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Web release

For immediate release - February 9 ,2006

Nong Khai celebrates World Wetlands Day

Nong Khai: Mr.Suphot Lawansiri, Governor of Nong Khai province , **Mr. Colin McQuistan**, Conservation Director of WWF Greater Mekong Thailand Country Programme, government agencies and local communities came together to celebrate the year of His Majesty the King's 80th Birthday as well as the World Wetland Day on February 2nd, 2007. Participants commemorated this event by releasing 1 million fish into Beung Kong Long lake and announced their commitment to protect the wetland based upon the wise use principles outlined in the internationally Ramsar convention.

In international recognition of the global importance of wetlands 150 nations, including Thailand announced February 2nd to be World Wetlands Day. The activities arranged on this day raise awareness and promote understanding of the significance of the wetlands they celebrate . This year, **WWF Thailand** together with Nong Kai province organized World Wetlands Day at Beung Kong Long in Nong Kai province. The aim of the event was to raise awareness of the importance of this wetlands which provides a vital food source for the local communities living around the wetland. However, unsustainable practices are jeopardising the integrity of the wetland and its resulting ecological products and services. Therefore, under the theme "*Fish for Tomorrow*" the celebrations at Beung Kong Long focussed on one of the most important functions of wetlands – that is providing a valuable fish protein source for the local population.

"Today in those countries along the banks of the Mekong, from the Tibetan Plateau down to the South China Sea, World Wetlands Day is being celebrated with the theme "Fish for Tomorrow". In order to ensure that we have enough fish to supply our needs tomorrow, we need to sustainably manage the fish, in the streams, rivers, deep pools, marshes, lakes and seasonally flooded forests where they are found, today! WWF is working to support effective management of wetlands based on the wise use principle so that Beung Kong Long can continue to provide the environmental and economic goods and services upon which local livelihoods depend. ," **Colin McQuistan**, Conservation Director of WWF Greater Mekong Thailand Country Programme, said.

On World Wetlands Day, celebratory events were held by WWF and partners near to the Mekong in Vientiane (Laos), Nong Khai (Thailand), and Kratie (Cambodia).

"Realising that our neighbours are facing similar situations and sharing similar concerns to ourselves, we may start to understand more clearly that what happens in any one part of the Mekong, will have profound impacts in another part of the system. We all benefit from sharing the great natural wealth the Mekong provides in many different ways, but this wealth depends on the continued health of the whole system – the interconnection of tributary rivers and streams,

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marshlands, the river itself and the seasonally flooded grasslands and forests it inundates - and most importantly, we all share in the responsibility for taking care of the magical Mekong” **Robert Mather**, Senior Programme Manager for the WWF Living Mekong Programme stated.

Beung Kong Long is considered to be Thailand’s second most internationally important wetland, and is the only wetland in the Northeastern region. Nearby Good Ting Marsh also a focus of WWF conservation efforts, is being supported to attain Ramsar recognition.. Both wetlands cover more than 3,200 ha and are principle watershed components of the Mekong river. In fact the inland fisheries of the Mekong basin produces 2% of the world’s annual total catch of all types of fish (both marine and freshwater), and 80% of the Mekong’ population get most of their protein from fish. The commitment to protect these areas contributes to guarantee the food source that nourishes the local people, as recognized by the governor of Nong Khai province.

“We have to take care of this significant wetland for all. Beung Kong Long is the food source, generating income and is the home of biodiversity and rare species. It is the wealth of every community including Beung Kong Long communities and neighbouring provinces. Beung Klong Long wetland is the only Ramsar site in the Northeast of Thailand. If we properly take care of this site, we will have food enough for the whole year.” **Suphot Lawansiri**, Governor of Nong Khai province said at the opening ceremony.

Dr. Chavalit Vidthayanon, Senior Freshwater Biologist, WWF Thailand stresses the importance of these ecosystems,

“Despite being a small area, Beung Kong Long hosts 10% of Thailand’s birds and fish species. Its ability to support natural resources makes it crucial to the strength of all communities. The people who depend on this water source may have low income but they are not poor. This coincides with His Majesty the King’s royal idea of sustainable economy; one has to depend on water, and water has to be clean and support life. We can have sustainable agriculture and together manage the area”.

Recent WWF surveys found that Beung Kong Long and Good Ting Marsh are the two most important basins in Nong Kai province in respect to the products they provide. They are home to more than 183 animal and 416 plant species. This biodiversity is the foundation of numerous economic drivers related to agriculture, fisheries and tourism. Fisheries are particularly important at the local level as they provide a food source captured by over 20 different traditional fishing techniques. Data collected shows that more than 80 tons of fish, 30 tons of shrimp and other aquatic animals are caught each year. Additionally, over 60 tons of aquatic plant drive a local household economy that converts these reeds and rushes into a variety of products; including woven baskets and clothing that subsequently enter the local economy.

Today, humans continue to benefit from these seemingly inexhaustible resources, although as time goes by it is becoming apparent that these wetlands are changing. It is therefore important that informed wise choices are made to mitigate increasing pressure from such activities as increased



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herbicide use in the expanding rubber plantations around the wetlands, over harvesting of aquatic plants and animals, or the reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in seasonal vegetable crops. It is rapidly becoming apparent that chemicals are accumulating in these wetlands, with consequences for the local food chain.

Anake Dejmanee, Deputy of Nonsomboon Sub-district Administrative Office notes the dangers of these signs that *“ both people and fish can be killed by the accumulation of toxins. Many people die when they shouldn’t have from toxin build-up. When testing blood, hospitals and health care clinics are finding increased levels of chemicals in peoples blood. As a preliminary caution, people are advised to properly use the chemicals especially to follow recommended doses. Villagers are also educated about the effects of agricultural chemical use on the wetlands so that together with the government, they can help protect the ecosystem and themselves in the long run”*.

Dr. Chavalit Vidthayanon adds that *“we have to consistently check water quality. If there are signs of pollution, a forum between farmers, fishermen and villagers needs to be organized. A good sign of how developmental projects affect the ecosystem is by the survival of indicator fish species such as the Boraras micros, Neodontobutis aurarmus, Syngnathus spicifer, Parachela. More importantly, if Beung Kong Long and Good ting are extremely polluted, not only will this affect Nong Kai people, but the biodiversity of the Mekong watershed as well”*.

As encroachment in these freshwater areas continues, **Yanyong Sricharoen**, Head of Community Management of Wetlands in Thailand and the Mekong River Basin Project, WWF Thailand, is highly aware of *“the significance of this joint commitment by stakeholders to manage wetland areas that are regionally and internationally important. Nong Khai is a pioneer in these activities, as seen in the set-up of the Nong Khai Provincial Wetlands Management Committee. In the first year of the project, we focused on fish and plant surveys, water quality testing, corresponding with stakeholders, strengthening the community as well as putting together a curriculum on local wetland education. In the coming year we are focusing on learning more about the wetlands and local environment by data analysis and designating management areas with all involved parties. Additionally, regulations for the protection and wise use are being developed for sustainable management. All activities are conducted by the stakeholders to ensure integration with their lifestyles and their appropriateness to the local ecosystem. In addition, experiences and lessons learned will be presented so that relevant policies in the provincial and national levels can be processed to assure proper management of all wetlands”*.

On this day in a small pavilion on the shore of the Beung Kong Long Lake, a joint declaration was signed that echoed across both sides of the Mekong from the mountains to the sea a declaration that demonstrated one small example of the dedication and cooperation required to protect this mighty watershed ...as a source for water and life that beats at the heart of those who depend on it, today and for generations to come.



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