

## PROFILE

**T**an Heok Hui's love affair with fishes started when he was a kid. From aquarium fish, he went on to collect wild fishes in streams around Singapore and the region. In 1995, he completed his honours thesis on fighting fishes (see box below). And for the last six years, the zoologist, who is pursuing his doctorate at the NUS, has been studying a unique freshwater fish living in fast-flowing waters of Borneo, commonly known as the Borneo sucker or *Gastromyzon*.

When asked about his current choice of research, he deadpans: "Well, it takes a big sucker to study a small sucker."



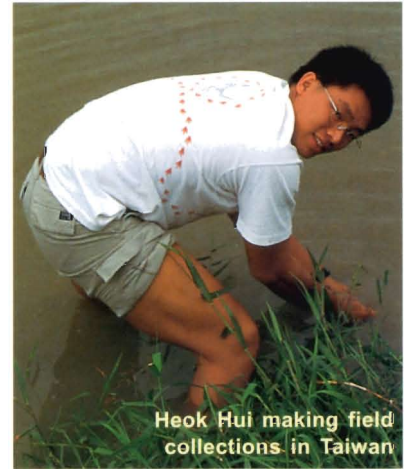
*Gastromyzon* (dorsal view)

But on a more serious note, he explains that these fishes, which have a distinctive ventral suction disc formed by modified fins, are still poorly known. The suction disc allows Borneo suckers to stay firmly attached to rocks or crawl along the bottoms of fast-moving waters, making them difficult to collect. This task was made easier by various simple tricks taught to Heok Hui by local fishermen during his field trips.

It is a chance to learn from the locals and other cultures that make field trips so fun, says Heok Hui. On one memorable trip to the Kayan Basin at East Kalimantan in 1999, he stayed with a Christian farming-cum-hunting gathering community. "They still cook with firewood, and either boil or steam their food. Sugar and coffee are considered luxury items. We had two meals a day, and by the time I had to come back, I had lost 5 kg!"

In 2000, he went to the headwaters of the Red River, Mekong, Yangtze, Irrawaddy and Salween basins in southern China. He says, "we had a wonderful time collecting fishes, but at the same time, it was somewhat of a culture shock, because the hygiene conditions were not very good, and I had a bit of food poisoning." But he was none the worse for the experience. "It's trips like these that make you count your blessings and kiss your toilet bowl," he says.

-Lea Wee



Heok Hui making field collections in Taiwan



A typical habitat of the Borneo suckers in Kalimantan

**Fighting fishes** - Fighting fishes (genus *Betta*) are one of the most speciose groups of fishes in SE Asia, the best known species being the Siamese Fighting Fish (*Betta splendens*). In 1990, 24 species were known. From Heok Hui's studies, we now know that many more species exist. He was responsible for discovering several new species! Fighting fishes are amazing. They breathe air, and can live in pools with poorly oxygenated water! The male fish takes care of the young, with some species even brooding the eggs and babies in the mouth! Many researchers are now studying their biology, adaptations and evolution.



*Betta simorum* - a large species from Sumatra described by Heok Hui and his supervisor in 1996

*Betta livida* - a small but brightly coloured species found in the peat swamps of North Selangor