The new Ramsar Site in Myanmar's Irrawaddy delta will protect coastal communities from storms

7 February 2017

Myanmar

WORLD WETLANDS DAY, 2 February 2017 – Conservationists in Myanmar have a special reason to celebrate World Wetlands Day, as the Meinmahla Kyun estuary, which is the last remaining important mangrove and mudflat site remaining in the Irrawaddy delta, is officially added to the List of Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The designation of Meinmahla Kyun as a Ramsar Site marks the Myanmar government’s commitment to the protection of coastal ecosystems, including mangroves, mudflats and turtle nesting beaches.

At the designation ceremony Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment Conservation, U Khin Maung Yi, said “The conservation of wetlands and the wise use of its resources is important for the development of human societies in a sustainable and equitable way.”

According to Dr. U Nyi Nyi Kyaw, the Director General of the Forest Department, Head of Ramsar Administrative Authority of Myanmar, “The new Ramsar Site will not only protect the Irrawaddy delta’s last remaining important mangrove estuary, which hosts Myanmar’s largest crocodile population, but will also protect the delta from storm surges caused by cyclones.”

“The Forest Department, with support of Fauna & Flora International (FFI), designated a Ramsar Site which covers the mangroves on Meinmahla Island and the surrounding estuary, which provides an important feeding and nursery ground for fisheries and protects coastal communities from storms. The site also includes mudflats of global conservation importance – particularly to threatened shore birds,” says Frank Momberg, Director of FFI’s Myanmar programme.

Resource exploitation within and surrounding Meinmahla Kyun, combined with the effects of cyclone Nargis, has led to a severe decline in mangrove cover. According to Zau Lunn, FFI’s coastal and marine conservation expert, the greatest challenge is the demand for firewood in the
Irrawaddy delta’s last remaining important mangrove estuary hosts Myanmar’s largest crocodile population. “Only a comprehensive programme of mangrove protection and rehabilitation, distribution of firewood-saving stoves and provision of alternative energy sources (e.g. solar drying of fish) can prevent further degradation of the mangroves”.

Despite the severe threats, Meinmahla Kyun hosts the world’s largest population of the critically endangered mangrove plant species *Sonneratia griffithii*, and more than 20 species of threatened fauna, including the critically endangered mangrove terrapin (*Batagur baska*), endangered wild dog (*Cuon alpinus*), vulnerable Ayeyarwady dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and lesser adjutant stork (*Leptoptilos javanicus*).

Threatened migratory bird species found in the area include the critically endangered spoon-billed sandpiper (*Calidris pygmaea*) and the endangered Nordmann’s greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*) and great knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*), which makes the Ramsar Site important for shorebird conservation along the Australasian flyway.

With more than 30 villages living in poverty surrounding the Meinmahla Kyun estuary, the Forest Department and Fauna & Flora International hope that international recognition as Ramsar Site will attract additional funding to alleviate poverty while protecting and restoring the mangrove forest with its unique biodiversity values.

Fauna & Flora International gratefully acknowledges the financial support for the conservation of Meinmahla Kyun from KfW Development Bank through the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity under the ASEAN Heritage Parks Programme and the Manfred Hermsen Foundation.

At the designation ceremony the following activities took place:

- Report of progress of the successful Myanmar – Norway cooperation on Conservation of Biodiversity and Management of Protected Areas in Myanmar where one component is to support wetland conservation and wise use at the national policy level, and at the site level to promote the improved management of Myanmar’s three Ramsar Sites;
- National Wetland Committee has been formed and held their second meeting a few days before the WWD; a National Wetland Policy has been drafted and is being circulated for comment; data collection for preparation of a National Wetland Inventory;
- Donation of binoculars from the Government of Norway to Moeyungyi Ramsar Site; Designation of Meinmahla Kyun as Myanmar’s third Ramsar Site, and preparation of the Gulf of Mottama as the country’s next Ramsar
Site.

Reported by Lew Young, Senior Advisor for Asia & Oceania, Ramsar Secretariat