

Nongtha wetland features in environment protection

Souknilundon Southivongnorath

With the backdrop of Nongtha wetland, Chanthabouly district governor expressed his wish that the human residents could have as much appreciation of the environment as the birds that visit the lotus flowers there each year.

Mr Saythong Keoudouangdy spoke to Vientiane Times yesterday at a ceremony organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to mark "Wetland Day" on February 2.

More than 10,000 birds make the wetland their temporary home when the lotus flowers are in bloom.

Mr Saythong said while birds understood the importance the wetland as a source of food and sustenance, too many residents of the village and surrounds didn't care about protecting their environment.

Nongtha wetland has long been an important source of food for the local people, providing edible plants, traditional medicines, fish and other foods.

Development in the area is encroaching on the wetland and polluting the water yet many residents do not seem to care, Mr Saythong said.

Seasoned fisherman Mr Bounmy Bhodhisane complained to the press that

he and other partners in the area can now catch a total of only six to seven kilos of fish per day if they are lucky.

"This is different from the past, when we used to catch 12-24 kilo per day. Today, just one kilo is difficult," he explained.

Known affectionately as Grandpa Bounmy, he has spent more than 60 years fishing the area and is worried that if Nongtha's environment is destroyed, then the fish will disappear into memory.

With this in mind, representatives of the IUCN and government officials in Vientiane organised a ceremony to promote protection of the wetland.

Working with local organisations, they came together to organise activities with the local media to raise the level of awareness of environmental protection.

IUCN Country Representative, Ms Latsamy Sylavong, said that the role of the media was very important in promoting protection efforts.

The participants were briefed on Wetland Day and the importance of wetlands to those animals and people that depend on them.

Participants from concerned government sectors, local officials and people from the village were in attendance.

The media interviewed several of the officials

and found them to be very supportive of the cause.

"This wetland is very important for the livelihood of these people, we should work together to increase awareness so people can continue to use it well into the future," Ms Latsamy said.

Head of Nongtha village, Mr Souphan Keobounma, said that a few years ago some people from outside the village began using electric-shock fishing methods in the pond.

He said this was a dreadful practice because it kills all nearby fish and aquatic life, not only the ones that can be eaten.

"We worked with the headmen from the other villages to discourage this practice as well as making sure everyone knew it was illegal. We have not had that sort of problem since," Mr Souphan said.

Since 2003, the IUCN has been marking the day with various activities.

Last year they celebrated with students of the National University of Laos, while this year reaching out to the media was the emphasis.

Activities organised included environmentally themed lessons for the village's primary school students, who learnt all about the importance of the wetland to their lives and those of the animals that rely upon it.



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Thongloun Sisoulith (left) and Japanese Ambassador Mr Masaaki Miyashita cut the ribbon to officially open the new Hinheup Bridge yesterday.

New bridge across...

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"As for our old bridge, we will keep it as a historical site and local people on both sides can use it for pedestrian passage," he said.

The new bridge is about 200 metres downstream.

Construction of the new bridge was made possible by a grant from the Japanese government valued at 933

million yen (about US\$8 million). Work began in September 2007.

The new bridge follows the design of the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge near Vientiane, and replaces the original Hinheup Bridge, built in 1918 and repaired after flood damage with the help of the Swedish

International Development Agency in 1981. The bridge is 195 metres long and 10 metres wide with two traffic lanes and footpaths on either side. Hinheup district is about 100 kilometres from Vientiane, and on the way to the popular tourist destinations of Vangvieng and Luang Prabang.

Rubber helps Luang Namtha farmers bounce back

Khamphone Syvongxay

Rubber cultivation could be a long-term resource for socio-economic development if the government can implement a plan to allocate suitable areas for production.

Luang Namtha has benefited from rubber, becoming a model for the rest of Laos after the provincial authorities placed restrictions on the size of plantations in 2008.

Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Department Director, Dr Khamlek Phaydara, said small-scale farmers can now grow rubber trees on their land for their family's future income.

Rubber is a valuable forestry product which can earn a relatively high income for provincial people, he said.

For farmers in Had-Nhau village, Luang Namtha district, are model families within the province, exporting rubber has been a means of poverty reduction since they began growing it in 1994.

Dr Khamlek said that last year the villagers exported about 600 tonnes of rubber to China for 10,000 kip per kilogram, while other farmers around the province exported only 200 tonnes.

This year he expects that Luang Namtha will double its rubber exports from last year, exporting around 1,600 tonnes, with trees planted



Rubber farm along the A3 road in Luang Namtha province.

six years ago now ready for harvesting.

Many foreign-owned companies are building processing factories in the province to make it easier to export the product.

In the past some local people were employed by investors on a casual or salaried basis to clear weeds from the rubber plantations, Dr Khamlek said.

Now some locals are benefiting from the 'two plus three' system in which farmers provide labour and lands, and companies supply seeds, funding for equipment and input on cultivation techniques.

He said that rubber is enjoying high market demand at present. Neighbouring countries need to buy many

thousands tonnes of rubber, but Laos and its producers are not able to meet the demand as yet. He added that rubber cultivation has no harmful effect on the natural environment if people use the correct techniques.

"A rubber tree can be harvested for 25-30 years and when the rubber runs out we can chop it down and sell the wood to make furniture. This is what Vietnam and China are doing," Dr Khamlek said.

There are currently about 26,000 hectares of rubber under cultivation in the province.

The province's top priorities in agriculture and forestry production are rice, rubber, cardamom and sugar, he added.



A landscape of Nongtha wetland in central Vientiane.

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