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The Mekong is a vital aspect of the livelihood of riverbank communities.

## Conserving biodiversity, sustaining Mekong livelihoods

Times Reporters

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Laos Office and the National University of Laos (NUOL) met in Vientiane on Friday to review the results of the first ecological surveys of the Mekong River between Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

The objectives of the surveys, which took place in 2011 and 2012, were to document the diversity and richness of flora and fauna along the Mekong River and to assess the status of endemic, restricted-range or threatened species.

This project concluded the first two phases of a three phase programme. The IUCN and NUOL's Faculty of Science worked closely to produce the first biodiversity survey for the area (the Mekong from Luang Prabang to Vientiane) recording all plants, aquatic invertebrates, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish found in this section as well as a livelihood assessment of all 97 villages found in this stretch of the Mekong.

The third phase will be a series of small projects aiming to conserve biodiversity while also improving local livelihoods.

This was the first step of a five-year Mekong conservation project, financed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF).

The results identified 23 new records for Lao flora while, regarding fauna, there were two records of national significance for birds and seven species of reptiles identified with national conservation significance.

Spawning sites for *Probarbus jullieni*, an endangered fish species, have been also identified as well as the occurrence of *Phoenix roebelenii*, a dwarf palm species common in horticultural use but rare in the wild.

Some sites still have a relatively high level of biodiversity but the results showed that natural habitats and wildlife populations have been heavily impacted by human activity and their future is in jeopardy.

The Mekong River is of great importance for Lao people

who live along the river and rely on its biodiversity, said Faculty of Science Dean Dr Somchan Bounphamy. She noted that the study would provide valuable data and information to the government and other development projects to provide a framework for monitoring and conservation in the future.

"The project is a combined effort by international researchers along with counterparts from the Faculty of Science, who are working together to not only expand upon the knowledge of biodiversity in Laos but also to train the future generation of scientists and conservationists, which is crucial to the sustainability of this amazing place," said IUCN Project Coordinator, Mr Raphael Glemet.

The event saw over 100 people in attendance including faculty, students and researchers from the faculties of Science, Forestry, and Environment, Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre, Lao Biodiversity Association, and the ministries of Agriculture and Forestry and Natural Resources and the Environment.