



Mekong Wetlands
Biodiversity Conservation and
Sustainable Use Programme



The Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative

Trans-boundary Implementation of the
Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Introduction

The Ramsar Convention has been increasingly encouraging the development of regional initiatives for wetland and water resource management issues. At the 8th Conference of Parties (CoP) to the Ramsar Convention in Valencia, Spain (2002), representatives from the four Mekong Region States (Cambodia, China, Thailand and Viet Nam) joined all other Contracting Parties in endorsing Resolution VIII.30 on the importance of regional initiatives for implementation of the Convention. In response to the call for development of a regional Ramsar initiative, the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) identified regional support to Ramsar implementation as a priority in its five year programme.

The Asian Ramsar Meeting in Beijing (May 2005) served as a starting point with regard to discussions on the development of a Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative. Preliminary informal discussions were initiated and representatives from all six states indicated an interest in exploring the possibilities of such an initiative. Based on the general indication of interest, this concept note/ discussion paper was prepared to provide further insight into what such an initiative might entail. The ideas presented in this paper are based on implementation of the principles of the Ramsar Convention with a particular focus on increased regional cooperation on water and wetland management issues in the Mekong Region.

During the Ramsar COP 9 in Kampala (November 2005), a Round Table Meeting is being organised to discuss the proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative. This meeting in Kampala will provide the opportunity for heads of delegations of the participating States and others to further discuss the need for such an initiative, its niche and what it might entail. The Kampala Mekong Round Table also aims to identify the way forward for further development of this proposed initiative.

Background

The wetlands of the Mekong Region include not only the Mekong River and those in the Mekong Basin, but also the Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya and Red, not to mention many other important smaller and coastal basin ecosystems. The rivers, backwaters, lakes, and swamps support many unique ecosystems which collectively perform numerous services for well being of the people in the Mekong Region. These include provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services.

Increasingly, evidence indicates that wetland resources are of particular importance to poorer groups, with significant implications for poverty reduction strategies, food security planning and rural to urban migration and employment. These will become even more significant if wetland resources are reduced. Over three-quarters of each of the populations of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Viet Nam are living outside of towns and cities with livelihoods reliant almost entirely on subsistence farming, fisheries, wildlife, forest

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products and plant resource utilisation. Wetland resources also make a significant contribution to national economic indicators such as income, employment and foreign exchange.

Such high levels of human population and usage have led to increasing unplanned development pressures, causing many direct threats to most of these important ecosystems. Despite the magnitude of services provided by the Mekong Region wetland systems, their ecological integrity (which is crucial for the delivery of ecosystem services) is increasingly being compromised. Due to the nature of the riverine systems, the negative consequences of changes in the region and associated wetlands often affect those who are not responsible for making those changes. The victims are most often the poor. These pose a significant threat to environmental sustainability, and thereby to the livelihoods of the people in many parts of the Mekong Region.

A range of on-going initiatives at various scales are looking into aquatic resource management and livelihoods issues within the Mekong Region. These primarily operate through state partnership projects with local or international NGOs and International Development Agencies. The Mekong River Commission (MRC), a state partnership between riparian nations of the Lower Mekong Basin is using Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) as a basis for many of its planning mechanisms. The IUCN Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) is a global initiative which includes work throughout the Mekong Region. WANI Mekong is designed to provide an ecosystems and livelihoods perspective to water and wetlands projects in the Mekong Region. Addressing poverty and livelihoods by demonstrating tangible livelihoods improvements and presenting these lessons to a broader audience has been one of the main areas of concern for WANI in the Mekong. Initially, a main area of work has been in developing the MWBP (see www.mekongwetlands.org). Other key players in the region include (but not limited to) Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) (through its Indochina and Living Mekong Programme) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) work on environmental issues in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS).

The need for a Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative

Recent concerns have resulted in the need for increased cooperation on trans-boundary wetland and water resource management issues. This proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative will build upon existing wetland conservation and water resource management efforts at the regional, national and site level in order to develop better coordination in implementation of the priorities of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Of the six states within the Mekong Region, all except for Lao PDR (currently considering ratification) are Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The fact that five of the six states have ratified the Convention makes Ramsar an ideal platform for this type of initiative.

Commitments of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention

In general, contracting Parties to Ramsar are bound by three main categories of obligation:

- **Non-site-specific:** To formulate and implement their planning so as to promote, as far as possible, the wise use of wetlands in their territory (Article 3.1);
- **Site-specific:** To designate one or more suitable wetlands of international importance for inclusion in the List (Article 2), to formulate and implement their planning to promote the



conservation of listed wetlands (Article 3.1) and to establish nature reserves on wetlands and provide adequately for their wardening (Article 4.1);

- **International cooperation:** To consult with other Parties about implementing obligations arising from Ramsar in respect of trans-boundary wetlands, shared watercourses and coordinated conservation of wetland flora and fauna (Article 5).

The commitments of contracting parties include the need for international cooperation in management and wise use of wetlands and water resources. The proposed Mekong Region Ramsar initiative will provide the platform for formalised cooperation on implementation of obligations.

The proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative will operate based on the principles of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands to facilitate the implementation of the Ramsar Strategic Plan (2003-2008) at the regional, basin, national, and site levels. In addition to general areas of collaboration in wetlands conservation and wise use, the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative will explore opportunities for collaboration in the following specific areas within the Ramsar Strategic Plan.

- Management of shared water resources, wetlands and wetland species
- Wetland inventory, assessment and monitoring
- Policies and legislation, including impact assessment and valuation
- Integration of wetland wise use into sustainable development
- Restoration and rehabilitation of wetlands
- Strategies for dealing with aquatic invasive alien species
- Lessons learnt and approaches in wetlands and livelihoods especially local communities, indigenous people, and cultural values
- Private sector involvement in wetland conservation and wise use
- Incentive schemes for wetland and water resource management
- Communication, education, and public awareness
- Designation of Ramsar sites – national and trans-boundary
- Management planning and monitoring of Ramsar sites
- Financing opportunities for the conservation and wise use of wetlands

Goal

Sustainable development in the Mekong Region through wise use of wetlands and water resources

Purpose of this initiative

Improved implementation of the principles and priorities of the Ramsar Convention by national agencies through increased regional cooperation



Possible outputs

- A platform for technical and governance related dialogue in relation to wetlands and water issues within the Mekong Region.
- A Mekong Region Wetlands Strategy based on the principles and priorities of the Ramsar Convention.
- An information exchange mechanism for lessons learnt on wetlands and water management issues.
- Identified/ established potential mechanisms for bilateral or multilateral financial assistance based on agreed priorities.

Making tools for wetland management and wise use available

This section provides one example of the possible added value of the proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative.

There is a range of technical and scientific guidance documents made available through the Ramsar Convention based on the efforts of the STRP and International Organisational Partners (IOPs). These tools are developed in response to the requests of the Contracting Parties. Despite being of high quality and incorporating cutting edge approaches to wetland conservation and wise use, these documents and tools are often not fully utilised at the regional and national levels. In this era where we can refer to as the “Information Age”, the lack of tools is not always the main reason behind weak implementation. The challenge is how to make globally available tools regionally relevant and applicable at the regional, national and site level. In the same way, there have been numerous tools and approaches for wetland management and wise use developed at the site level by local communities. How can we capture these achievements and make them available at the national or regional level? For this reason, it is proposed that a Regional Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (RSTRP) be established. The RSTRP will provide technical input on regional implementation of the Ramsar Convention including scaling down global tools and scaling up local tools. The regional STRP will consist of representatives of each of the states entering into this regional agreement, representatives of the IOPs working on regional wetland and water related issues and other key players.

Proposed membership of the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative

Following the operations of the Ramsar Convention, it is proposed that the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative will have state and non-state membership. The following six states will be the core members of the Ramsar Mekong Initiative – Cambodia, PR of China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. Other organisations will include basin organisations (in particular the Mekong River Commission) and others involved in regional wetland and water issues.

Proposed institutional arrangements

Development Phase (2005-2007)

It is proposed that a regional Ramsar working group be established constituting of members from the six riparian states and other appropriate representation. This methodology for procedures for establishment of



the Regional Ramsar Working Group will be decided at the first meeting during CoP9 in Kampala. It is also proposed that the Regional Ramsar Working Group be responsible for the development of the detailed proposal for the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative outlining the appropriate institutional setup etc. At the national level, ideally, this initiative should be anchored within the Ministry where the chair of the national wetlands committee (or Ramsar Administrative Authority) is located.

The Kampala meeting could decide on the appropriate regional organisation/ programme that would be responsible in initially leading this proposed initiative. One option is the MWBP. The MWBP has established multi-sectoral national and site level steering committees to guide the implementation of the programme. The MWBP has developed a multi-stakeholder mechanism in the form of a Regional Wetland Coordination Forum designed to provide opportunities for dialogue in the region. Therefore, IUCN, through WANI Mekong and the MWBP could support selected components in the development phase through its capacity building and strengthening network component. Other options might include organizations and initiatives mentioned earlier i.e. WWF, ADB etc.

Operational Phase (2008 onwards)

1. Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative Ministerial Level Meetings (Is this required?)

Senior Environment Ministers to meet once in three years prior to Asian Ramsar Meeting to review progress reports and endorse work plan and core budgets (including Ramsar support budgets) for next phase. This will then be presented at the Asian Ramsar Meeting.

2. Mekong Region Ramsar Secretariat (Regional Coordination Unit)

At the regional level, a secretariat will be established to serve the member states. Membership of the secretariat will be based on the responsibilities assigned by the member states. It is envisaged that all the member states will be represented at the regional secretariat. (Secondment of one officer from the National Ramsar Office to the secretariat)

3. Mekong Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (MRSTRP)

The Mekong Ramsar Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel will be established to provide technical advice on the implementation of the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative. Representatives on this panel will include the state designated STRP focal points and additional wetland technical experts appointed by the representative member states.