

Session III – Connecting People and the Ecosystems That Support Them 12:00 Noon

Linking Cranes, People and Wetlands in the Mekong Delta

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Abstract

Cranes inspire people worldwide but saving their habitats alone is insufficient to solve pressing resource issues in the Lower Mekong Basin. People worldwide still control the majority of the globe's land base. It is in wetlands, as well as in other ecosystems, that conservation solutions can be found. Thus, using cranes as an inspirational tool to bring people together and by focusing on ecosystems that provide resources for people and myriad other denizens alike, we can provide effective conservation solutions. We exemplify one such project from Phu My commune, peopled by Khmers, in Vietnam's portion of the Mekong Delta. The goal is to ensure protection for the wetland at Phu My, which hosts the vulnerable Eastern Sarus cranes, and the last major population of *Lepironia*, a wetland plant in the sedge family.

Phu My commune is among the poorest in Viet Nam. The 5,000-acre wetland, adjacent to the commune, provides the major economic base to the community's Khmer ethnic minority and has been harvested for centuries by the villagers for the production of woven goods. An International Crane Foundation project team worked with villagers to provide skill training to replace time-intensive matt production with more efficient production of high quality handicraft products such as hats, handbags, and storage bins. The team also assisted the community in marketing and selling their products to tourists and higher-value export markets. After one year, the project provided skill training for 150 people and employed 32 full-time workers. Out of 350 families living in the area, 200 of them are making handicraft products, increasing their daily income to 30,000 Vietnam dong (\$1.86 U.S. dollars), which is three times greater than their previous wage. Ecologically, wildlife monitoring, invasive alien species control, wetland restoration and sustainable harvest of the *lepironia* activities are now occurring. Handbags are, therefore, responsible for improving ecosystem quality for people, cranes and the many other wetland species.