FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 6, 2015

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Working together to protect biodiversity and human livelihoods in Bangladesh

MONTPELLIER, FRANCE: Hilsa fish are the national fish of Bangladesh, highly valuable to the country's economy and since the 1970s the fishery has been in sharp decline. Consequently, in 2014, USAID developed a five-year partnership with the Government of Bangladesh and WorldFish to improve the resilience of the Padma-Meghna River estuarine ecosystem and livelihoods that depend upon it. The Enhanced Coastal Fisheries project (ECOFISH^{BD}) has developed a collaboration of participatory research partners to build capacity of the Bangladesh Department of Fisheries to improve Hilsa fish (*Tenualosa ilisha*) catch monitoring, strengthen enforcement in fish sanctuaries, and establish community-based management of the fishery

USAID - Bangladesh Environment Officer Nathan Sage presented the project, "Enhanced Coastal Fisheries in Bangladesh (ECOFISHBD): A Program for Biodiversity Conservation and Improved Livelihoods in the Padma-Meghna River Estuary", at the 27th International Congress for Conservation Biology this week in Montpellier, France.

The ECOFISH^{BD} project utilizes an innovative "research in development" approach that addresses the development challenges prioritized by local, national and regional stakeholders. In close collaboration with partners, the project aims to support the use of science-based decision-making in fisheries management, enhance the resilience of Hilsa populations through improved management of the fishery and build the capacity of partners and fishing communities to improve enforcement in fish sanctuaries. In addition, the project aims to establish adaptive fisheries co-management and support the improved livelihoods of fishers, especially women.

According to Nathan Sage, "Sustainable management of the Hilsa shad in Bangladesh will have benefits to fisher livelihoods and nutrition as well as ecosystem benefits as the local communities work to better protect the fishery. Lessons from around the world have shown that community-based and collaborative management of fish sanctuaries can work. These efforts will help to build community resilience in a changing environment and protect important fisheries for future generation."

The project utilizes participatory action research methods that enable fishers to work alongside researchers to identify problems and use their skills and local resources to find solutions. Participatory research empowers communities and strengthens their capacities, provides access to new knowledge, and links them effectively with other stakeholders.

During a separate session Ms. Annabelle Bladon of Imperial College (London) gave a presentation entitled “An assessment of targeting in a compensation scheme for Hilsa conservation in Bangladesh.” Results of the assessment will directly support ECOFISH project-funded outcomes related to policy, power and incentives.

In collaboration with diverse project partners, the USAID project provides technical support to enable fisheries conservation activities promulgated in the Hilsa Fisheries Management Action Plan (HFMAP) in 2003. The HFMAP includes: 11-day fish trade ban to protect fecund migratory Hilsa; seasonal fish bans in five riverine sanctuaries (each 20-100 km in length) to protect juveniles; registration of fishers with ID cards and fisheries enforcement actions; and separate regulations to prohibiting the manufacture and use of monofilament fishing nets. Improved management of Hilsa catch fisheries through these various initiatives also has the potential to affect the abundance of other, non-target aquatic species. However, limited financial resources to implement these measures across a vast landscape have resulted in few conservation benefits.

More than 2000 conservation professionals discussed this topic and other important issues during this week at the International Congress for Conservation Biology in Montpellier.