

Shocking Reality

An 'illegal' fisher in a Cambodian village reforms himself after realizing the ill effects of 'electro-fishing'

Uy Sokhey is a young man who lives and works in the Tumpung Cheung Community Fisheries (CF) in the Tumpung Cheung village of the Battambang Province of Cambodia. In his early twenties, he is a father of two little children and lives in a small and poorly provisioned house with a zinc-sheet roof and thatched walls. He is poor.

Leng Chunnap, his wife, is a CF Committee member, who is in charge of extension work in the CF. She is a very lively person, who recounted for us how her husband stopped illegal fishing on the very first occasion that he tried it. The police arrested him for illegal 'electro-fishing', and, since he could not pay the bribe to stay out of jail, he was packed off to the local prison. Chunnap, who was pregnant at that time, had to get the help of the Village Chief and the Commune Council chief to get her husband released.

Looking back at the event, Sokhey says that he decided to try his luck at electro-fishing because of the desperate need for money at a time when his wife was pregnant. Life was tough and the need for cash was great. Fishing with a cast-net, which cost between US\$10-20, yielded only at best 6-7 kg of small fish. That would fetch about 12,000-14,000 Riel (US\$3-4). But with electro-fishing, for a slightly higher investment of US\$30-40, even an unskilled and untrained person could hope to get 20-30 kgs of large-sized fish. That amount would easily fetch 40,000-50,000 Riel (US\$10-13). Expert electro-fishers can get as much as 30-40 kg in a haul. It is this significant difference that attracts

people to illegal electro-fishing, Sokhey explains.

The batteries used for electro-fishing are generally the ones that fishermen use at their homes for generating electricity to light a bulb or to power the television set. It costs about 1,100 Riel (US\$0.3) to charge a battery. In domestic use, the charge normally lasts for a week. If used for electro-fishing, the battery's charge lasts for just a day. One of the incentives for electro-fishing is maximum usage of the batteries in the home.

Electro-fishing presents more risks than being arrested by the military or the police. First, there is the monetary risk of having to pay about US\$12-15 to the military personnel who live near the areas where the fishing is done.

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Then there is the risk of an electric shock. The battery is strung on the person's back during the operation. The fisher then wades into the water. Normally, electro-fishing is done in knee-deep water.

Shocking operation

However, sometimes fishers venture deeper to catch more fish. But if the battery nodes get wet during this operation, the result is a shock for the

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A boy filleting fish in a Cambodian fish market

tion of the CF, over half the people in the village did electro-fishing. Now, he says, the number is much lower, probably down to a fifth. However, the habitual offender can still be found.

Batteries are widespread because of the lack of electricity in the village. So will electro-fishing stop once there is rural electrification in Cambodia? Sokhey's answer to this query gets to the heart of the issue. He discounted the hypothesis thus: "If a family has rice enough for the full year, then very few people will continue electro-fishing." Poverty is at the crux of illegal fishing. What role can CF play in the future to address this issue? ¶

fisher. One person in the village died in this manner. The other risk is the overflowing of acid from the battery onto your back. This can lead to burns. However, these risks have been greatly reduced with the new non-acid batteries. The miniaturization of the batteries has also made it easier to carry the equipment to the water. This technological change has given a longer lease of life to electro-fishing.

Now that the batteries are so small it is easy for people to go to fish with both a cast-net and an electro-fishing apparatus. On spotting the patrolling group of the CF or the police, they will hide the electro-fishing gear in the flooded forests and use the cast-net and feign to be a rule-abiding family-scale fisher! The law says that to be arrested, you must be apprehended with the gear in your possession. So if you hide the batteries, you can always say that the batteries in the flood forest are not your own! Some persons even fish with the electro-fishing gear and bring the fish back home or to the market in the cast-net!

Uy Sokhey says he will not go back to electro-fishing. He has also tried to dissuade others from doing so with some success. He says that he realized that harming the natural resource was like destroying the country. His wife's involvement in the CF and her role as the extension worker has also influenced Sokhey. He says that before the forma-