

Cambodia: exceptional biodiversity uncovered on a section of the Mekong river

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Cambodia (2008). Amongst 24 species discovered in the Northeast of the country along the Mekong river, this *Amorphophallus* sp. also known as 'corpse plant';
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According to a series of surveys jointly conducted by WWF (World Wild Fund), the Fisheries Administration (FiA) and Forestry Administration (FA) of the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) in 2006 and 2007, a remote 55km section of the Mekong River, located between Kratie and Stung Treng towns in Northeast Cambodia, has been discovered to be of high biodiversity value both nationally and globally. These surveys, as reported in a WWF communiqué released on January 15th, led to surprising findings, including one new species unknown to science, 24 new species records for Cambodia and 36 fauna species that are globally threatened and listed under the 'Red List' elaborated by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The new plant species found in the area termed by scientists as the 'Central Section', is a *Amorphophallus* sp., known as 'corpse plants' for science. Other discoveries include new national records of rare plants, fish and one reptile. The largest global populations of two bird species, White-shoulder Ibis and Mekong Wagtail, were found, as well as some of the largest breeding colonies in Southeast Asia of Plain Martin and nests of an endangered giant turtle. Of equal significance was the discovery of a near pristine region of tall riverine forest, waterways and island archipelagos, and a remarkable uninhabited section of river 40-50 km long.

'The Royal Government of Cambodia recognises the importance of maintaining the Mekong's resources for biodiversity, national food security and development, and reflect this need in the targets of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2002 and Cambodia's Millennium Development Goals,' said Seng Teak, WWF Country Director. To achieve these goals, he continued, a critical first step is to document the Mekong's biodiversity and natural resources.

The study area is described by scientists as including probably the last suitable freshwater habitat for the critically endangered Irrawaddy Dolphin. 'Unlike many other mainstream sections of the Mekong in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, this particular part of the river remains relatively untouched by human activities,' said Richard Zanre, WWF Freshwater Program Manager. This region, he added, used to be one of the last strongholds of the Khmer Rouge and was off-limits to local and foreign agencies until as late as 1998.

However, the situation is changing rapidly as extensive human in-migration to the site started affecting the sites. Timber logging, clearance of riverbanks to create homes and rice fields, intensive fishing and wildlife trade are increasing daily, as well as new economic development, especially water-based infrastructure, road building, etc. place new pressures on wetland resources. 'Without proper control, these activities will soon degrade the local ecology, exhaust natural resources and result in severe long-term impacts for local livelihoods as well as biodiversity,' WWF warns.

This is why, at a workshop in Kratie in 2008 to present the research findings to Government stakeholders, participants agreed that the 'Central Section' should be proposed as a 'special management' area. WWF and its partners are now working on developing a programme to assist national and provincial agencies in effective management of the site through the training of human resources and the organisation of awareness-raising campaigns among local communities adjacent to the site. If the mobilisation proves successful, it might ensure the conservation of this exceptional biodiversity.

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