

Pangasianodon gigas Chevey

(The PA BEUK of Laos)

Note No. 5

Fishing for the Pa Beuk at Ban Houei Sai in 1938: recollections
of H. E. Mr Soth Petراسي.

The fishing was done in March or April. It was carried out where the river was relatively shallow - between 1 and 2 metres deep. A bamboo watch-tower was erected on the bank and a look-out posted on it, while a pirogue with a crew of three men stood by.

When a Pa Beuk came upstream the look-out could detect it by movements of the surface of the water. He could even tell from these movements whether it was a male or female and how big it was (although the fish itself could not be seen at all). He would give the signal to the pirogue crew who would put out into mid-stream so as to lie across the Pa Beuk's path. The man in the middle of the pirogue would then throw three stones, one to land in front of the Pa Beuk and the other two on each side of it. The Pa Beuk would react by sinking to the bottom and waiting, swimming just sufficiently to keep itself in the same place despite the current. The man in the bow of the pirogue would then cast his epervier (a kind of circular throw-net, about 3 or 4 metres across, weighted round the edge and fitted with a draw-string by which it could be pulled tight over anything enclosed in it). This would sink through the water and over the Pa Beuk's head, enveloping it. The Pa Beuk would then take off, with its head trapped in the net (which had been pulled tight by the draw-string), and swim all over the place. The first two men would dance about for joy, their work being over, while the third man, the helmsman, would have a difficult job to control the pirogue while the Pa Beuk towed it to and fro. Eventually the Pa Beuk would surface within reach of the fishermen and one of them would thrust a rope through its gill and out of the mouth and then round the tail and secure it thus to a thick bamboo pole which could in turn be lashed to the side of the pirogue, so that the Pa Beuk could be towed to the bank.

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Note No. 6

Enquiries at Savannakhet, Pakse and Khong Island, May 1974

Enquiries made at these three places were inconclusive, in that no definite and detailed information was available at any of them about catches of Pa Beuk in recent years. However, these enquiries (and ones kindly made beforehand by Mr Stone in Savannakhet and Mr Zimmerman in Pakse) substantiated two general propositions:

- (a) Pa Beuk are rarely caught in the stretch of the Mekong from Savannakhet to the Khmer frontier.
- (b) Nonetheless, the reputation of the Pa Beuk as an excellent food fish is high all the way down to Pakse - contrary to stories heard in Vientiane about its being too fat and almost uneatable in that lower stretch of the river.

Savannakhet

Two seasons when the Pa Beuk might be caught were mentioned. That of May/June received greater emphasis than that of October/ November.

I was told that the Pa Beuk were usually caught by net. But there was one report, which needs further investigation, of fishermen catching them occasionally on a 'very big hook'.

Everyone agreed that they were rarely caught. 3 or 4 a year was a common estimate. It was pointed out to me that at Kengkabao, not far from Savannakhet, there is a place where the Mekong becomes very narrow, yet is still quite shallow during the dry season. I was told that it would hardly be possible for a fish as large as an adult Pa Beuk to pass these narrows during daylight hours, if fishermen were present there, without being spotted; and that if they were seen they would be easy targets for anyone with a gun. The inference was that it is unlikely that any large-scale migration of the Pa Beuk, e.g. for spawning purposes, could take place in this area during the dry season. Since we know from elsewhere (Ban Houei Sai) that it is precisely in the latter part of the dry season that the Pa Beuk makes such movements, it is tempting to make the further inference that no significant important migration of Pa Beuk takes place in the vicinity of Savannakhet.

Khong Island

Numerous local officials showed interest in the matter, but the level of knowledge was low and the information offered seemed uncertain. The fact seems to be that Pa Beuk are very rarely seen at Khong Island. However, I was told that 'two years ago' a couple had been caught, each 'five forearms' long (i.e. about 2 metres 20), and sold at Pakse at 500 kip the kilo.

I inspected the Falls of Phapheng below Khong Island, and talked to various people about the possibility that the Pa Beuk could ascend them. What I saw fortified my belief that, for much the greater part of the year, they could not ascend the main stream. It would only be possible during the full 'crue' at the end of the summer. However, the local opinion seems to be that they do not pass the falls at all. This is an interesting point, since many people have believed that the Pa Beuk has its real home in the Tonle Sap and that it only appears in the Laotian part of the Mekong when making an annual migration to China for spawning purposes. It seems more likely that the Khmer population of Pa Beuk and

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the Laotian population are separate. The idea fits in with evidence suggesting that the Khmer Pa Beuk (lake-dwelling and furnished with a superabundance of vegetation to eat) are too fat, while the Laotian specimens (river-dwelling and not overfed) are leaner and much better to eat.

Pakse'

People at Pakse' know about the Pa Beuk and acknowledge that it is sometimes caught in the Mekong, either to the south (e.g. at Khong Island) or to the north of Pakse. Most informants thought that the season was around May, but one gave October/November.

With the help of Mr Boualy Sopha I was able to interview about eight lady fishmongers in the market at Pakse' on 17 May. They all agreed that it was unusual for a Pa Beuk to come to market and that they had not seen one so far this year. Those of them whose memories stretched far back also agreed that the Pa Beuk had never been abundant in the Pakse area. The most common story was that 'every 2 or 3 years about 1 or 2 or 3 Pa Beuk were caught and sold'. A price of 500 to 800 kip a kilo was quoted; but two ladies said that a Pa Beuk had been sold in 1973 at 1500 kip a kilo (this is the same as the current price at Ban Houei Sai, but well below the price at Vientiane). Another stated that she was herself a fisherwoman, and that in the course of 20 years she had caught 3 Pa Beuk. She said that the season was definitely 'now', i.e. May and June.

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