



WORKING  
TOGETHER TO  
HELP PROTECT  
THE WORLD'S  
FRESHWATER  
RESOURCES



CASE STUDY

JANUARY  
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# The Mekong's Treasure

## Protecting Dolphins, Protecting Cambodia's Future

### THE OCHITEAL DOLPHIN POOL



is nearly silent at dawn, its peace interrupted only by the occasional splash and sharp exhale of Irrawaddy dolphins surfacing to breathe.

Later in the day, this wide, slow section of the Mekong River between Cambodia and Laos will hum with voices of tourists and locals and long-tail boat engines. Once an ordinary Cambodian village, Ochiteal is now a small but thriving ecotourism hub, all thanks to the four dolphins that call this pool home.



*Mr. Sok Lang,  
river guard and  
dolphin tour guide*

“Dolphins are our living national treasure,” said Mr. Sok Lang, a river guard and dolphin tour guide. But in the past decade, the number of Irrawaddy dolphins in the Mekong has dropped dramatically as they regularly became entangled in fishermen’s gill nets and drowned.

Dedicated Cambodians are not letting their national treasure disappear without a fight. Villagers, government officials, and community organizations in core dolphin habitat have come together with WWF to better manage the Mekong’s natural resources and build a sustainable future for all that rely on the river.

Under the HSBC Water Programme, WWF provides communities in Stung Treng and Kratie Provinces with the skills and equipment they need to manage their fisheries and protect their dolphins. Fish are a staple of life along the Mekong; rural villagers depend on them for as much 80 percent of their dietary protein, but catches have declined in recent years. To ensure the future of the fisheries, WWF helps communities form and maintain community fisheries (CFis). These volunteer village committees, now with 512 members, monitor fish catches in their swath of river, establish no-take zones in key habitat, and form patrols to stop illegal fishing.

The CFis are paired with alternative livelihood support to help communities reduce their dependence on fishing. Villagers are trained in animal husbandry, growing vegetables, aquaculture, and handicraft production, and form collective savings groups to support their members through hard times. Another WWF project helps communities improve their ecotourism enterprises.



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Tourists from around the world visit Ochiteal to see the Irrawaddy dolphins.



**151,492**  
**METERS OF**  
**GILLNETS**  
**CONFISCATED**  
**(2013 - 2015)**

River guards Mr. Sok Lang and Mr. Samnang Keo with gillnets confiscated from the dolphin pool.

WWF also pairs with community leaders to educate villagers about the need to conserve the Mekong. They spread the message at schools, village meetings, and even Buddhist temples, where monks emphasize the importance of living in harmony with nature.

**CONFISCATED**  
**BY RIVER**  
**GUARDS**  
**(2013- 2015)**

**11,103 M**

**HOOK-LONG-LINE**

**25**

**ELECTRO-FISHING**  
**TOOLS**

**19**

**POACHERS' BOATS**

The Mekong's Irrawaddy dolphins do not have time for gradual change, however. That is why 67 rangers regularly patrol the 180 km of river designated by the government as core dolphin habitat, leaving their families for long stretches for little pay to try to catch lawbreakers. It is a dangerous and unpopular job; ranger outposts regularly receive threats and patrols have been confronted by armed poachers. Despite this, the rangers are dedicated and since receiving regular training in technical patrolling skills from WWF, they are more effective than ever.

“With the training, the river guards can plan patrols more effectively and arrest more poachers than before,” said Mr. Samnang Keo, WWF’s law enforcement officer and the guards’ trainer. “This year, the river guards arrested and sent six people to court for illegal fishing in the dolphin protected area.”

These efforts appear to be paying off. In September 2015, WWF’s HSBC-funded dolphin population survey showed a significant drop in dolphin deaths, and, for the first time in years, calves surviving to adulthood. People, too, are profiting: even in the low season for tourists, the Ochiteal dolphin pool sees 50 visitors a day, and ecotourism hosts report an increase in their income.





200 villagers gathered to protest Don Sahong Dam at a WWF-organized boat march in December 2015.

But just two kilometers upstream from the Ochiteal pool, on the Laos side of the border, construction is starting that may destroy all this progress. The Don Sahong hydropower dam will block the only year-round channel for fish migration and severely alter the flow of the river, putting the entire Mekong fishery at risk – and the people and the dolphins that depend on it.

It has united the community more than ever. In September 2014, WWF and the River Coalition Cambodia (RCC) presented the signatures from 255,596 concerned citizens from over 200 countries at a public protest of the dam. Over 10,000 of those signatures came from the 100 villages in the core dolphin zone. When the Lao government approved the dam concession without an environmental impact assessment or approval from the inter-governmental Mekong River Commission, more than 600 people attended WWF protests. Even as construction begins, the people refuse to give up the fight.

“The Mekong is life for the people,” said Mr. Chhith Sam Ath, WWF-Cambodia’s country director, simply. “If you kill the Mekong, you kill our life.”

## ABOUT HSBC WATER PROGRAMME

The HSBC Water Programme is a five year, US\$100m partnership with Earthwatch, WaterAid and WWF, three NGOs that rank amongst the world’s most respected environmental and sustainable development organisations. The programme also funds charities managing local water projects proposed by HSBC employees. These partnerships provide the necessary scale to deliver the powerful combination of water provision, protection, research and education; benefiting communities in need, enabling people to prosper, and driving economic development and growth.

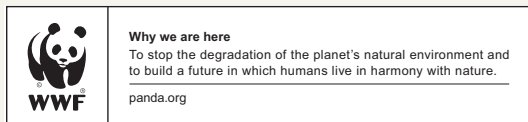
### WWF-Greater Mekong

No. 92/2 Soi Paholyothin 5 (Rajakru), Paholyothin Road,  
Samsen nai, Phayathai, Bangkok 10400 Thailand

Tel.: +662 619 8534 - 37 Fax: +662 619 8538 - 39

Email: [wwf@wwfgreatermekong.org](mailto:wwf@wwfgreatermekong.org)

[wwf.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/where\\_we\\_work/greatermekong/](http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/greatermekong/)



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