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## Endurance or opportunity: Recognition is the key to success; the story of a catfish farmer of the Mekong Delta

*From a humble beginning to the top of the league of the catfish farming sector*

It was one of the most intriguing encounters when the extremely shy, self-made catfish farmer Trang Hung, the President of the HungCa Co Ltd. from Dong Thap province in the Mekong Delta, agreed to enlighten us with his most incredible life story which over a 35 year period has made him one of the major players in the catfish farming sector in the Mekong Delta.

Mr Hung is the fourth of six siblings of a fisher family of the Mekong Delta. He was educated up to the 5th grade when he decided to continue the traditional family livelihood of fishing. Around 1974 as an 18 year old he decided to catch catfish fingerlings in the flood period plains, and rear them in a wooden cage of 6 x 12 m with stainless copper mesh on the sides. He continued to feed the stock with a mixture of rice bran, morning glory and broken rice, depending on availability and affordability at the time, when the fish reached about 1.2 kg in 11 months. He sold the produce at local markets in VinLong, CanTho and other nearby places. Through this practice, over the subsequent years his production annual production increased to about 15 t.

Mr Hung was inquisitive and was always on the look out to improve his farming practice. He began to notice that if the cage bottom touched the soil, the stock grew better and was less prone to disease, and the flesh was also white. This simple observation made him believe that tra catfish would perform better in earthen ponds than in cages, and that was the beginning of pond farming of catfish in the Mekong Delta

By 1984, within a decade, Mr. Hung had expanded his practice to 2 ponds (10 x 10m) and 3 cages, and a production of 20 tonnes per year. By 1990 he had 10 cages and 3 ponds, each of 1 ha, obtained through a lease from the government - areas not suitable for rice cultivation - and achieved a production of 150 tonnes per year. Up to this stage Mr Hung would procure wild caught fingerlings from the wild in Cambodian waters, himself using his fishing skills, and his farmed produce was sold for around 3,200 to 3,400 VND/ kg (\$US 0.31 – 0.32), fetching approximately 4,000 VND/ kg (US\$ 0.38) in Ho Chi Min City.

During the period 1991-95 he improved the practice to obtain three crops per 24 months, and a production to 5,000 tonnes per year, and proceeded on to improve further and further when by 2000 he was able to produce 10,000 tonnes in 5 ponds and 10 cages. In 1993, as the catfish exports began to occur Mr Hung commenced selling his produce to processing plants. Mr. Hung began to further expand his farming activity and by 2005-06 he was able to produce nearly 60,000 tonnes per year, with a concurrent expansion of culture pond area to 200 ha, through land leases, and thus became one of the most important players in the catfish farming sector in the Mekong Delta.

Mr. Hung's endeavours did not stop at achieving this incredible level of production of 60,000 tonnes per year. He decided to venture into the processing sector, where he established a processing plant, which currently is



*Mr Hung in a happy mood revealing his life story*

capable of handling 100 tonnes of raw material per day. The plant employs 1,900 people of which 90% are women, empowering rural households and communities. Mr Hung plans to have a second processing plant functioning by February 2010, and he continues to forge ahead.

The simple lesson learnt is that human endeavour, an open mind, hard work, determination and the ability to recognize emerging opportunities enables one to reach great heights, bringing reward to the individual, but even more importantly bringing wealth and prosperity to the community - empowering the poor and the needy. Mr. Hung's personal wealth is secondary to the wealth, empowerment and happiness he has brought to the community!!!

Based on the translation of an interview with Mr Hung October 2009 in Dong Thap, Vietnam.