

FISHING IS FOR GIRLS: RURAL MATRIARCH FISHES FOR FAMILY AND RESEARCH

By Som Sitha and Phun Thorn

At the feet of the Cardamon Mountains in southern Cambodia lies a remote village with a complex past. This village was settled by Khmer Rouge soldiers when they sought refuge following the bloody civil war, which ended in 1996. This is the village of Bak Angrut, part of the Dornng Peng Commune of the Sre Ambel District of Koh Kong Province just north of the Gulf of Thailand.

In this remote region, villagers have largely forgotten the war and have forged a community that relies heavily on wild harvest from the surrounding resources. The deep green mountain forests and slow rolling Sre Ambel River with its fertile valleys supply almost everything they need.

Small artisanal fisheries like the Sre Ambel River are frequently unmanaged and subject to overfishing. The impediment to management is a lack of reliable data on the fishery. Managing fish populations requires data on which species are being exploited, size at capture, fishing location, harvest, and fishing effort. Without this necessary information, appropriate management actions cannot be determined.

In early 2021, with funding from the USAID-funded Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Fish, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in Cambodia recruited artisanal fishers to participate in a citizen science program (FishforFuture, F3) where they are tasked to record their daily fishing success. This data will be used to understand the issues facing the fishery and create rules and regulations to protect the river and its resources.

Chhoeun Sreynuch is one of the 15 fishers who participate in this fisheries research program. She is excited to be a part of the activity, collecting data that will help create more sustainable fishing practices in the future. Sreynuch dropped out of school after she finished sixth grade, which is not unusual for rural people in the area. She married a local fisherman from Bak Angrut and today is a 38-year-old mother of two (ages 10 and 17). Living along the river in the remote village, her family is entirely dependent on fishing for their household income.

Every month since the activity began, Sreynuch has recorded more than 400 harvest records from her fishing trips. In return for her valuable data, Sreynuch earns a participation stipend of \$80 per month in addition to sale of her daily fish catch.

“This work is important for our family because fishing is our main source of income,” Sreynuch said. “Because we are poor and have low education, our whole family would need to spend intensive time on fishing, as better alternative livelihood opportunities are very limited.”



Chhoeun Sreynuch is a fisherwoman from the village of Bak Angrut in Cambodia. (Photo by Phun Thorn/WCS)

PROJECT TEAM

Lead PI and U.S. PI	Sandra Correa, PhD Mississippi State University
Cambodia PI	Som Sitha, MS Wildlife Conservation Society
Cambodia Co-PI	Simon Mahood, PhD Wildlife Conservation Society
U.S. Co-PIs	Wesley Neal, PhD Mississippi State University
	Peter Allen, PhD Mississippi State University
	Wes Schilling, PhD Mississippi State University

She told WCS that before her work with the activity, her children had less time for schooling and lacked many of the school supplies they needed.

“Thanks to the Fish Innovation Lab activity, we can earn extra income to support our whole family,” she said. “Our kids have more time for school and adequate money for school-related expenses like books, uniforms, and other study materials.”

Her participation in the activity bodes well for her children’s future.

“Without this opportunity, one or both of our kids probably would have to work with us on the boat and drop out of school as we did,” Sreynuch said. “Now, they can receive a proper education, and we are very proud parents.”

She has high hopes that the research data they provide can be used to improve fish populations in the river to maintain the fishery long-term.

Currently, Sreynuch and her husband catch about three kilograms and rarely up to 10 kilograms of fish per day. They can sell their fish for about 7,000-12,000 riel (Cambodian currency), which is about \$1.75-3.00 per kilogram in U.S. dollars, depending on species and quality. Thus, in U.S. dollars, their daily income is typically about \$5 and rarely as much as \$30 on exceptional fishing days.

The research collected by the community fishers is important for all five Community Fisheries committees that WCS and Fisheries Administration are supporting. The research personnel will train each committee on how to use the fish data collection once the activity has ended, so that, the fish data will inform committees on how to better manage their fish catch and inform their community members how to harvest properly.

With the continuing support from WCS, it is hoped that fish richness and abundance will be improved in the river. This will lead to higher catch rates and more income for the well-being of families like Sreynuch who depend on the river.

ABOUT THE FISH INNOVATION LAB

The Fish Innovation Lab supports the United States Agency for International Development’s agricultural research and capacity building work under Feed the Future, the U.S. Government’s global hunger and food security initiative. Mississippi State University is the program’s management entity. The University of Rhode Island, Texas State University, Washington University in St. Louis, and RTI International serve as management partners.

www.feedthefuture.gov
www.fishinnovationlab.msstate.edu