



## Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme

### **Is it a forest, or is it a wetland?**

In Viet Nam all protected areas are listed and managed under the Special Use Forest system, including Tram Chim National Park, one of the two demonstration sites of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) in Viet Nam. Lang Sen Wetlands Reserve, the other demonstration site of MWBP, is the only exception, having been established as a wetlands reserve, the first of its kind in Viet Nam.

The classification and management of wetlands was a main focus for the Vice Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the Vice Chief of the Department of Forestry and the Director of Southern Sub-Institute of Forest Inventory and Planning (Sub-FIPI), when they visited the MWBP demonstration sites in April 2006.

During the visit MWBP had the unique opportunity to make recommendations directly to the Vice Minister, highlighting the need for wetlands to have an appropriate policy, not be treated just as forests; that appropriate hydrology is central to the health of wetland ecosystems and the management of fire and water; to ensure that the ecological role of fire in wetlands ecosystems is recognised; and that local people participate in and benefit from conservation.

The Vice Minister expressed great interest in the wetlands, and relevant recommendations, and as a result requested that MWBP and Sub-FIPI organise a roundtable meeting, chaired by the Vice Minister, with the participation of all managers of protected wetlands in the Mekong Delta, the Viet Nam Environment Protection Agency and leading wetland scientists from the southern region. Such a meeting is a great achievement in the recognition of wetlands and their ecological importance to the people of Viet Nam.

The roundtable was a success, with the wetland managers of the Mekong Delta being able to communicate directly to the ministry about the challenge they face. The talks were informal, however discussions resulted in significant outcomes, such as recognising that wetlands management needs to take a holistic ecosystem view, with forest as only one component; that the Special Use Forest regulations, although important and useful in the early days of conservation in Viet Nam, are not longer suitable for wetlands management; and local communities should be allowed to use resources in an organised and sustainable manner. The roundtable also resulted in an interesting debate about whether a new statute should be created for wetland reserves, and discussion of an innovative idea for private companies, with local communities, to manage wetlands on behalf of the government, which will be further exploration.

The involvement and interest of the Vice Minister in the work of MWBP is a significant achievement in regard to policy change, and will contribute substantially to the wise use of wetlands.

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