

University Network for Wetland Training in the Mekong Region

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Wetlands are important ecosystems that support vital ecological functions and provide valuable products and services for human activities. The role of wetlands in the Earth's ecological functions has been well documented and widely accepted. In spite of their importance, wetlands worldwide have been subjected to misuse and abuse. Large areas of wetlands have been lost, mostly to agricultural development, and many of the remnants are heavily degraded due to the combined effects of pollution, over-exploitation, and mismanagement. Conserving wetland resources through a better understanding of wetland ecology and the application of ecologically sound management is urgently needed.

The Mekong River is one of the great rivers of the world. Wetlands of the lower Mekong basin nourish a population of 55 million people of the countries of Laos PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The biodiversity of the Mekong wetlands is of international significance and includes many unique ecosystems and a wide array of globally threatened species such as Giant catfish, estuarine crocodile, Sarus crane, Giant ibis and Irrawaddy dolphin. As in many other regions of the developing world, wetland resources of the lower Mekong basin are heavily exploited and wetland biodiversity

is under serious threat. Protecting wetlands to safeguard biodiversity and sustain their benefits to local communities becomes necessary for all four riverine countries. To implement this task, the four countries need a sufficient number of experts and technical staff who are willing and able to work in the field of wetland conservation.

It has been a challenge for Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and

ing in wetland ecology and management for protected areas staff, governmental officials and other interested citizens.

Through support from a variety of institutions and aid agencies, many people of the Mekong region have been trained in various facets of wetland conservation over the last 10 years. Even so, little of this capacity can be tapped for actual work on wetlands. Few



Memorandum of Understanding signing ceremony at Mahidol University, Thailand, 22 May 2003.

Vietnam to find enough competent local professionals to work on wetlands and natural resources management in general. It is worthwhile to raise awareness and foster interest in wetland conservation among undergraduate and graduate students of the four countries in hopes that those students will get involved in wetland research and conservation practices as they develop their career. There is also a great demand in providing practical train-

people who have been trained still work on wetland issues since most have moved on to managerial positions or other jobs. The training that they received is often fragmentary as well. Though useful, courses in wetland delineation, for example, do not develop a strong understanding of wetland ecology that can be used to adapt school examples to applied situations.

With the pressing demand for high quality training in the fields of



Photo: N.P. Nga

Field work at Tram Chim National Park, Vietnam. First training course, June 2003.

wetland ecology and management and the insufficiency of training capacity, a dialogue on how to improve the situation was initiated from 2000-2002 among colleagues of several major universities in the Mekong region. Through discussions it became clear that, instead of leaning on foreign expertise, the educational institutions in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam should invest on building their own capacity to be able to provide comprehensive and affordable training programmes, tailored to suit specific characteristics of the region. It was also realised that a network of universities is necessary to promote regional collaboration. Such a network is essential not only in effectively providing regional training but also in improving understanding and exchanges among researchers and educators of the region.

With support from the International Crane Foundation, a workshop was held in November 2002 in Ho Chi Minh City, bringing together representatives from eight universities of the Mekong region, including the Royal University of

Agriculture (Cambodia), Royal University of Phnom Penh (Cambodia), National University of Laos, Chulalongkorn University (Thailand), Mahidol University (Thailand), Can Tho University (Vietnam), Nong Lam University (Vietnam) and the University of Natural Sciences – Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). The workshop discussed details of network operation and drafted a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of the network.

On 22 May 2003, top administrators from these universities met in Thailand to sign the memorandum officially creating the first university network in Southeast Asia that would specialise on wetland training and research. The meeting was sponsored by Mahidol University.

As agreed, the network will facilitate the construction and implementation of regional training courses focusing on field-biology aspects of wetland ecology and management. The longer term goal of the network will be to strengthen the capacity of member-universities in establishing complete academic programmes in wetland ecology

and conservation. The network will also serve as a mechanism for cooperation among member-universities in other areas of education and research as well as to facilitate exchanges between member-universities and other wetland institutions in the world.

The first activity of the network was a training course taught by instructors from the region, and held in Vietnam from 1 to 28 June 2003. The participants, composed of

24 teaching staff selected from the member-universities, were taken to key wetland sites in the Mekong Delta for field practice. The course was successfully completed, receiving high appreciation from participants and other observers. The course was sponsored by the ASEAN Regional Center for Biodiversity Conservation with co-funding from the International Crane Foundation and the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. A similar one is being prepared to take place in Thailand in May 2004, and will be co-hosted by Mahidol and Chulalongkorn Universities. Subsequent courses will be held in Laos in 2005.

Since its establishment, the Mekong University Network has facilitated collaboration between member universities and many institutions and programmes from other countries, including the ASIA-Link programme of the European Union and the Mekong Education Initiative of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Exchanges among colleagues of member universities also increased noticeably. ■