

WORKING TOWARDS THE APPLICATION OF THE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO WETLANDS IN VIETNAM

INTRODUCTION

Eighty three percent of the whole Vietnamese population lives within 100km of the country's 3,500 km coastline. Wetlands with large areas and rich diversity, in the coastal, plains and mountainous areas, play critical roles in the livelihoods of local people and the development of the country. However, there are still many challenges in wetlands management that involve not only technical issues but also social, economic and institutional challenges. It is these above all that need to be understood and brought into a better relationship so that those who depend on wetlands are not made more vulnerable.

A WORKSHOP TO ADDRESS HIGH LEVEL POLICY PROBLEMS FOR WETLANDS IN VIETNAM

In January 2008 a national level workshop, co-hosted by The Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE), The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), The Vietnam Environmental Protection Agency (VEPA) and IUCN was held in Ha Noi to discuss pilot applications of the Ecosystem Approach in wetlands, the lessons learned from the attempt, and the national level policy issues which were shown to need more attention as a result.

The first part of the workshop brought together more than 60 national park managers, national and international scientists and experts who work in ecosystems management-related areas. The second part was a small high-level meeting for Government decision-makers to consider

Senior officials were aware of several policy gaps and overlaps, and of a series of other issues that needed harmonization in wetlands and protected area management in Vietnam. There was interest in the potential of the Ecosystem Approach for addressing wetlands, protected area biodiversity and socio-economic problems and solutions in an integrated manner, but some caution as well.

The workshop was a follow-up to two field-level workshops with protected area managers held in the Mekong Delta in 2006, under the auspices of the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Programme (MWBP), and drawing also on this programme's field experience. It became clear in those workshops that many field-level problems identified by the ecosystem approach analysis undertaken could only be addressed at higher levels.



The Hanoi workshop also drew on experience from other Vietnamese wetland areas. Finally, it took special note of the progress which has been made in Vietnam's forest sector in integrated management, since this sector is well ahead of wetlands in implementation experience.

PROTECTED AREA MANAGERS WERE SHOWN HOW TO USE THE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH IN THE MEKONG DELTA WORKSHOP TO ANALYSE THEIR OWN PARKS, AND THEN DEVELOPED A SHORTLIST OF KEY CONCERNS:

a) The lack of a sectoral niche for wetlands at the national level

At higher levels wetlands come under forests in the category 'Special Use Forests'. There is no wetlands sector as such. This has sometimes caused management difficulties, particularly in the Mekong delta where some wetland tree species need fire treatments from time to time to prevent major unplanned wildfires. Forest rules deem all fires in forests illegal.

b) The lack of a forum for the resolution of land-use conflicts at provincial level

Limited interdepartmental and interdisciplinary links at provincial level, so that impacts on existing wetland protected areas or vital protective mangrove areas are not necessarily considered when other interventions take place. For instance, in the drive to help the many extremely poor people in the Mekong delta, people are transferred to emptier



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Selling Snails

wetland areas to live, or encouraged to clear mangroves to invest in fish and shrimp-farming, when these are highly detrimental to the wetland areas concerned.

c) The impact on local livelihoods of parks and protected areas
Negative livelihood impacts have often occurred when the right to use resources (such as fish or timber) previously enjoyed is withdrawn. This has happened when areas which were once production areas have been designated as wetland protected areas. It is observable too that the conservation of wild birds in parks negatively affects the productivity of farms and fisheries outside them. Managers noted that because these effects have not been measured, they were often assumed to be zero.

d) Sustainable use
Guidelines for sustainable use policies have not been issued, nor for benefit-sharing, so park managers do not know how to proceed. Given the costs to local people of protected areas, there ought to be a policy for sharing benefits from the reserves fairly. Co-management may also be a possibility in the future, but it is not yet addressed by policy.

KEY POLICY ISSUES NEEDING ATTENTION WHICH EMERGED FROM THE HANOI WORKSHOP: NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Policy Review

Participants called for a review of current policies and legislative documents at central, ministerial and sector level related to the management of forest / wetland ecosystems. The aim would be to identify those which need to be revised, supplemented or adjusted, building on any material which already exists. It was suggested that outputs should include:

- The highlighting of inconsistencies between sectors and the laws, regulations and decrees that are currently applied in each sector, to identify the laws that currently need to be revised / adjusted
- The identification of gaps.
- Recommendations for more consistent management arrangements for different kinds of protected areas (forest, wetlands, marine and so on)
- Recommendations about the institutional arrangements needed to implement those policies/ strategies)

There is also some overlap in implementation responsibility between MONRE and MARD on wetland issues and in other areas such as river basin management. Guidelines are needed to clarify these.

2. Establishing a National Wetlands Committee

The Ramsar Convention requires the establishment of a "National Wetlands Committee". Since there was an active National Steering Committee in the recent past funded by the Mekong Wetlands and Biodiversity Programme (MWBP), support for this Committee could be taken

over by the Dutch-supported National Wetlands Support Programme (NWSP) and could be tailored to fit Ministerial as well as Ramsar requirements.

3. Developing an Inter-Ministerial circular on wetlands management

A circular has been drafted by MONRE (with funds from the National Wetlands Support Programme). MARD supports the idea of using this project product as a foundation for further development into a joint circular, once further consultation with MARD has taken place. Governments should enact a decision on the management and conservation of wetlands (under Decree 109), and a system similar to the ISO for evaluating the quality of wetlands management. IUCN and NGOs should assist Government to develop wetlands management guidelines for the important wetlands of Vietnam.

4. Revising Forest Regulations in order to support wetlands

Special Use Forest (SUF) regulations have already received preliminary scrutiny to identify ways of making them more supportive of wetlands. For example, fire and water regulations will need to be revised so that they meet the needs of different main types of forest ecosystem such as upland forest, and peat-based and non-peat-based wetlands. What are now needed are technical guidelines to guide management and enhance the skill-levels of staff, especially those in parks and nature reserves. If SUF regulations are to be revised, the process needs to be part of the review of Forest Law taking place in 2008.

5. Feeding into plans for a national Protected Area database

There is a plan to develop a national protected area data-base covering all sectors. For wetlands, preliminary work has already been undertaken by VEPA mapping areas of national wetland importance. Initial challenges to an overall system may arise from the fact that different ministries have made a start in their own sectors using different methods and criteria.



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Monitoring the water level

KEY POLICY ISSUES NEEDING ATTENTION WHICH EMERGED FROM THE HANOI WORKSHOP: NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Devolution – a more diverse allocation of responsibility
Ideally, strategic decisions should be made at the national level, coordination decisions at the provincial level and day-to-day management decisions be taken by field managers and district authorities. This will require improved skills at lower levels, and arrangements for adaptive management: supervision, monitoring, and follow-up, and legally-based annual and longer-term management plans are needed at this lowest level as well.

2. The establishment of Provincial Wetlands Committees
Provincial level committees are important for several reasons. Firstly many of the coordination issues between sectors highlighted by the Mekong protected area managers can be best addressed at this level.

At this level, it will be very important to address wetlands which are not protected areas alongside parks. Non-protected wetlands are especially vulnerable to the impacts of poor coordination between agencies. In a committee context, wetlands can be considered within the broader landscape, so that the impacts on the wetland of land-uses outside it can be considered properly.

The core issue is regional planning and it needs to be legalized to support a wider landscape approach. Indeed, how to decide the use of wetlands that are not protected areas remains a key unresolved issue for the national level to consider as well. Pilot Master Plans for three main areas, the Red river, the Mekong river, and coastal wetlands would be the ideal solution.

3. Benefit-sharing and Co-management
There is currently a range of experiments going on in natural resources co-management in Vietnam. What is needed is an enabling national legal/policy framework which allows this experimentation (in trial contexts such as project contexts) and encourages learning and adaptation from the best experience.

The concept of co-management still needs to be more clearly defined; the delegation of responsibility needs always to go together with benefit sharing; in due course co-management guidelines need to be legalized: one model will not fit all situations.

Community participation has been successfully elicited in a few wetlands situations, and in many more forest situations, but the criteria for success are not yet clear. It is clear that public consultation is inadequate on its own. Often public stakeholder consultation is claimed, but there has been no real intention of following up on suggestions made (a problem with consultation which is true in many countries where a transition from top-down to participatory processes is under way).

THE ROLE OF THE ECOSYSTEM APPROACH AT POLICY LEVEL

The Ecosystem Approach at the field level is likely to be a tool for analysis of what is going wrong and why, and how the future might be better planned and implemented.

At strategic levels, whether these are at provincial level where competing land-uses for the same terrain have to be adjudicated, or at national level where policy must be aligned to deliver best practice at lower levels, it clearly has a somewhat different role.

One of the chief virtues of the ecosystem approach is that it provides a framework for the negotiation and resolution of difficulties which may arise when two or more sectors conflict, or when neither of two adjacent sectors fully address a perceived problem. For instance the fisheries and agriculture sectors may between them fail to protect mangroves from being cleared for tourism or fish-farms, because neither factors in the full value of mangroves in their own calculations. The communication of the Ecosystem Approach needs to be refined at the policy level not in the abstract, but on the basis of such examples.

In many cases application of the Ecosystem Approach will be seeking to ensure sustainable use of ecosystem goods and services rather than only the protection of biodiversity. Instead it will be important to show how the application of the principles leads to truly sustainable development taking into account all factors (social, environmental and economic).

FURTHER INPUTS

Participants at the Hanoi workshop concluded by requesting the development of guidebooks on the Ecosystem Approach for the field level and the policy level, stressing the relevance and importance of the approach for broader understanding and better implementation in the future.

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