

# Wetland Livelihoods



Mekong Wetlands  
Biodiversity Conservation and  
Sustainable Use Programme

The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) is a joint programme of the four riparian governments of the Lower Mekong Basin – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam – managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Mekong River Commission (MRC), in collaboration with other key stakeholders. With funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), UNDP, The Royal Netherlands Government, MRCS, the Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) and other donors, the programme tries to address the most critical issues for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in the Mekong wetlands.

The programme aims to strengthen the capacity of organisations and people to develop sustainable livelihoods and manage wetland biodiversity resources wisely.

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# Mekong Livelihoods - Wetlands Livelihoods

A JOINT UNDP - IUCN - MRC GEF-FUNDED PROGRAMME





# Mekong Livelihoods – Wetland Livelihoods

**Livelihoods in the Lower Mekong Basin have been based on managing land and water resources. They can be called wetland livelihoods – based around rice, aquatic resources and the use of a range of other natural resources, adapting to the seasonal changes of flood and recession.**

**Some of the greatest threats to rural livelihoods come from degradation of wetland and water resources, while some of the greatest opportunities for ensuring sustainable livelihoods and reducing poverty come from wise management of these resources.**

The MWBP has adopted an approach to livelihoods and poverty alleviation based on recent understandings that recognise that livelihood strategies are based not only on the use of a range of natural, material and economic resources, but also social and cultural resources.

Poverty reduction is not simply a matter of income and consumption but is also concerned with strengthening the capacity of people to manage their resource base, to represent their interests and rights, to benefit from changing market forces, and to participate effectively in decision making processes.

## Aquatic Resources for Food Security

Aquatic resources – including fish, frogs, snails, shrimps and insects – provide the main sources of animal protein for most rural people in the Lower Mekong Basin, particularly the poor. They provide the main coping strategy for periods of rice shortage. However, there are few coping strategies for periods of aquatic resource shortages.

The Lower Mekong Basin has a rich productive fishery that supports the livelihoods of millions of people. Maintaining and improving this natural productivity is essential for local people and for national economies.

## Water for Health

Securing reliable access to clean water – from rivers, streams, wetlands, groundwater - is essential for ensuring good health. Many health problems in the Mekong Basin are associated with poor water supplies.

Establishing clean water supplies also depends on maintaining the wetland and river ecosystems so that the water in the wells and pipes can continue to flow.

## Community Based Resource Management

Rural communities in the Mekong Basin have long histories of managing their natural resources. While many of these traditional community management regimes have been undermined in recent times, there is renewed interest in re-establishing a range of traditional practices that ensure sustainable, equitable use.

The pressures on wetland resources are both local and regional. Increasingly managing these pressures requires collaboration between communities and governments across the Basin.

## Local Knowledge, Participation and Empowerment

Managing complex dynamic ecosystems such as wetlands requires participation of a range of stakeholders. In Thailand, local villagers are becoming engaged in local management and planning through undertaking their own

research, analysis and monitoring activities known as Thai Baan research. This local knowledge provides unique, valuable insights for sustainable resource management. By leading the research process themselves, local people are better able to take on the kinds of management responsibilities that will allow them to cope with growing pressures, and better able to represent themselves in decision-making processes.

## Women and Children

Women and children play key roles in wetland management – often responsible for a range of household activities from fishing, managing household water, managing river bank gardens and cooking. Women and children who stay in rural areas are also important for maintaining the cultural traditions of rural communities.

## Resource Access and Rights

Natural resource-dependent individuals, households and communities become marginalised because they either have no rights to the resources on which they are dependent – or no feasible way to exercise the rights they do have. Clashes between traditional and contemporary systems of property rights are often at the root of livelihood and environmental insecurity. The most vulnerable communities are invariably the poorest and most marginalised, for whom alternatives are non-existent or come at exorbitant cost.

The MWBP focuses on the livelihood security of Lower Mekong Basin communities from the perspective of rights to wetland resources – the “missing link” between poverty and resource degradation – and demonstrate the links between the existence and quality of rights to wetland resources and the economic role of resource rights in sustaining livelihoods.