the communities about illegal fishing and help to demand the rights of community fisheries.

According to Mr. Sok there are 85 species of fish in the fisheries but some of them are extinct but they have sighted new species of fish as well even though they are not sure whether the new species are edible as they look strange.

“We haven’t heard of the appearance of new species of fish in the Tonle Sap Lake” said Dr. Carl Middleton, Tonle Sap Community Database Coordinator of Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT). “But it is true that the fish stock is decreasing each year”.

“Flooded forest is rich in nutritious food for fish during the spawning in flooding season due to its depletion fish cannot spawn as they cannot get food. So, it leads to decrease in fish stock” said Dr. Middleton.

“We had fished 86 metric tonnes of fish our community fisheries in 2002. But I don’t think we fished more than this within three years” said commune leader Mr. Ben Moa 37.



Traditional Fishing at Tonle Sap

“Electrocuted, illegal, small scale and small net fishing and use of chemical drugs on fishing have led the decrease of fish stock in our fisheries” said Mr. Ben.

“We sighted 60 small net illegal fishers in our community but after involvement of PNKA most of the people are aware so, we saw a few [illegal fisher] this year” said Mr. Sok agreeing with activities of the PNKA.

The fishing season which begins from November and lasts till January, has already started however the fishers are catching less fish than previous years. “There are not fish as in the past” said Mr. Moeun Phea 36, a fisherman showing traditional way of fish collection in the net with his friends.