

Lower Mekong level endangers giant catfish

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Sinking water levels in the Mekong River have raised concerns for the well-being of giant catfish, as well as worries that drug smuggling might increase.

In Chiang Rai's Chiang Khong district, Pisit Wannatham, president of the Ban Hat Khrai Giant Catfish Association, yesterday said the Mekong had dropped to its lowest level in two decades.

He is unsure whether the situation will resolve itself like in 1992 when a severe drought hit the Mekong but giant catfish continued to spawn in April and May that year.

"This year the issue came from various factors and the water level is now too low for the fish to lay eggs in April-May," he said.

If they do not reproduce, it will be a major crisis and a clearer hint to their extinction, he said.

Suparp Kaewla-ai, chief of Chiang Rai's freshwater fishery station, said that if the problem were prolonged, it would threaten spawning this drought season because the fish needed water to be at least 2 to 3 metres deep.

However, extinction is unlikely because, if they fail to do so in April-May, they will return to lay eggs in the rainy season or whenever the water rises high enough.

Giant catfish mingled to reproduce in nature so some species might be affected, but the giant catfish population will not shrink. Fishery stations in Thailand raise many giant catfish, so they could be released to restore the natural balance if needed, he said.

Captain Dusit Jantharat, head of the Mekong River Patrol Patch in Ubon Ratchathani, said the falling water level caused several dry spots to emerge, which made it more convenient for people to cross over. This increased national security risks, especially drugs trafficked from neighbouring countries.

The authorities have doubled land patrol shifts and are keeping a close watch on major ports and suspect spots, while intelligence officials have been instructed to proactively follow targeted persons, he said.

All riverside villagers have been told to strictly follow the rules, especially one that prohibits launching boats after 6pm, to help accommodate the officials' work.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said he did not think China had intentionally brought suffering to downstream countries.

The cause of the current water shortage must be investigated first and Thai authorities will look up the agreements on international water management to see what they could do next, he said.

It is still too early to conclude that China should be blamed for not releasing water retained upstream, the PM said.

Meanwhile, with the arid season in full swing, smog in the North remained severe with five provinces shrouded in fine dust particles exceeding the standard for a week now.

Tourism associations in Chiang Rai and Lampang admitted the haze was hurting their business. Chiang Rai saw a 20-per-cent decline in tourists both local and foreigners, while Lampang said the region was suffering rather than one particular province because tourists usually visited several neighbouring provinces in one trip.

The northern province of Mae Hong Son and 20 districts in Buri Ram, Chaiyaphum and Surin have been declared drought disaster zones, while some areas of Nakhon Ratchasima are also hard hit.

The Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Region 5 Office has dispatched four water trucks to each of the four northeastern provinces to help local authorities' provide assistance.

Second Army Area chief Maj-General Weewalit Jornsamrit said the drought was expected to be more critical this month, as major reservoirs were running low.

Local Army units are preparing to work with governors and provincial offices of the Internal Security Operations Command in helping drought victims.

P.S.

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