

# World Wetlands Day – Healthy Wetlands, Healthy Forests – Activities in Lao PDR



This year World Wetlands Day was recognized and celebrated in Vientiane and in Beung Kiat Ngong Wetlands in Champassak Province, one of the first sites in Lao PDR recognized under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Wetlands, such as mangroves, peat forests and freshwater swamp forests, are home to a wealth of biodiversity. To mark this year's World Wetlands Day on Wednesday 2 February, IUCN highlighted the role and importance of forests in wetlands, as 2011 is the International Year of Forests.

This year's World Wetlands Day also marked the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ramsar Convention. Ramsar protected wetland sites cover an area of 186 million hectares, about the size of Mexico, making it the largest protected area network in the world. Lao PDR joined the Ramsar Convention in September 2010, nominating two wetlands sites of national importance, Beung Kiat Ngong in Champassak Province and Xe Champhone in Savannakhet Province.

In Lao PDR this year, IUCN and the Government of Lao PDR convened a range of activities to recognize the importance of wetlands and the vital role played by forests in the water cycle and in providing environmental services such as protecting water quality and storing carbon.

In Vientiane, on January 31, 2011, the first meeting of the National Committee for Wetland Management of the Ramsar Convention in Lao PDR was held. The meeting was chaired by H.E Asang Laoly, Vice Prime Minister of Lao PDR, and Chairman of both this Committee and the National Environment Committee. The meeting's purpose was to inform all committee members and stakeholders about country's accession to the Ramsar Convention, to discuss the significance of wetlands and affirm Lao PDR's commitments to manage and use the resources wisely.



*Photo 1: Participants at the first meeting of the Lao National Committee for Wetland Management of the Ramsar Convention*

The meeting discussed the institutional arrangements for wetland management, including the roles of concerned institutions. In his opening remarks, H.E. Asang Laoly underlined the Lao PDR commitments toward

implementing Ramsar Convention including the need for strategic planning for wetland management in the future.

In Champassak Province, provincial and district government representatives, teachers and students, journalists and civil society participants came together at Beung Kiat Ngong in Pathoumphone District on February 5<sup>th</sup> to celebrate World Wetlands Day. Activities promoted the value of wetlands, emphasizing the importance of flooded forests and forest swamps, such as those found in Beung Kiat Ngong.



Photo 2: Key participants at celebrations in Beung Kiat Ngong Wetlands

“Lao PDR’s wetlands, including these forested wetlands, provide us with essential services, such as carbon storage, habitats for fish and other species, and livelihoods for local people. Lao PDR’s recent accession to the Ramsar Convention shows its growing commitment to protecting its wetland resources”, commented Ms Latsamay Sylavong, Country Representative for IUCN Lao PDR, in news reports on the activities.

Processions, local performances, and an elephant baci ceremony were organised, as the celebrations coincided with the local Elephant Festival.



Photo 3: Procession to the wetlands



Photo 4: Elephants join the celebrations

Games and quizzes about conservation and the value of wetlands were another highlight for local school students.



*Photo 5: School children's activities for World Wetlands Day 2011*

Significant media coverage was gained for World Wetlands Day and the Ramsar Convention in Lao PDR this year. This included:

- Government press release in Lao and English on the first meeting of the National Committee;
- Statement to the press, in Lao and English, released by Vice-Prime Minister Asang Laoly on wetlands and Ramsar;
- IUCN Lao press release in Lao and English on celebrations in Beung Kiat Ngong;
- Web stories on the IUCN Lao and Asia regional websites on WWD activities (e.g. [http://www.iucn.org/about/union/secretariat/offices/asia/asia\\_where\\_work/lao/?6989/World-Wetlands-Day--Healthy-Wetlands-Healthy-Forests](http://www.iucn.org/about/union/secretariat/offices/asia/asia_where_work/lao/?6989/World-Wetlands-Day--Healthy-Wetlands-Healthy-Forests)); and
- TV news reports on the activities in Beung Kiat Ngong, screened locally and nationally (e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al1SviNifgw>).