



## IAN WELCH'S angling adventures

Here, in our unmissable 4-page slot, the UK's most cutting edge specialist coarse angler is the man to follow every week. Welch writes exclusively in *Angler's Mail*.

# Giant ray puts Welch on top of the World



THIS  
WEEK'S  
VENUE

It may be one of the most remote rivers on Earth but you still find fast food packaging and human rubbish amongst the flotsam!

### MAEKLONG RIVER, SAMUT SONGKRAM, THAILAND

Arising from the confluence of the Rivers Kwai Noi and Kwai Yai the Maeklong River flows through dense jungle and drains Thailand's central plains, flowing for some 145 km before reaching Samut Songkram Province and discharging into the Gulf of Thailand via a mile-wide estuary. The murky waters are hugely productive and home to massive populations of freshwater prawns, catfish and snakeheads; all of which are feasted upon by the world's largest freshwater predator, the awesome giant freshwater stingray.

#### IAN'S AIM

With Team FishSiam having captured a huge 180 kg stinger for the National Geographic TV cameras on the Bang Pakong the pressure is now off, but the team still needs to get some serious research done on Maeklong populations and Welch's looking for a beast to match his 150 kg specimen of last year!

#### CONDITIONS

Cloudless skies, blisteringly hot sunshine and temperatures well into the 30s; it's perfect.



Team Maeklong – the most gifted team of stingray anglers ever assembled. (L-R) Got, Puck, Pia, Jo, yours truly, A, Boy, Sa and P-Guy.

**T**HE hum of the air conditioning unit crept ever so slowly into my consciousness, creating a strange counter-rhythm to the thumping in my head, and I quietly cursed National Geographic's globetrotting fish biologist Zeb Hogan for purchasing such a huge bottle of bourbon with which to celebrate the capture of a massive 180 kg freshwater stingray for the cameras.

It was almost certainly a memorable evening, but sadly I had little recollection save a vague memory of the top US fishery scientist lusting after a young Thai girl who, to my eyes, resembled Rod Stewart. Strange folks these Yanks.

When, finally, the hands of my watch stopped spinning uncontrollably, I found I had a couple of hours to kill before the first tide so had time to freshen up before a breakfast of rice soup with extra chilli followed by a swim. The combination cleared my head and made me feel almost human again.

On the jetty alongside the river I was pleased to find partner in crime Rick Humphreys looking just as bad as I had felt, but typical for him he was still firing on all cylinders - and without the benefit of the chilli kick or the pool. I reluctantly decided it must be my age and resolved, one day, to grow up...

I became more concerned when the buzzing in my head started again and was only reassured when Rick pointed out that our boat was arriving and, sure

enough, within minutes the noise revealed itself as the motor of a Thai longtail.

First out of the boat was good friend 'Boy' - indisputably Thailand's top angler and the man who had guided me to such stunning results last time I was over. I knew most of the rest of the team from last year too, and many greetings were exchanged, the lads grinning at my feeble attempts at the local language.

The news from Boy was good - the Maeklong had been in cracking form over the past couple of days and a German client had boated three male stingray averaging 60 kg.

Fish of that stamp would do very nicely for the tagging exercise we hoped to carry out in conjunction with Thailand's Department of Fisheries. It would be the first such research ever conducted on the species, a unique collaboration between FishSiam and the Thai Government - and groundbreaking stuff if we could carry it off.

The scientists hoped to be able to tag at least one big female fish, and having missed out on a giant specimen from the Bang Pakong a couple of days previously, I too was hopeful a big female would grace us with her presence.

We moored up in one of the spots I fished the previous year - a classic stingray swim where the main river branched, creating a large eddy where



PROBABLY the largest freshwater fish that has ever been fully authenticated as having been caught on rod and line. Weighing between 265 kg and 350 kg Welch's giant freshwater stingray is a true monster in every sense of the word.



The Accurate Platinum Twin Drag – it almost made the fight a pleasure!



Brace shots of stingers are rare but I boated this brace of males within minutes of one another.



We're gonna need a bigger boat... The monster rolls at the front of the net.



The boys take the strain as we ease the fish out of the net onto a waiting wet tarpaulin.



Implanting electronic tags will yield the first scientific data on where these incredible creatures move.



A collapsible swimming pool acted as a temporary holding facility for the rays during tagging and DNA procedures – the beast only just fitted!



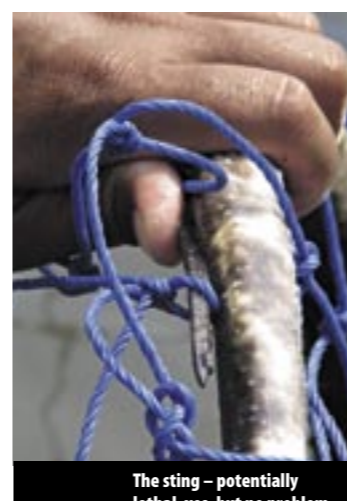
Wuttichai 'Boy' Khuensuwan shows the running lead arrangement.



An hour into the fight and the pain is showing big time. You just have to have the inner strength to grit your teeth and keep going.



Don't drink the water!



The sting – potentially lethal, yes, but no problem if you are sensible and know what you are doing.



An ultra-sound scan showed that my fish was carrying three young – so we got her back into the river straight away.



Having watched the action and organised the teams for a fortnight Rick bagged this 60 kg fish on the final morning.

## VENUE information

**DESCRIPTION.** Tidal in its lower reaches the MaeKlong River receives two daily water influxes which raise levels by between three to five metres through Samut Songkram Province where the murky waters drop off to depths of 20 m. It's a seriously wild and largely unexplored waterway and one of the last true adventures left to freshwater angling.

**FISHING IN THAILAND.** Ian fished with Rick Humphreys, Wuttichai 'Boy' Khuensuwan and the FishSiam.com team who offer a range of angling packages throughout Thailand including the unique opportunity to do battle with the largest known freshwater fish on earth. For full details check out [www.fishsiam.com](http://www.fishsiam.com)



» food would drop out of the current with a good main current, slack water and a crease. It was just the sort of area you would target on a river back home, proving watercraft is universal!

The other feature the swim offered was a fish farm at the downstream end. The restaurant trade throughout Thailand is huge business and fish rearing a prolific and profitable industry. With fish culled and cleaned on a daily basis, the areas around farms are rich in fish waste; and with jumbo portions of fresh entrails adding to prolific natural food, it's a wonderful larder that rays are quick to exploit.

I was going to position one rod close to the farm, one in the slack and two across in the faster water. All of them would offer snakehead livebaits on a running lead set-up with a 9/0 Owner Circle hook to a 150 lb fluorocarbon hook length at the business end.

On the deck the hardware was a 50 lb class boat rod coupled with an Accurate Platinum Twin Drag multiplier - a new reel to me, and one which looked, and indeed proved, to be a dream. I've never been a lover of multipliers but these babies started to win me over as soon as Boy demonstrated them.

Confident with the gearing and drag system and ready to go, I gave the thumbs up and the lads started to ferry the rigs out.

Last year the MaeKlong branch of FishSiam was in its infancy and the newly-formed team

was getting to know the ropes. Now, thanks in no small part to Boy's influence, the lads had gelled as a unit and it was a pleasure to be in their company.

Prime feeding time is on the rising tide and as the current shifted and the water started to flood the atmosphere was electric. I was quiet and could feel my heart pounding in my chest and my palms beginning to sweat – and not because of the heat.

All around the gentle sound of mantras drifting from the temples was punctuated by the splash of the occasional prawn fisherman, the cry of the occasional eagle and... the purring of a reel clutch as the bait just off the main drag was taken.

Boy gave me the thumbs up, Rick called the film crew and I clicked the lever into 'strike' and wound down hard into solid resistance – stingray!

The adrenaline rush was tempered as I felt the fish shift off bottom and realised it was small. Five minutes later I had it in open water and a couple of minutes later watched as the lads demonstrated the new landing system which saw a massive extending net unfurled on poles from the side of the boat – it was perfect and within a few seconds the fish, a specimen of 50 to 60 kg, was gently cradled in the mesh and we were on our way back to base, where the fish was transferred to a temporary holding pool where the scientists would take a DNA sample as well

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as implant an electronic tag to remotely monitor the movement of the fish.

We blanked on the rest of the morning tide but I was confident of further action on the afternoon high water, and sure enough I was into a fish within minutes of the bait hitting bottom, and before long had another 50 kg-plus fish at the boat – just in time to wind into a second take and land another fish of similar size shortly after!

With the pair of fish safely in the makeshift lab we motored back to the swim at breakneck speed

to take advantage of the last of the tide and the fact numbers of fish were clearly moving – and feeding.

The next take was strangely slow to start and only developed properly after a few seconds. It was as if the wings of a massive fish had tweaked the line as it passed across it before picking the bait up. Once again I wound down hard and prepared to haul up a male fish but in an instant was dragged across the gunwale as the rod doubled over and the fish went to ground. In those few seconds I hadn't just experienced raw power, it was as if the whole earth had moved – with me attached!

I wound down hard, pushing the rod well past its test and heaved, straining with ever muscle I had, but it made little impression on the beast 15 m below the boat. After half an hour my arms had all but gone and I was shaking as I strained, and after an hour my legs started to buckle too. With sweat pooling around me I was all but finished and the fish hadn't even budged.

I called for some water and, thinking I wanted to pour it over myself, the lads passed me a water bottle filled with river water. Too gone to notice I assumed it was drinking water and downed the bottle in one as the team at first stared in disbelief then started to roll about with laughter – it was a rare light moment in an otherwise serious situation!

Another 30 minutes down and Boy told me the tide would soon be turning – if I didn't shift the fish before the change he reckoned I never would.

I put on a glove to pull line onto the reel to exert extra leverage, gritted my teeth and somehow

found the reserves to pile on more pressure.

The rod butt started to creak and for an instant I thought it was going to explode under the strain, but after ten minutes I felt something give below as the fish shifted.

The fight would be won or lost in the next couple of minutes and I heaved and cranked with everything I had left in an attempt to keep her moving and prevent her bottoming out again, and with shouts of encouragement all around I somehow managed to do just that and played out the end game in open water.

The netting team were spot on and as a mass of white belly boiled at the surface the immortal words from Jaws came to mind: 'We're gonna need a bigger boat.'

It took some 15 people to lift her on a tarpaulin into the holding pool where measurements, tagging, ultrasound and DNA samples were carried out; the measurements giving a minimum weight of 265 kg and a maximum of 350 kg – a veritable monster and, we are told, the largest freshwater fish officially caught on rod and line.

I was soaked with sweat, ached from head to toe and was hardly able to stand by the time we lifted her back into the water. I swam alongside her, kissed the massive bulk of her hump and then moved aside as the team undid the binding on the sting and she drifted back into the depths of the MaeKlong – one of the last true freshwater monsters.

Back home now the thought of that fish still haunts me, and sends shivers down my spine.