Wetland stakeholders in the Philippines meet to update the National Wetland Action Plan

12-14 January 2009, Dumaguete City, Visayas Island Group, Philippines

The Philippines is recognized as one of the world's biologically richest countries, but with over 7,000 islands making up the country, and the archipelago stretching over 1,810 kilometers from north to south, the challenges of managing this diversity - much of it associated with wetlands - is enormous. With only four designated Ramsar Sites, a rather modest number of protected areas, and a recognized general deterioration in Philippine natural ecosystem health, there is an agreed urgent need to develop policies and plans to arrest this deterioration and implement sound management practices. The current situation is likely to deteriorate even further through the likely impact of climate change, particularly on the Philippines' extensive coastal ecosystems, and through the fast rate of population growth (the population now stands at almost 90 million).

To chart the way forward for Philippine wetlands, over 60 people representing a broad range of stakeholders in wetland conservation met for three days in the beautiful grounds of Silliman University in Dumaguete City located in the Visayas island group. The principal aims of the conference were to review implementation of, and to update, the National Wetlands Action Plan published in 1993; to set the stage for the development of a National Wetlands Policy; and finally to set up a National Wetlands Committee to oversee the finalisation of these two documents and the implementation of the plan.

The conference was sponsored by GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) and was organized by the Society for the Conservation of Philippine Wetlands (SCPW) in collaboration with the Ramsar Administrative Authority (the Protected Areas and Wildlife Board in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)). Key Ramsar contacts in attendance included the Head of the Administrative Authority, Dr Theresa Mundita Lim, the National Focal Point, Ms Marlynn Mendoza, and both the CEPA Focal Points, Mr Carlo Custodio (Government) and Ms Amy Leccione (NGO - SCPW). The participants included representatives from a range of government agencies at the national level, politicians, Regional, Local Government Units and Municipalities, NGOs, universities and research institutes.

Opening remarks were delivered by:

DR Ben Malayang III, President of Silliman University
DR Candido Cabrido, President of the SCPW
Hon. Jose Baldado, Deputy Governor of Negros Oriental
Ms Joy Esguerra, National Coordinator of the UNDP-GEF Small Grants Programme
DR Uwe Scholtz, Program Adviser for GTZ
DR Manuel Gerochi, Under Secretary of DENR, who read the Keynote Speech of DENR Secretary Lito Atienza

Dr Lim delivered a keynote address on Wetlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change to set the overall scene for the rest of the meeting. This was followed by a review of the current National Action Plan, its level of implementation, and the need to update it to take in the practical realities facing the country's wetlands at the moment. There was also a stated need to ensure that the new plan clearly identified appropriate time scales and lead implementers to ensure better implementation than has been achieved with the current plan.

There was a strong focus from many participants on the importance of CEPA and I was asked to give a presentation on the new CEPA Programme and the CEPA Planning Tool recently launched at the Ramsar COP in November 2008. There was a particular interest in the clear emphasis on participation in the new programme. Participatory management skills and their use in wetland management at the local level was identified as key to management success and the
need to formalize this in the new action plan and in the national wetland policy to be developed was widely recognized. So too was the need to improve CEPA skills more broadly in wetland conservation so as to provide the 'enabling' environment for implementing the National Action Plan.

Following the introductory messages and keynote addresses on day 1, five technical working group (WG) leads presented brief reports on the current plan in relation to Freshwater Wetlands, Marine and Coastal Wetlands, Peatlands, Special Wetland Types requiring attention, Enabling Activities, and Wetland Policies. All participants were invited to join one of these groups to begin the process of updating the relevant parts of the national action plan over the next two days.

Day 2 began at 06.00 and 07.00 as participants departed on one of the five field trips. The unifying theme for the trips was community-led conservation approaches. I had the good fortune to visit Apo Island Protected Landscape where the local community has the authority to manage this protected area in collaboration with one government-appointed Park Superintendent (see annotated photos for further details).

The Working Groups convened in the late afternoon on day 2 and the morning of day 3 to finalise their reports to the plenary. Following the plenary presentation by the leads of each WG on key issues and concerns to be addressed by the new plan, an overall process was established for the next steps. It was agreed that over the next three months an ad hoc National Wetlands Committee will be set up to use the WG reports to draft the plan; this will articulate what is to be done, who will be the lead implementer (Communities/Local Government Units; National Government Agencies; Academic Research Institutes; or Civil Society Organisations), and what are the estimated time scales for delivery. The draft will then be sent for nationwide consultation and then further refinement. A process and likely funding support for the replacement of the ad hoc National Wetlands Committee with a permanent body was also agreed.

-- Sandra Hails, Ramsar

Group photo of wetland stakeholders who participated, representing the Ramsar Administrative Authority (Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau), other government agencies, regional and local government representatives, politicians, wetland researchers, international funding organisations, NGOs - and the Ramsar Secretariat.
The meeting was held in this building, originally the Silliman Institute founded in 1901 and now part of the prestigious Silliman University.

The Marine and Coastal Working Group preparing their materials for the plenary session.
Part of the Working Group on Enabling Strategies. On the left is Carlo Custodio, the CEPA Government National Focal Point and furthest away is the CEPA NGO National Focal Point, Amy Lecciones from the Society for the Conservation of Philippine Wetlands (the latter a key organiser of the meeting).

Field trip to APO Island Protected Area

This is a highly regarded example of community management of wetlands in the Philippines. The process began several years ago with the involvement of staff from Silliman University, who provided both essential technical management support and capacity building for the local community in management processes.

Today the island is home to 165 families with a total population of 770. The PA is managed by 57 staff: two staff members are paid for by the government, the PA Superintendent and the Chief Warden, and the remaining 55 persons including administrative and protection units are paid for by the income from tourism (such as snorkelling and scuba diving around the island, accommodation for tourists, tour guiding, and the sale of souvenirs). Additional income to the community also comes from their exclusive fishing rights around the island. The community receives 75% of the income generated, the remainder going to the government.

On-site management is overseen by the Park Superintendent and the Barangay Captain (the village chief). Under national laws on PAs, a Management Board must be set up to oversee the management of the PA and this currently includes the Mayor of the mainland town under which the island community falls within the local government system, the Barangay Captain, the Provincial Planning Development Officer, and a representative from the DENR from Central Visayas region.

While the Management Board is rather heavily biased towards the provincial representatives, overall the management structure seems to work very well and the on-site management is amicably managed by the appointed PA Superintendent and the Barangay Captain. Management success can be measured by the effective management of the marine sanctuary and other coral areas around the island - but also by the fact that islanders are so content with their lives that community members don’t want to leave the island and overpopulation is an issue the Barangay Captain is now having to deal with!
From the left: Marlynn Mendoza, the Ramsar National Focal Point, Carlo Custodio, the CEPA Government National Focal Point, and Leo Capon, Site Manager for the Naujan Lake National Park Ramsar Site, on our boat getting ready for the 20 minute journey between mainland and APO Island.

Left: PA Chief Warden Right: Barangay Captain, Liberty Pescobillo
Below: The PA Superintendent, Viernov Grefalde, briefing participants on the management process on the island.
Two PA staff from the local community
Selling souvenirs helps raise the community's income

Part of the village
One of the younger community members anxious to demonstrate her sweeping skills!

Photos by Sandra Hails and Cynthia Layusa

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