



for a living planet

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Press Release

For Immediate Release

World's forgotten fishes vital for hundreds of millions of people but one-third face extinction, warns new report

The world's dazzlingly diverse freshwater fishes are critical for the health, food security and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, but they are under ever increasing threat with one in three already threatened with extinction, according to a report published today by 16 global conservation organizations.

World's Forgotten Fishes details the extraordinary variety of freshwater fish species, with the latest discoveries taking the total to 18,075 – accounting for over half of all the world's fish species and a quarter of all vertebrate species on Earth. This wealth of species is essential to the health of the world's rivers, lakes and wetlands – and supports societies and economies across the globe.

Freshwater fisheries provide the main source of protein for 200 million people across Asia, Africa and South America, as well as jobs and livelihoods for 60 million people. Healthy freshwater fish stocks also sustain two huge global industries: recreational fishing generates over US\$100 billion annually, while aquarium fishes are the world's most popular pets and drive a global trade worth up to US\$30 billion.

With over 1,100 species of fish, the Mekong River is one of the world's most productive inland fisheries. Cambodian people currently get around 16 per cent of their animal protein and 28 per cent of their lysine from freshwater fishery of the Mekong River basin. The 2017 Annual Fisheries Production Report by the Cambodian Government's Fisheries Administration showed that fisheries sector contributes 8% of the country's Growth Domestic Product (GDP).

But freshwater fishes continue to be undervalued and overlooked – and thousands of species are now heading towards extinction. Freshwater biodiversity is declining at twice the rate of that in our oceans or forests. Indeed, 80 species of freshwater fish have already been declared 'Extinct' by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, including 16 in 2020 alone. Meanwhile, populations of migratory freshwater fish have fallen by 76 per cent since 1970 and mega-fish by a catastrophic 94 per cent.

"Nowhere is the world's nature crisis more acute than in our rivers, lakes and wetlands, and the clearest indicator of the damage we are doing is the rapid decline in freshwater fish populations. They are the aquatic version of the canary in the coalmine, and we must heed the warning," said **Mr Stuart Orr, WWF global Freshwater Lead**.

The result of a rapid market assessment on endangered fish trade, conducted in 2020 by WWF-Cambodia showed that Giant Barb, Isok Barb, Giant Goonch, Mekong Tiger Perch, Elephant-ear Gourami and Mekong Freshwater Stingray are among other 35 fish species that were traded and sold at wet markets in Cambodia, as well as being trafficked into neighboring countries. Giant Barb and Isok Barb are classified as critically endangered both globally and in Cambodia, while Giant Goonch, Mekong Tiger Perch, Elephant-ear Gourami are classified as endangered in the Kingdom.



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"Despite their importance to local communities, freshwater fish are invariably forgotten. Freshwater fish matter to the health of people and the freshwater ecosystems that all people and all life on land depend on. It's time we remembered that," said **Mr Seng Teak, Country Director of WWF-Cambodia**.

The report highlights the devastating combination of threats facing freshwater ecosystems – and the fishes that live in them – including overfishing and destructive fishing practices, habitat destruction, hydropower dams on free flowing rivers, over abstraction of water for irrigation, and domestic, agricultural and industrial pollution. In addition, freshwater fishes are also at risk from the introduction of invasive non-native species and the impacts of climate change as well as unsustainable sand mining and wildlife crime.

The decision by the Royal Government of Cambodia to impose a 10-year moratorium of hydropower dams on the mainstem of the Mekong river has been widely praised. Factoring freshwater fishes into development decisions are the best management practice: it needs to be the rule.

"Cambodia's correct decision is an example for other countries, recognizing free-flowing rivers provide invaluable benefits for people and countless wild species that depend on," **Mr Seng Teak** said.

There is a long list of threats, but there are also solutions – and 2021 offers real hope that the world can turn the tide and start to reverse decades of decline in freshwater fish populations. The world must seize the opportunity to secure an ambitious and implementable global biodiversity agreement at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) conference in Kunming, China.

"What we need now is to recognize the value of freshwater fish and fisheries, and for governments to commit to new targets and solutions implementation, as well as prioritizing which freshwater ecosystems need protection and restoration. We also need to see partnerships and innovation through collective action involving governments, businesses, investors, civil society and communities," **Mr Stuart Orr** said.

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Note to editors:

The report was published by Alliance for Freshwater Life, Alliance for Inland Fisheries, Conservation International, Fisheries Conservation Foundation, Freshwaters Illustrated, Global Wildlife Conservation, InFish, IUCN, IUCN SSC FFSG, Mahseer Trust, Shoal, Synchronicity Earth, The Nature Conservancy, World Fish Migration Foundation, WWF and Zoological Society of London.

The full report of World's Forgotten Fishes can be downloaded [here](#)

Photos can be downloaded [here](#)

Photos of endangered fish victim of trade can be download [here](#)

For more information:



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About WWF

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with over 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption. www.panda.org