



## Environmental Cooperation-Asia (ECO-Asia)

# Asia Regional Biodiversity Conservation Program



Jim Peters / ARBCP

*Loss of biodiversity in the Greater Mekong Subregion is occurring faster than anywhere else in the world and protected areas can undermine the livelihoods of the poor, especially women and children, who are heavily dependent on forest resources.*

**BACKGROUND** The Greater Mekong Subregion in Southeast Asia is an area of significant ecological importance and home to rare and endangered species including the Siamese crocodile, Javan rhino, giant ibis, and the Asian golden cat. It is also one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Increasingly, national and regional development activities harm critical ecosystems and important biodiversity areas by fragmenting natural landscapes—primarily the result of infrastructure development and forested areas converted to agriculture. While parks and protected areas can preserve flora and fauna, there is mounting concern that these areas may undermine the livelihoods of the poor, especially women, who are heavily dependent on harvesting forest resources. Unclear and conflicting objectives, inadequate spatial scale, weak governance mechanisms, limited stakeholder engagement, and weak regional collaboration have made previous conservation efforts ineffective.

Working closely with the Asian Development Bank's Biodiversity Conservation Corridor Initiative/Greater Mekong Subregion (BCI/GMS), ECO-Asia takes an innovative and integrated approach to improving sustainable management of natural resources and the conservation of biodiversity in Vietnam and the Mekong Region. The development of a sustainable and robust biodiversity corridor will provide areas of protection for selected rare or endangered species, expanding their range and connecting important habitat areas.

This large-scale approach, piloted in the Cat Tien National Park in Vietnam, will give relevant experience to the BCI, its member countries and collaborating organizations. Local stakeholders will benefit from development of enabling conditions for sustainable finance mechanisms, including payments for environmental services, that will provide real economic opportunities to rural communities, particularly women. The corridor pilot will promote sound natural resource and biodiversity conservation in the Greater Mekong Subregion.

**APPROACH** ECO-Asia implements activities to support four key objectives.

**Restore and maintain ecosystem connectivity in biodiversity corridors and across landscapes.**

Activities focus on biodiversity conservation at the landscape and regional level to maintain large-scale processes and viable populations of plants and wildlife. While core protected areas are buffered from the effects of potentially damaging external activities, degraded ecosystems are restored and ecosystem services are expanded. Land tenure systems that promote and support sustainable conservation give local populations new incentives for resource management.

**Promote sustainable financing for biodiversity and natural resource conservation.** Payments for environmental services are innovative financial mechanisms that link environmental sustainability and poverty alleviation. In return for adopting sustainable land use practices, upstream service providers (often poor upland communities) benefit in receiving compensation or payments for environmental services from downstream users.

**Improve the livelihoods of the rural poor.** Production of sustainable and diversified natural resource-based products, value-added processing and services create new income opportunities and jobs in rural communities.

**Strengthen environmental governance and institution building.** Improving awareness of and compliance with laws and regulations that further sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation is central to the program. Identification of key institutional, legal and policy structures that support payments for environmental services provide a framework from which to begin dialogue among providers, beneficiaries and other stakeholders. Participatory approaches and communication of successful initiatives promote the spread of sustainable activities throughout the Lower Mekong region.

Special attention is placed on activities that improve the livelihoods of the rural poor, especially women, who manage and depend on natural resources differently than their male counterparts. ECO-Asia links the lessons learned from its pilot site, the Cat Tien National Park and its surrounding landscape in Vietnam, to national and regional policies, agreements and actions relevant to the Biodiversity Conservation Corridor Initiative/Greater Mekong Subregion.

**IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS** Winrock International, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), Winrock International India, and FFF Associates

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