

MRC/IUCN Regional Workshop on Mekong Wetlands, Biodiversity, and Livelihoods
25 – 26 January 2010
Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

On 25-26 January over 40 wetlands specialists met in HCMC in a workshop organised by MRC and IUCN in order to share recent experience, knowledge gained and lessons learned from ongoing work on wetlands in the Mekong Basin, and to identify priority areas for future work.



Presentations from IUCN, WWF and GTZ projects in Nong Khai in north-east Thailand, Stung Treng in Cambodia, Beung Kiet Ngong in Lao PDR and Soc Trang in Viet Nam, focused on site-based interventions. Each of these projects illustrated successful examples of wetlands management based on co-management approaches whereby local communities and government negotiate an agreement that specifies the rights, roles, and responsibilities of both parties. A key feature in each case has been the establishment of new organisational/institutional arrangements at the local level that have enabled better management of the sites. Co-management is a form of management that lies between full state control at one extreme and exclusive local community control at the other. It appears to be well adapted to managing wetlands given their inherent variability over place and time, which demands flexibility and adaptability in decision making.

While these site-specific projects demonstrate real progress in terms of moving communities and local government toward more sustainable use of wetlands, the presentations highlighted issues that still need to be addressed. At national levels, enabling environments are lacking due to gaps in national wetlands policy, and wetlands laws, and there is limited appreciation of the economic value of the ecosystem goods and services that wetlands provide. As an example, all wetland protected areas in Vietnam are designated as Special Use Forest (SUF) and managed as forests rather than wetlands. In the case of Tram Chim National Park, this led to a focus on fire suppression rather than maintenance of the park's wetlands as habitat for globally threatened birds. A decree was issued in 2003 defining wetlands and their management objectives but it has not been implemented because SUF management is the responsibility of MARD while wetlands management belongs to MONRE. As a result, no wetlands conservation areas have been designated.

The presentation on the Beung That Luang wetland near Vientiane showed how valuation of wetlands in terms of water filtration, flood control, and local livelihoods can be used to make an economic case for their conservation. But the project also highlights a key weakness: even if conservation is more economic than conversion, the issue is who benefits and who loses. Gains from conversion typically accrue to a small group of land developers and their political allies while the costs are borne by large numbers of the less wealthy who

lack political influence. In reality, therefore, decisions over wetlands use are made on the basis of political considerations as well as cost-benefit calculations.

Other presentations at the workshop showed that the MRC's Environment Division is working on basin wide wetlands inventory and valuation. The Fisheries Programme is regularly providing new and updated information on the value of basin fisheries, whilst the Basin Development Programme is projecting what might happen to wetlands in the Mekong Basin under different development scenarios. It became apparent from these presentations that given the huge potential human impacts from wetlands loss that this work needs to be more than just a series of data collection and mapping exercises. Rather, MRC should work with partners to communicate the key policy messages to decision makers in the member countries. IUCN, WWF, and other organizations have considerable experience and can work closely with MRC in this regard.

The workshop also provided an opportunity to celebrate World Wetlands Day (albeit one week early). February 2nd each year is World Wetlands Day. It marks the day that the Convention on Wetlands was adopted in 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Globally there are presently 158 Contracting Parties, with 1828 wetland sites, totaling 169 million hectares, designated as Wetlands of International Importance. So far the countries of the Lower Mekong Basin have however embraced Ramsar with differing levels of enthusiasm. Presently there are 11 Ramsar sites in Thailand, 3 in Cambodia, 2 in Vietnam and none in Laos which has not yet ratified the Convention. Of these only 3 in Thailand and 2 in Cambodia are within the Mekong Basin, and these five sites together cover less than 50,000 hectares – representing less than 0.1% of the lower basin area. Although new sites within the Mekong Basin have been proposed the limited interest in Ramsar sites arguably reflects the need for more awareness at government level of wetlands relative to other habitats. There is therefore a real opportunity for MRC to take a leading role as a regional platform for supporting Ramsar site designation, and building capacity for effective implementation in the Mekong.

The theme of [World Wetlands Day](#) in 2010 is “**Caring for Wetlands— an answer to climate change**”. Globally, wetlands store an estimated 300 to 700 billion tons of carbon¹ – roughly equivalent to the total amount of carbon in the atmosphere. Wetlands ARE vulnerable to human-induced climate change but, if we manage them well, wetland ecosystems and their biodiversity also have a role to play in the mitigation of climate change and will be important in helping humans to adapt to climate change through their critical role in reducing impacts of extreme weather events, and ensuring water and food security. While currently the number one driver of wetland loss and degradation is habitat change as a result of human development, climate change effects are already being felt across the world.

Generally speaking, governments have so far accorded a much higher value to conservation mangroves than to freshwater wetlands. This may reflect the well-established relationship between mangrove loss and catastrophic storm damage, as shown by the 2004 tsunami; Cyclone Nargis in 2008; and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The relationship between freshwater wetlands loss, reduced resilience, and large-scale damage has been less well documented. But government attitudes may be changing. Hanoi, for example, in response to heightened flood risk is embarking on a project to rehabilitate its lakes, to obtain dual benefits of wetlands and flood alleviation.

¹Bridgman, S. D. *et al. Wetlands* **26**, 889–916 (2006).