



## Networking: Bringing People Together for Greater Outcomes

The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) is a programme that strives to generate and share information on which to base wetland policy, planning and management decisions. In recognition of the great importance of generating and distributing relevant information the MWBP has researched, developed and implemented key networks as an active aspect of the programme. These networks focus on bringing together wetlands experts to work together on a common concern, strengthen research and communications capacity, share knowledge and develop solutions that meet the needs of both decision-makers and resource users.

### Which networks, and why?

To avoid duplication of work, ensure collaboration in addressing the critical issues of the Mekong River and identify whether to establish and/or join existing networks at the global, regional, national and provincial levels, a comprehensive network analysis was carried out to collate a wealth of knowledge about existing networks that focus on issues related to MWBP. The analysis entailed extensive research with MWBP staff, partners and external experts, resulting in a broad list of existing networks active within the fields of wetlands, biodiversity, communication, education and other related areas.

The networks were analysed in regard to their relevance, current production rate (e.g. when the last information update or forum entry was made), quality of information, and give and get ratio. The give and get ratio is an important element and is applied to ensure that efforts given to the network/s are equal to or exceeded by the benefits (get) of being a network member. The give and get ratio forms an essential part of the network evaluation. Networks were also selected for a specific purpose, for example to receive up-to-date programme relevant information (information networks); to contribute to the networks, raise profile and stimulate thought (contribution networks); and to monitor industry trends and identify areas of collaboration / leverage (monitoring networks)

At the conclusion of the analysis MWBP prioritised the existing networks to determine the best matches with the aims of the MWBP networking action plan and hence decide which networks the programme should join. The analysis results were also used to identify networking gaps or areas of expertise relevant to MWBP in which a network did not exist. The recommended networks were selected under the premise that fewer networks be chosen so that more time and effort (give) may be allocated to strategic management and contribution, to ensure programme leveraging and membership benefits (get) are achieved. Further information and full recommendations can be obtained from the Regional Networking Action Plan.

### Outcomes So Far....

The networking component of the MWBP is now fully developed and implementation has commenced. The information and monitoring networks are being accessed on a daily basis, with information being filed and made available to all staff via the shared server. This wealth of up-to-date information is a useful resource for ensuring the programme is informed, proactive in interacting with and responding to wetlands experts and able to access key information quickly.

In regard to participating to the 'contribution networks', the first programme discussion paper titled "*Floods - Observations From The Lower Songkhram River Basin*" was completed and distributed to all networks (over 1,000 people). This was a solid achievement for MWBP. Programme discussion papers about topical and relevant issues are planned to be distributed every quarter, to raise the profile of MWBP, stimulate thought and to contribute to the programme aim of generating and sharing information.

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Although it was evident from the Networks Analysis that many wetland, conservation and development networks, of relevance to MWBP, already exist within the region and internationally, on closer review the analysis identified a gap in the networking of key organisations working on wetlands, conservation and similar issues within the region, and being able to link these organisations and experts across regional borders. Hence, it was recommended that MWBP progress with the establishment of the Regional Wetlands Coordination Forum (RWCF) with the purpose to:

1. provide regular opportunities for organisations working with wetland conservation, sustainable use and development in the region to network; and
2. present activities, experiences and progress.

The RWCF is a mechanism for ensuring that all the wetland activities within the Mekong Basin undertaken by the variety of different agencies and NGOs can be coordinated, their experiences shared and issues taken forward for consideration at the highest level of government.

The purpose of the RWCF is to provide regular opportunities for organisations involved with wetland conservation, sustainable use and development to come together and present their activities, experiences and progress. Through this mechanism there can be greater understanding of issues affecting the Mekong River Basin wetlands and better coordination of activities being undertaken by these different agencies. It has been planned that the RWCF will meet once or twice per year. It will be chaired by the UNDP Programme Team Leader, with Vice-chairs from IUCN Programme Manager, and MRCS Programme Manager.

The first meeting of the RWCF took place at the World Conservation Congress in November 2004. The meeting focused on determining how the RWCF should work and identifying priority issues for the RWCF and MWBP to consider in 2005. Correspondence with the members of the RWCF was undertaken in 2005 and the second meeting is planned for 2006.

Overall the development of the RWCF has been slow, but linkages between members have been established and many areas of programme work have been carried out or involve the RWCF member organisations, thus helping to share information and experiences of the different partner organisations in wetland conservation and sustainable use; coordinate parallel and co-financed activities. It is envisaged that as the MWBP grows the RWCF will also contribute to outcomes by identifying gaps and opportunities for additional activities to complement the programme work and make recommendations for the development of guiding principles for wetland conservation and sustainable use to take to the Regional Steering Committee and other official meetings.