



Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

Concept Note

Feasibility of Establishing the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative
Trans-boundary Implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Introduction

The Mekong Wetlands and their Importance

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 live outside of towns and cities with livelihoods reliant almost entirely on subsistence farming, fisheries, wildlife, forest products and plant resource utilisation. Wetland resources also make a significant contribution to income, employment and foreign exchange in the region.

Increasing human population has 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.

In order to address the declining situation, several initiatives have been launched in the recent past to improve aquatic resource management and livelihood conditions 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

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CAMBODIA



LAO PDR



THAILAND



VIETNAM





developing the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (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), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) work on environmental issues in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), ASEAN, ACMECS.

The Ramsar Convention

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. 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).

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 MWBP identified regional support to Ramsar implementation as a priority in its five year programme.

The Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative

The development of a Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative started during the Asian Ramsar Meeting in Beijing (May 2005). Preliminary informal discussions were initiated and representatives from all six states indicated an interest in exploring the possibilities of such an initiative. During the Ramsar COP 9 in Kampala (November 2005), a Round Table Meeting was organised to discuss the proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative. The Kampala discussions addressed two specific issues i.e. the possible added value (or niche) of such an initiative and what is the way forward for further development. It further examined the concerns and possible mechanisms.



Rationale for Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative

In the recent times, the need for increased cooperation on trans-boundary wetland and water resource management issues has been repeatedly emphasized at different fora. Recent efforts on wetland conservation and water resource management at the regional, national and site level has provided insight into better coordination in implementation of the priorities of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. This proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative will build upon the existing work, and that five of the six states have ratified the Convention makes Ramsar an ideal platform for this type of initiative.

The Ramsar secretariat welcomed the start of this regional initiative, particularly for sharing experiences. The proposed MRRI would provide an upstream-downstream linkage with the proposed Himalayan Ramsar Initiative which is also under development.

The proposed MRRI is expected to provide **sustainable development in the Mekong Region through wise use of wetlands and water resources** by improved implementation of the principles and priorities of the Ramsar Convention by national agencies through increased regional cooperation. The expected main outputs of MRRI would be:

- Facilitating a platform for technical and governance related dialogue in relation to wetlands and water issues within the Mekong Region;
- Development of a Mekong Region Wetlands Strategy based on the principles and priorities of the Ramsar Convention;
- Setting in place an information exchange mechanism for lessons learnt on wetlands and water management issues; and
- Developing a strategy for bilateral or multilateral financial assistance based on agreed priorities.

The proposed Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative would 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, MRRI 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

Following the operations of the Ramsar Convention, it is proposed that the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative will have state and non-state membership, and will be represented by the core members of the RMMI and others including basin organisations (in particular the Mekong River Commission) and others involved in regional wetland and water issues.

This concept paper is for undertaking a feasibility on the establishment of Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative.

The Project

Objective: To assess the feasibility of establishing the Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative in six Mekong region countries and to engender national support

Outputs: The following outputs would be produced:

- (a) Report on the institutional and financing assessment
- (b) National consultation visits and meetings in six Mekong countries
- (c) Regional dialogue meeting
- (d) Final report with recommendations for scope, terms of reference, draft constitution and financing mechanisms for Mekong Region Ramsar Initiative

Activities:

(a) Institutional and financing Assessment (Jan – June 2006)

- One of the key issues to be addressed in the development phase is institutional assessment to compare the strengths and weaknesses of existing organisations and identify the most appropriate platform for such an initiative.
- Development of TORs for the regional and national level
- Exploration of financing mechanisms
- This would be undertaken through commissioning a small consultant team (international plus regional) with travel to visit the different organizations.



(b) **National Dialogues** (Jan – Sept 2006)

- Identifying Ramsar issues of specific concern at the national level with regional relevance that can be addressed through this initiative (i.e. narrowing the scope). This specific activity is a response to the initial reaction from states that the proposed scope of the initiative is too broad.
- Identification of national focal points and responsibilities
- This would be undertaken through specific consultation processes and national level meetings

(c) **Regional Dialogue Meeting** (Oct 2006)

- The outcomes of the national dialogue will be presented at a regional dialogue to the working group for discussion
- The outcomes of the institutional assessment presented and options assessed
- Establishment of a regional working group for the Mekong Region Ramsar initiative
- This would be undertaken through a single regional meeting

(d) **Preparation of a full proposal** for implementation of the Regional Ramsar Initiative