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Observatory

A STUDY OF THE WORLD'S CATFISH

A TEAM of catfish experts is scouring the globe to look for new species of this poorly studied fish, thanks to a US\$5 million (S\$8.5 million) grant from the National Science Foundation in the United States.

The work, led by Dr Lawrence Page and Dr Carl Ferraris of the Florida Museum of Natural History, will involve research, exploration and collection of catfish in the region, as well as Africa and South America.

The duo estimates the team will discover about 1,700 new species in five years, based on projections by different groups of catfish researchers from all over the world.

There are already close to 3,000 known species - the second largest group of freshwater fish in the world, after carp.

Unlike birds and mammals, it is a poorly studied group, said Dr Page.

'The worldwide distribution of the fish and its economic importance as a food and aquarium fish were some reasons the National Science Foundation decided to fund the project. And we're bringing together the experts worldwide to do it.'

It decided to hold a workshop on catfish at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the National University of Singapore because of the country's diverse collection of 5,000 catfish specimens found in the region.

Hardy catfish species which have been released or escaped into the wild are increasingly becoming pests in lakes, rivers and streams.

In Singapore, two of the suckermouth armoured catfish - a familiar sight in aquariums here because they help to get rid of algae in tanks - have infested the waterways. When they grow too large for their tanks - the South American fish can reach a length of about 60cm - they are sometimes abandoned by their owners.

Being able to survive in fast flowing, dirty and even poisonous waters, they have thrived.



The giant Mekong catfish can hit 2.5m in length and weigh 200kg. This one was caught in the Mekong river in Thailand. -- CHAVALIT VIDTHAYANON

'They are found in the thousands in reservoirs and monsoon canals here,' said the museum's director Peter Ng. 'And the worrying thing is we don't know how they are affecting the ecosystem.' -- Chang Ai-Lien

RAT'S GENE CODE MAPPED

WASHINGTON - The genetic code of the rat joined the growing list of creatures whose DNA has been mapped, and experts said it will make the laboratory rat, already beloved by scientists, an even better tool for fighting human disease.

The rat is only the third species to be sequenced to such a degree, after the completed human genome sequence in April 2003 and the draft mouse genome in December 2002.

It confirms that the laboratory rat is, in fact, a good choice for medical research. Almost all human genes associated with diseases have counterparts in the rat genome, the researchers wrote in this week's issue of the journal Nature.

'This is an investment that is destined to yield major payoffs in the fight against human disease,' Dr Elias Zerhouni, head of the National Institutes of Health, which funded most of the research, said in a statement. -- Reuters

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