The Sepik River soon to be designated as a Ramsar Site in Papua New Guinea

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Papua New Guinea

Bird of Paradise is a national emblem of Papua New Guinea, a country where primary forests cover 55 percent of the land area and where people celebrate their traditional culture and connection with nature at a number of festivals throughout the year.

Papua New Guinea acceded to the Ramsar Convention in 1993 and so far designated two Ramsar Sites: Tonda Wildlife Management Area (1993) and Lake Kutubu (1998). In September this year, the Government’s Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA) invited a joint team from the Ramsar Secretariat and WWF to visit the Lake Kutubu Ramsar Site and the Sepik River which the Government nominated as the country’s next Ramsar Site.

Covering 2.4 million hectares, the Sepik River will be one of the largest riverine Ramsar Sites and will cover the river from its upper reaches to the sea. Local people not only depend on the river for transport and fisheries but also, for its wild salt and freshwater crocodile population which support the family-based crocodile skin and meat farms. The Sepik Wetland Management Initiative (SWMI) community based group was set up in 1998 to support the sustainable use of the river resources and in particular, the conservation of crocodiles and their habitats. SWMI organizes an annual Crocodile Festival to celebrate and raise awareness of the importance of the river. However, the river has been changing through increasing siltation caused by forest logging and the arrival of invasive plant and fish species. There is also the threat of potential chemical leakage from an open cast mine that has been proposed in the upper reach of the river. SWMI hopes that the designation of the Sepik River as a Ramsar Site will help them ensure the long-term conservation of the river and its resources.
Covering 2.4 million hectares, the Sepik River will be one of the largest riverine Ramsar Sites. It has a high number of endemic fish species (10 out of 14 species) and is surrounded by a primary forest. Many of the people living in the scattered villages around the lake still depend on the lake for fisheries. The Government has also designated the lake as a Wildlife Management Area and formed a committee made up of representatives from the villages to manage the site. Each year, the community organizes a traditional festival which attracts over 20 singing groups to celebrate digaso oil which is produced from one of the local tree species, the kundu drum, and the lake itself. Two of the villages have set up a lodge on the top of an island in the lake to attract tourists but they are faced with challenges such as the site’s relative remoteness and the lack of an effective means of communication as well as marketing. Oil and natural gas have been found in the highlands above the lake and these resources are being actively exploited through pipelines which run within the Ramsar Site boundaries. A large die-off of fish in 2007 was blamed by the local people on leakage from the pipelines. Consultants for the oil company pointed out a fungal infection brought in with the tilapia which was used by the local community for aquaculture.

Papua New Guinea’s rich natural resources have always attracted logging, mining, as well as oil and gas companies. Without proper control, these operations have, and will cause further impacts to the rich environment and the livelihood of the local people.