Mainstreaming Wetland Biodiversity Conservation

A workshop sponsored by UNEP-GEF
Yueyang City, Hunan province, P.R.China, 2-4 December 2008

An international workshop on Mainstreaming Wetland Biodiversity Conservation: Experiences and Lessons Learned in Practical Applications of Mainstreaming, organized by the GEF Wetland Project Office and the State Forestry Administration of China, took place from 2-4 December, 2007, in Yueyang, Hunan Province on the shores of Dongting Lake, a large freshwater lake that includes three Ramsar sites. Sponsored by UNDP/GEF, the workshop brought together over 130 experts and practitioners with the objective of sharing experiences in mainstreaming wetland biodiversity across all sectors of the national economy, society, and the policy-making framework, as well as at global levels.

Key national and regional leaders from within China were present including the Vice Administrator from the State Forestry Administration (SFA), Madame Yin Hong, and the Head of our Administrative Authority, Mr Ma Guangren (SFA), the Vice Governor of Hunan Province Mr Yang Taibo, and the Mayor of Yueyang Municipality, Ms Huang Lanxiang, as well as the Regional Technical Advisor from the Bangkok office of UNDP/GEF, Mr Sameer Karki.

Distinguished guests at the first plenary session. Opening remarks were made by Ms Yin Hong, Deputy Administrator of the State Forestry Administration (4th from right); Mr Yang Taibo, Vice Governor of Hunan provincial Government (4th from left); Ms Huang Lanxiang, Mayor, Yueyang Municipal Government (3rd from right), and Mr Sameer Karki, Regional Technical Advisor for Biodiversity, UNDP-Asia Pacific (3rd from left). On the far right is Mr Ma Guangren,
We learned from Mr Sameer Karki in his presentation that UNDP/GEF is funding six national wetlands programmes in Asia, with ongoing projects in Bangladesh, China, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Republic of Korea, and he underlined the need to effectively mainstream wetland biodiversity across sectors both in terms of managing such national programmes and in ensuring the continuity of the work once the projects are completed. Indeed their sponsorship of this workshop was in recognition of the importance of mainstreaming at all levels in UNDP/GEF wetland projects and the need to learn from past experiences.

While there was limited time for discussion of presentations, facilitators were able to distill some of the positive and negative experiences at local, regional, national and global levels, and the organizers intend to publish both a workshop proceedings with the extended abstracts and a monograph that will include the full papers of invited speakers as well as other related work carried out under the China Wetlands Project.
The Yueyang Nanhu Hotel, location of the workshop, on the shores of Dongting Lake

With an intensive 28 presentations over two days, this report can only provide broad comments on some mainstreaming issues that were highlighted.

The presentation from Mr Ma Guagren noted the increasing recognition of wetland management in China particularly because of the critical competition for water between users and sectors, and the recognition at the highest levels that wetlands play a key role in flood protection. Mr Ma noted the importance of a recent decision by the China State Council giving the mandate for setting up a National Wetlands Committee that will be chaired by the Minister of Environment and will include senior representatives from 16 ministries. This will be the key driving force for an effective mechanism for managing wetlands in the country that takes account of all water users. The Committee will be launched in December of this year.

At the subnational level in China a number of presentations were made from several wetland demonstration sites under the UNDP/GEF China Wetlands project, including one from Dongting Lake. The presenter, Mr Gui Xiaojie, highlighted the importance of the cross-sectoral committee that was set up locally to manage the programme of work on restoring the lake with all key local government sectors represented, as well as the critical importance of establishing a working relationship with a number of the local industries that have a significant impact on the water quality of the lake. Their communications programme to raise awareness targeted local communities living around the lake, making agreements with them on their roles and responsibilities in managing the wetland, but also focused on raising awareness of the value of the lake with local government decision-makers, particularly with regard to the natural flood protection afforded by the lake. Of interest too was the work done during the project to strengthen local legislation and policy to support conservation activities and prevent activities that are harmful, as well as their success in building partnerships with NGOs and in securing significant funding from several international sources.

While Eugenio Barras from WWF in Mexico noted the challenge of having no consideration for the allocation of water for wetland ecosystems in the river basin he works in, and no obvious mechanism to rectify this, Jenny Day from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, spoke of the positive value of their National Water Act in ensuring water for basic human needs and for aquatic ecosystems. Still on the theme of water allocation, Eric Fisher, a private landholder who owns part of the Macquarie Marshes Ramsar Site in Australia, talked of the challenges of ensuring sufficient water allocation to a Ramsar Site to maintain the integrity of the ecosystem, especially from the private landholders point of view: He highlighted the value of the Ramsar Site Managers Network in Australia in assisting in the development of solutions and in providing a mechanism for raising wetland issues with a wider audience. Another networking approach came from Gordon Ajonina of the Cameroon Wildlife Conservation Society, where a pan-African mangroves network
assists in the sharing of experiences and skills in participatory conservation with local communities across the region. These are just a taste of the mainstreaming issues that were presented - there were many more insights into mainstreaming from other speakers.

In my own presentation on mainstreaming from a Convention perspective, I looked at practical examples from our Contracting Parties that had helped to mainstream wetland wise use at national and international levels. An illustrated example highlighted the challenges that face our Administrative Authorities, with the plethora of ministries and departments as well as the relevant national and regional institutions that have a stake in wetlands. Well-structured National Wetland Committees can certainly contribute to meeting this challenge and two examples, from Austria and Thailand, were discussed in some detail. A brief look at the underlying legislation that will lead to the establishment of the Republic of Korea's first national wetlands committee was introduced, noting that the UNDP/GEF national wetland programme in the country will be assisting in this. An innovative approach to developing and implementing wetland strategies in Sweden was also considered, as well as effective approaches to managing transboundary wetlands, using the example of the Floodplains of the Morava-Dyje-Danube Confluence (including Ramsar sites in Austria, Czech Republic and Slovakia). And of course we cannot talk about mainstreaming without emphasising the need for effective communication that reaches across sectors. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment synthesis report on *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Wetlands and Water* was identified as a useful tool for wetland communicators in reaching from the world of environment to the world of development and in framing the challenge for wetland conservation in its broadest context. The use of World Wetlands Day as a campaign day for working with local communities, schoolchildren, local and national decision-makers was mentioned also - and it was referred to in several other presentations as well.

A significant output for this workshop was the preparation and adoption of the Dongting Lake Declaration, calling on the international community to mainstream wetland biodiversity, and including a number of suggestions referring to the Ramsar Convention and how it operates.

Workshop participants were rewarded for their hard work with excellent food, wonderful hospitality, and a day trip that took us on a visit to see the results of some of the restoration work at Dongting lake as well as visit to Yueyang Tower, an important cultural centre in the Province for 1700 years, made famous by Chinese poets who visited and wrote poems about the tower and the lake, and also by Chairman Mao, who was born in Hunan province and visited the tower. On the third floor of the tower his handwritten poem has been preserved on wooden boards.

-- Sandra Hails, Ramsar
A research and visitor centre on the shores of Dongting Lake
On a cold, overcast day, participants viewed the restoration work at the lake. Although hard to tell from this photo, the lake extends as far as the eye can see!

Fishing boats at the lakeside
Participants visited Yueyang Tower, made famous by visiting Chinese poets, has been an important cultural centre for 1,700 years.