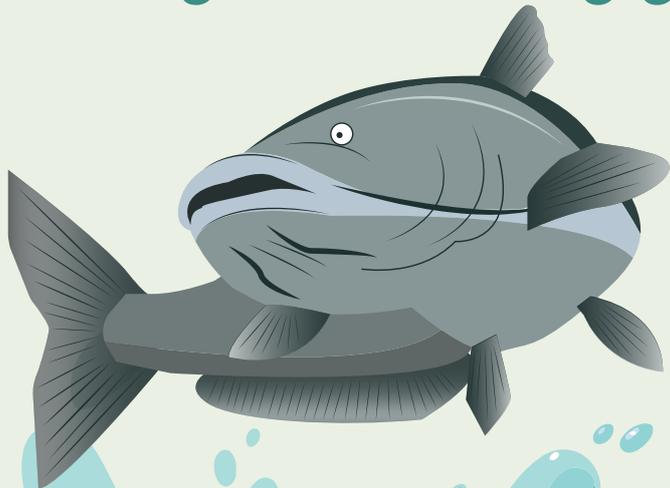


The Mekong Giant Catfish

Pangasianodon gigas



Native to the
Mekong River



The Mekong giant catfish is endemic to the **Mekong River** and mainly in the **lower Mekong River basin**

CONSERVATION
STATUS:

**CRITICALLY
ENDANGERED**

It is one of the most endangered fish in southeast Asia

60 They can live to be
years old

The construction of dams likely **prevents** them from **spawning** and may cause **extinction**

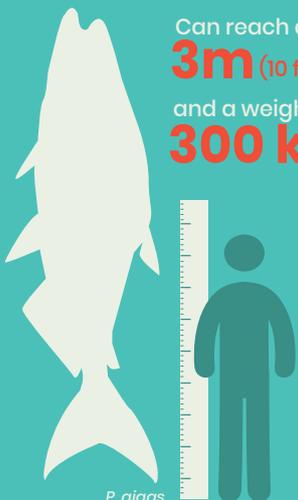


They **spawn** at the beginning of the **rainy season**

Although they are catfish they have **no barbels**



Can reach a length of up to **3m** (10 feet) and a weight of over **300 kg** (650 pounds)



P. gigas

Mainly feed on **aquatic plants and algae** at the river bottom



Total number of fish declined by:

90%



in the last **50 years**

The Mekong Giant Catfish

The Mekong giant catfish

The Mekong giant catfish is a Mekong endemic that occurs in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Based on genetic studies and fishing reports, the Mekong giant catfish is most likely still widespread but very rare and scattered throughout the Lower Mekong river basin. Nowadays, catches are reported, at most, a few times a year.

Historically, this catfish was a highly-valued food resource. Now, laws protect the species by banning intentional fishing in most areas. However, some Mekong giant catfish are harvested incidentally as by-catch (accidentally caught when fishing for other species). Recent reports suggest that there is illegal harvest, trade and sale of the species in Vietnam.

Although we know little about their migration pattern, it is assumed, based on genetic research and catch information, that the Mekong giant catfish migrate long distances. Mekong giant catfish migrate out of the Tonle Sap Lake to the Mekong River. They are found in the deep pools of the Cambodian Mekong, and they may migrate from Cambodia, over the Khone Falls in Southern Lao PDR and all the way to northern Thailand. The only known spawning site for the species is upstream of Chiang Khong, Thailand. However, this probable long-distance migration is now blocked by two dams: the Sahong and Xayaburi Dams.

In autumn they migrate, from October to December, out of the Tonle Sap Lake, down the Tonle Sap River, and into the Cambodian Mekong. In northern Thailand or Laos, they spawn at the beginning of the rainy season in June. They only spawn once per year and can produce over 1,000,000 eggs. After spawning, the juvenile fish move downstream to the floodplains of the Songkhram River in Thailand and Tonle Sap in Cambodia.

Size and feeding

The Mekong giant catfish can reach a length of up to 3 meters (10 feet) and a weight of over 300 kilos (650 pounds). The maximum recorded weight was around 350 kilos. It has a broad head and mouth but does not have barbels like

other catfish species. It is also a highly valued sports-fish due to its size, growth and strength. In Thailand, captive-bred giant catfish have been introduced into game fishing ponds.

It is a migratory species of fish that mostly swims in medium to large rivers. In the wild, they mainly feed on detritus (organic matter), aquatic plants and algae on the river bottom. Mekong giant catfish in captivity will eat other foods like fishmeal pellets.

Current Status

The Mekong giant catfish is classified as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List; it is one of the most endangered fish in Southeast Asia. The total number of fish has declined by over 90% in just 50 years. The trend still shows a decrease in numbers of Mekong giant catfish. It is illegal to catch Mekong giant catfish in Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. But giant catfish are very rarely captured incidentally by fishers targeting other species. When this happens, the Mekong giant catfish are either released or illegally harvested and sold sometimes to restaurants that specialize in serving exotic dishes.

Also, the construction of dams likely prevents the species from spawning. For example, the Xayaburi Dam is only one of 11 dams planned downstream in the Mekong River in the distribution range of the Mekong giant catfish. The impact caused by these dams for the Mekong giant catfish is not entirely known; however, it may cause extinction.

Besides the threats to the Mekong giant catfish, dams also threaten a lot of other species of fish. The presence of river barriers could cause a collapse in the annual catch of fish in the Mekong River where migratory fish make up between 40–70% of the yearly harvest that is approximately around 3 to 6 billion US dollars. Meaning, dams could cause a decline worth over 4 billion dollars when the populations of migratory fish collapse!

Other threats are logging and wood harvesting and agriculture and forestry that cause habitat loss.

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