

Mekong Region's Wetlands at Risk from Mega Infrastructure Projects, Environmental Groups Warn Delegates to Ramsar Meeting

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Phnom Penh, Cambodia - As delegates from Asian governments, NGOs and scientific communities gather at regional wetlands talks in Siem Reap from 3 to 7 November; environmental NGOs in Cambodia warn that fast infrastructure development could reverse years of wetlands management and conservation success while threatening the progress of sustainable development and poverty reduction in Cambodia, and in the region.

Increasingly, large and looming infrastructure projects, including off-shore petroleum extraction, road and bridge projects cutting across the Tonle Sap Lake, and most notably the construction of hydropower dams on the Mekong River and its major tributaries, are posing fundamental threats to the wetland biodiversity and the important ecosystem services they provide.

Wetlands occupy more than 30% of Cambodia in the form of coastal areas and freshwater bodies, providing an essential part of the nation's food and nutrition security. Fisheries and aquatic resources account for nearly 80% of animal protein intake in the Cambodian diet, while rice and other staple crops grown in floodplains rely on healthy wetland ecosystems to thrive.

"Wetlands resources are integral to the livelihoods of Cambodians and to the country's sustainable development," said Dr. Srey Sunleang, Director of Department of Wetlands and Coastal Zones of General Department of Administration for Nature Conservation and Protection, Ministry of Environment. "The Cambodian government joined the Ramsar Convention in 1999, and is committed to conservation and wise use of wetlands in Cambodia."

One of the most critical and timely concerns is the proposed Don Sahong dam, which if built would block the only channel

available for year-round fish migration in the Lower Mekong River, effectively threatening the world's most productive inland fisheries and the livelihoods of 60 million people in the Lower Mekong Basin.

"As a majority of Cambodians are directly dependant on the rich aquatic resources of the country, we anticipate that development of such mega infrastructures will seriously affect ecosystem services of two of Cambodia's important Ramsar Sites - Stung Treng and Boeng Chhmar (in Tonle Sap) - resulting in loss of biodiversity and livelihood opportunities," said Chhith Sam Ath, Country Director, WWF-Cambodia.

"We are at a critical cross-road now, and we look to the regional meeting on wetlands to take concrete steps in reviewing the need for coordinated policies and actions related to infrastructure development to ensure that wetlands are conserved and unacceptable losses in ecosystem services are avoided," said Dr. Tracy Farrell, Senior Technical Director, at Conservation International-Greater Mekong Program.

Effective management of wetland reserves is strongly recommended by Ramsar, and it starts with well-coordinated management plans that consider multiple demands and zoning of sustainable use and protected areas, including strict protection zones. Otherwise known as core zones, these are areas recognised to be of highest conservation value, such that human disturbance is to be minimised in order to maintain ecosystem integrity.

"Together with other NGOs, we support the government in monitoring internationally significant wetlands that could be designated as new Ramsar sites in Cambodia. Tonle Sap's Prek Toal core zone has already received endorsement from local communities and relevant government authorities, and could become Cambodia's 4th Ramsar site," said Bou Vorsak, Cambodia Programme Manager of BirdLife International. "At the same time, major threats to wetlands must be dealt with in order to ensure that the different modes of development are not working against each other."

"We expect the participants to Asia's meeting on the Ramsar Convention to consider the impact of energy and infrastructure development on the global effort of conserving wetlands, and support drafting a resolution in which signatories will be obliged to consider health, full functionality and wise use of their Ramsar Sites when planning for any energy or infrastructure project," said Dr. Robert Mather, Head of Southeast Asia Group at IUCN.

The Asian regional wetlands meeting, happening simultaneously with the Asian Wetland Symposium, is hosted by Cambodia. This is a lead-up to the global meeting of the Ramsar Convention, expected to be held in Uruguay in June 2015.

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Notes to Editor

Signed by 168 countries, the Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty on the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. At the upcoming regional wetlands meeting, 33 Asian governments will discuss key issues and review progress on the Ramsar Strategic Plan of 2009 - 2015. This meeting will also draft resolutions that will play a critical role in the strategic plans and global wetland conservation policies from 2016 onwards to be discussed at the international Ramsar Convention meeting in Uruguay, June 2015.

At the centre of the Ramsar philosophy is the "wise use" of wetlands. When they accede to the Convention, states which have signed the treaty (or known as Contracting Parties) commit to work towards the wise use of all the wetlands and water resources in their territory, through national plans, policies and legislation, management actions and public education.

About BirdLife International

BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation partnership. Together we are 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide – one per country or territory – and growing with almost 11 million supporters, 7000 local conservation groups and 7400 staff. BirdLife's vision is a world rich in biodiversity, where people and nature live in harmony. We are driven by our belief that local people, working for nature in their own places but connected nationally and internationally through our global partnership, are the key to sustaining all life on this planet. This unique local-to-global approach delivers high impact and long-term conservation for the benefit of nature and people.

About Conservation International

Building upon a strong foundation of science, partnership and field demonstration, Conservation International empowers societies to responsibly and sustainably care for nature for the well-being of humanity.

About IUCN (International Union of Conservation of Nature)

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the world's oldest and largest global environmental network - a democratic membership union with more than 1,200 government and NGO member organizations, and almost 11,000 volunteer scientists in more than 160 countries. IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 professional staff in 60 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world.

About WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society)

Wildlife Conservation Society saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature.

About WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature)

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with over 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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