

AQUANEWS

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Giant River Stingrays Found Near Thai City Stefan Lovgren in Chachoengsao, Thailand for National Geographic News

When anglers called that March afternoon to say they had caught a giant freshwater stingray near this bustling Thai city, biologist Zeb Hogan couldn't believe it.

He had just spent a week in the remote Mekong River in northern Cambodia, searching for the ray—which might be the world's largest freshwater fish species—to no avail.

Hogan, of the University of Nevada in Reno, is documenting the rays as part of the Megafishes Project, an effort to document Earth's 20 or so freshwater giants.

Hogan is also a National Geographic Society Emerging Explorer. (National Geographic News is part of the National Geographic Society.)

Many of these behemoths, including the giant stingray, have declined in recent years. The ray, listed as "vulnerable" on the 2007 World Conservation Union Red List of species, has been overfished in its Mekong River habitat, Hogan said.

But when Hogan arrived at the river that afternoon, he found that not only had the anglers reeled in a 14-foot-long (4.3-meter-long) ray, but that the creature had also just given birth to a dinner plate-size baby. The newborn clung to the rough skin on the back of its mother, which was being held at the riverbank by nine handlers.

"Amazing," Hogan said. "A stingray this size giving birth before our eyes."

(See photos of the world's "monster" fishes.)

The giant freshwater stingray, also known as the freshwater whip ray, is found in several

ivers in Southeast Asia and northern Australia.

There are unverified accounts of individuals growing well over 1,000 pounds (450 kilograms) in weight and more than 20 feet (6 meters) in length—among the largest of the approximately 200 species of rays.

To qualify as a "megafish," a species must grow to at least 6.5 feet (2 meters) in length or 220 pounds (100 kilograms) in weight.

"It's been a goal of mine for a long time to see if these stories of huge stingrays are really true," Hogan said.

Until now the Mekong giant catfish holds the official record as the largest freshwater fish ever caught, with a 2005 catch in Thailand tipping the scales at 646 pounds (293 kilograms).

Much is still unknown about the mammoth ray, which was only described scientifically in 1989.

"We know almost nothing about its abundance and habitat needs, which makes it extremely difficult to manage the species," Hogan said.

No one knows whether the species is truly a freshwater fish or if it can also move into the ocean.

But the behavior of the ray can be gleaned just from the way it looks, he pointed out.

"It has eyes on top, and the spiracles [breathing holes] are modified gill slits that allow the ray to breathe as it's buried in mud."

(Continued on page 2 and 3)

AQUANEWS

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The ray feeds on clams and crabs using jelly-filled pores that are able to detect electrical pulses from its prey, he said.

Its barb, or stinger, located at the base of its whiplike tail, can grow 15 inches (37.5 cm) long and is the largest of any stingray's.

"The tip is sharp like an arrowhead, passes through skin easily, and can even go through bone," Hogan said as he held the tail of the mother ray, his face just inches from its 9-inch (22-centimeter) barb.

The barb is covered with a sheath of toxin that is injected into a wound. In 2006 Steve Irwin, the "Crocodile Hunter," died after his heart was fatally pierced by a barb.

In March a woman died boating in Florida after a spotted eagle ray jumped out of the water and hit her in the head.

Hogan said those incidents were freak occurrences, and that stingrays never purposefully attack people.

"We need to absolutely rid our minds of stingrays as dangerous creatures and become more curious about them and protect them," he said.

(Related: "'Crocodile Hunter' Fans May Be Revenge-Killing Stingrays" [September 13, 2006].)

"They're incredible animals," Hogan said as he watched the giant mother ray swim back into the river, the baby clinging to its back.

Despite fishing pressures in Cambodia, in the Bang Pakong River in eastern Thailand, stingray populations appear to be healthy.

It may seem surprising that the giant creatures could thrive in an area densely populated by people, Hogan said.

"You wouldn't expect to find tigers or wild elephants or any other large, wild creatures in an urban environment like this," he said.

"But it's quite possible that the reason healthy populations of giant freshwater stingray still occur is because they're so difficult to catch."

To snag a giant ray, fishers must use live bait as big as 2.2 pounds (1 kilogram).

Rockland Aquanauts Organization Inc. Mission Statement:

To provide, promote, and advance environmental protection, care, and voluntary clean-up of waterways by any and all lawful means; to promote the importance and care in every manner possible by environmental awareness and otherwise; to purchase, print, publish, and circulate literature to promote the importance and care of the waterways and the work of the Corporation. To perform all acts the Corporation may deem appropriate or advisable in such operation; to establish, provide, and voluntary clean-up waterways, to encourage, support and subsidize the cleaning and protection from pollution.

When caught, a 200-pound (91-kilograms) stingray may bury itself under 200 pounds (91 kilograms) of mud, making it almost impossible for people to lift it out of the water.

Wuttichai "Boy" Khuensuwan, co-owner of the fishing outfitter Fish Siam, said it's like "hooking into a submarine."

There are stories of hooked stingrays dragging boats for miles up and down the river, and even pulling boats underwater.

Earlier this spring Fish Siam anglers spent six hours—with 15 people taking turns at one rod—to bring in a stingray in the Bang Pakong River.

In comparison, it took fisher Niyom "Q" Phuttharaksa only about an hour and a half to bring in the pregnant mother that Hogan examined.

Once the fish is brought to the riverbank, it is secured with a rope or tube through its nasal cavity. The barb is immediately wrapped with a cloth to prevent injuries.

Rick Humphreys, co-owner of Fish Siam, said he has developed a fascination with the stingray.

"The fact that these fish are highly elusive, highly nomadic, totally understudied, and very rarely caught just helps fuel our obsession ... to actually see if this is the largest freshwater fish on the planet," he said.

The day after the ray's birth, Hogan received a call from Cambodia: A fisher named Sok Long had caught a ray in the Mekong River, purported to be as big as the Thai 14-footer.

The biologist quickly got on a plane headed to Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital.

"These catches are so rare, I don't want to miss out on any of them," he said. "We keep getting closer to these accounts I've heard of these unbelievably big fish.

"The more I learn about the giant freshwater stingray, the more I believe these unbelievable stories."

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Approved Hessian Lake Dives 2008

Saturday June 7th 9:00 am

Sunday July 13th 9:00 am

Saturday August 9th 9:00 am

Sunday Sept. 7th 10:00 am

Saturday Sept. 27th 10:00 am

Sunday Oct. 12th 10:00 am

Saturday Oct. 25th 10:00 am

BBQ Help Needed

We have BBQs after every Hessian Lake dive, but next year, we don't want the chef tasks to fall on the same people all the time, so we are asking for your help. If you plan on coming to the Hessian Lake dives, please consider offering to set up, cook, or break down the BBQ gear.

Setting up might mean you set up before diving, get out of the water first, or forego diving that day. **Cooking** means you cook for everyone who shows up, not just yourself & your friends.

Breaking down the BBQ gear means you stay until everyone has eaten and the grill is cool enough to put into your car to store until the next dive.

You don't have to be a Board Member to help. Everyone can pitch in. Any expenses, like buying food, are reimbursable. So please look at the dive dates and let us know when you can help out.

Thank you

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP FEES ARE DUE

Rockland Aquanauts Organization
2008 Dues

I guess it is that time of the year again, Membership Dues are due. Last year all our members received much more than they gave out to the Organization. As usual you will be receiving a tax donation for the first \$25.00. All members who attended the Annual Dinner not only received money off their own dinner but they also received money off their guests dinner. Everyone whom attended also received prizes, some worth many times the cost of their Dues. Don't forget the Annual Picnic as well as all the BBQ lunch's after the Lake Dives.

So please send in your \$42 dues early to;

Rockland Aquanauts Organization
c/o
Paul Galeazzi Jr.
4 Greensward Drive.
Valley Cottage New York 10989

Scuba-Diving Pot Kingpin Goes to Jail

Garry C. Chupurdy, 58, of Thunderbolt, Georgia pleaded guilty last month for running a marijuana smuggling operation in which he sank tons of pot, then brought it to the surface later using GPS and scuba gear. Chupurdy made yearly trips to Jamaica in his 78-foot catamaran *Cat's Meow*. On the return voyage, he packaged marijuana in air tight, vacuum-sealed plastic bags and sunk them in shallow waters 30 miles off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Chupurdy then returned in a small motorboat, located the packages with GPS and dived down to retrieve them. He smuggled 1,500 pounds on one trip in May 2006, and 2,000 pounds in June 2007. Chupurdy was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

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May 2008

Giant Stingrays, Scuba Diving Pot King Pin, Hessian Lake 2008 Schedule, Membership Dues

****There will be NO May Meeting****