Will we have fish tomorrow?

By Stephen Hall and Achim Steiner

Every January and February, Cambodia's Tonle Sap River hosts one of the world's great fishing spectacles. As it carries the annual floodwaters back to the mainstream of the Mekong, the river brings hundreds of millions of fish downstream from Cambodia's Great Lake. Waiting for this annual migration, the Dai fishery operates from platforms strung across the river just upstream from Phnom Penh. Hundreds of fishing families live on these fishing platforms during the Dai season and together can catch as much as 14,000 tons each year. At its peak in a good year, the Dai fishery has caught 30 tons per hour, 24 hours per day - a powerful measure of the productivity of the world's most intensive inland fishery. Stretching across Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, the lower Mekong Basin produces over 2.5 million tons of fish each year.

But times are changing. The quality of the Dai fish catch has declined steadily in recent years, with the valuable bigger fish becoming more scarce, amid concern that a combination of fishing pressure and environmental change threatens the productivity of the Mekong fishery. Dams on the upstream Mekong and its tributaries, conversion of wetland habitats around the lake perimeter, and pollution from agricultural runoff threaten the productivity of this remarkable ecosystem.

Such worries have parallels elsewhere in the Mekong and throughout the world as concern for the future of the world's artisanal fisheries and the communities depending on them is rising sharply.

In celebrating World Wetlands Day on 2 February, the Ramsar Wetlands Convention has focused attention on how much artisanal fisheries depend on our ability to protect and sustain the productivity of wetlands. Across the developing world, rivers, lakes and inshore coastal systems support fisheries that together provide over 8 million tons of fish each year. Many millions of poor people rely on these fisheries for food, nutrition and income. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, small-scale fisheries support the livelihoods and incomes of more than 10 million people, and provide food for 200 million. Inland fisheries produce more than 2 million tons of fish a year, valued at over $1.8 billion at first sale.

Wetland fisheries provide a powerful demonstration of how conservation and human development goals coincide. Just as the fishers of Tonle Sap depend on the diverse wetlands around the Great Lake and on the annual flood, fishers across the developing world depend on preserving natural habitats and sustaining water flow. If the world's poor are to have fish tomorrow, we must meet wetland conservation goals and find ways to better manage the fisheries they support.

Multiple stakeholders need to take action at many levels to achieve both objectives, but adopting three key steps will help.

First, we must recognize the role played by fisheries in supporting the livelihoods of poor people and take this into account when deciding development policies and putting them into practice. Many of the threats to fisheries come from decisions about land and water use that fail to consider impacts on fish stocks and those who depend on them. The benefits of these fisheries for food and economic security often don't appear in a government's economic statistics and the impacts of their loss on national economies are missed. When we build dams and draw water for agriculture, urban and industrial use, we need to consider explicitly the impact on fisheries.

Second, we must strive for improved cross-sectoral dialogue as this is the surest way to include fisheries in development decisions. In Cambodia, for example, wetlands working groups in three provinces have succeeded in building awareness and a common sense of purpose across agencies. Agriculture, fisheries, environment, tourism, rural development, public works and women's affairs have all taken part.

Third, we must adopt a rights-based approach. Building resilient small-scale fisheries that are properly valued and can contribute their full potential requires us to develop better measures of sustainability and resilience. We should also work harder to better understand the full costs and benefits of development choices. Central to this aim must be measures that assess whether we have met the rights of the poor. Meeting basic rights to food, education, health care, economic opportunity and political participation is the surest way to build resilience. Providing these needs will help communities break out of the vicious cycle where poverty drives environmental degradation which in turn drives poverty.

The imperatives to conserve wetlands and improve the lives of people are intimately bound. As the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals looms on the horizon, we must redouble efforts to fully recognize this connection. World Wetlands Day provides an opportunity to reflect on the steps needed to achieve these noble aims. National and international agencies need to make concerted efforts to engage stakeholders at multiple levels, ranging from fishing communities to river basin authorities, to take on these challenges. Only by addressing the issues in this way will we sustain the world's wetlands and fisheries and the people who depend on them.

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