

Upstream, Downstream – Let the Discussions Flow at the 2nd Southeast Asia Water Forum in Denpasar

Water management issues were in the spotlight at the 2nd Southeast Asia Water Forum (SEAWF) held in Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, from 29 August to 3 September 2005.

Bangkok, Thailand, 3 September 2005 (IUCN) – Supported by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Southeast Asia Water Forum (SEAWF) was organized by the Global Water Partnership – Southeast Asia, the Directorate General of Water Resources, Ministry of Settlement and Regional Infrastructure, and Indonesia Water Partnership.

IUCN's participating delegates represented IUCN's Water and Nature Initiative (WANI) and the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP). The Forum advocated better water management through public participation and IUCN representatives helped develop the plan for the Forum, organised a session and supported participating partners.

IUCN hosted a comprehensive presentation on 31 August 2005 entitled *Environmental Flows – Ecosystems and Livelihoods: The Impossible Dream?* With a focus on the interactive, the presentation provided an overview of 'environmental flows,' otherwise known as 'e-flows,' which describe how optimum water resource management ensures environmental, social and economic benefits flow on downstream.

E-flows are a vital tool to facilitate participatory negotiation and lead to decision-making on water resource issues within countries and across boundaries. As waterway access becomes increasingly competitive, a multi-stakeholder approach is advocated, linking engineering, law, ecology, economics, hydrology, political science and communications into the equation.

Delegates from around Southeast Asia evaluated e-flows and Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) during the three hour IUCN session. At the core of discussions, was the burning question: can the application of e-flows provide benefits for ecosystems *and* livelihoods?

The e-flows approach has been tested in central Viet Nam's Huong River Basin (Thua Thien Hue province) where flooding and saltwater intrusion are major concerns. In 2003-2004, a multi-partner approach, including the Huong River Projects Management Board, the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), IUCN and local government agencies, identified the importance of developing an Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) strategy in the province to maintain ecosystem integrity while providing social, cultural and economic benefits to the local people. Such efforts are part of an ongoing and informed approach to wise water usage.

Director General of Viet Nam's Department of Water Resources Management, Dr Nguyen Thai Lai, was a participant at the e-flows session and is currently active in national e-flows efforts. The Department of Water Resources Management is a new department under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE).

"Our quest for rapid economic growth must not blind us to the importance of protecting the flows our rivers need to stay healthy and productive. The conference session brought that message home to us all", said Dr Lai.

"There are many difficult scientific and social issues involved, so the opportunity to share our experiences and knowledge was especially valuable. I hope it will be the start of much greater collaboration between us", he added.

In terms of outcomes, the IUCN session generated interest in e-flows as an integral part of IWRM strategy and provided an opportunity for debate on techniques, methodologies and concepts with focus on advancing national agendas and managing water resources from river basins to growing cities. And with buzz words like *participation*, *regional cooperation*, *strengthened capacity* and *education*, the SEAWF showcased regional success stories and pushed forward strategies for improved urban and rural water supplies in the region.

WANI is a 5-year action plan of 80 partner organisations to improve water management for healthy rivers and healthy communities. Demonstration of good management in ten basins is supported by the development of tools for financing, governance, empowerment and information. For more details on WANI generally and the Huong River Basin experience see www.waterandnature.org/ and www.iucn.org.vn/

MWBP is a five year (2004-2009), US\$30 million initiative working in the four Lower Mekong countries – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam. It is a joint United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), IUCN and Mekong River Commission (MRC) managed programme running in parallel but closely coordinated with the MRC structures and decision-making processes. For more information visit www.mekongwetlands.org/

Delegates from the Viet Nam and Laos PDR IUCN offices represented WANI and MWBP at the 2005 Forum.

The first Southeast Asia Water Forum was held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, in November 2003.

More about environmental flows

More information on the concept and its application can be found in the IUCN guidebook *Flow – The Essentials of Environmental Flows*, which is now widely recognized as the most comprehensive state-of-the-art guide on the topic.

The book can be downloaded directly from <http://iucn.org/themes/wani/pub/FLOW.pdf> or through <http://www.waterandnature.org/flow/main.html> or <http://www.iucn.org/themes/law/>

