



Mekong River Commission

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PRESS RELEASE

MRC No. 01/07

Lao Government joins forces with MRC, WWF and IUCN to celebrate World Wetlands Day

Vientiane, Lao PDR
2nd February 2007

Members of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Department of Livestock and Fisheries, the Science Technology and Environment Agency, and the Lao National Mekong Committee joined representatives of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), together with its partners from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) today to share in a celebration of World Wetlands Day (2 February) at the National University of Laos (NUoL), Dongdok Campus, Vientiane.

The event will raise awareness of the importance of wetlands to society, to the environment and to the economy of Lao PDR. The MRC, IUCN and WWF are working together to conserve the wetlands in the Lower Mekong Basin and to highlight their economic value. As well as providing an important source of food and income for rural people, wetland habitats (including rivers, lakes, paddy fields, nongs and flooded forests) are home to many rare and endangered species, such as the Siamese Crocodile and Mekong Dolphin.

The theme of this year's World Wetlands Day is "Fish for Tomorrow" a particularly significant issue for Lao PDR where fish and other aquatic products represent an important source of protein and household income and the productive inland fisheries rely on healthy wetlands. World Wetlands Day is organised globally by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which Lao PDR hopes to join later this year.

The afternoon's celebration took the form of presentations by Government and University Officers, followed by a panel discussion involving the government agencies, NUoL students and representatives of non-government organisations. There was also an accompanying exhibition on the wetland work of organisations and environmental agencies in Lao PDR, as well as a display of children's art.

In his welcome address by Mr Soukkongseng Saignaleuth, President of the National University of Laos, stressed the importance of educating young people about the need to preserve wetlands. His speech was followed by presentations on the importance of wetlands to the ecology, society, economy and the Ramsar Convention by Mr Phouviang Latdavong, Director General, Department of Inspection, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the importance of fish for tomorrow and the significance of the ecosystem on aquatic biodiversity by Mr Somphanh Champhengxay, Deputy Director General, Department of Livestock and Fisheries.

Mr Phouviang and Mr Somphanh were later joined on an expert panel by Mr Khamphet Roger of the Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre and Mr Chanthavong Saignasith, Director General of the Lao National Mekong Committee. The panel addressed questions raised by NUoL students on the use and future of wetlands in Lao PDR.

To build understanding of the importance of wetlands within the next generation, the Mobile Conservation Unit of NUoL, organised a children's art competition throughout January to encourage youngsters to think about the future of their land. Children from schools close to wetlands in Vientiane were given materials, engaged in play activities on the theme of the World Wetlands Day and asked to illustrate what wetlands mean to them. Children from all of the schools involved joined in the WWD celebration at NUoL. A selection of the artwork was displayed and the winners of the children's art competition were presented with prizes at the end of the day's events.

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