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## Building grassroots support for sustainable natural resource management in Western Siem Pang Important Bird Area

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Participants expressed their concern about negative impacts of human activities on natural resources and the environment in their community.

Photo: Prach Pich Phirun

**BirdLife International<sup>1</sup> Cambodia Programme** – From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2006, village meetings were organised by Site Support Group<sup>2</sup> (SSG) members in Western Siem Pang Important Bird Area<sup>3</sup> (IBA), Stung Treng Province. The meetings were held in five villages; namely Pong Kreal, Phabang, Kek Krom, Kek Svay, and Lakay. This activity was facilitated by Mr. Prach Pich Phirun - BirdLife Project Officer, and is part of the Netherlands Government funded project titled *Strengthened Community Natural Resource Management in Western Siem Pang Important Bird Area, Cambodia*.

The meetings aimed to introduce a new concept of sustainable natural resource management and to

allow villagers to express their concerns and opinions about management of their community forests, especially of Trapaengs (seasonal wetlands in deciduous forest) in order to establish trapaeng management protocols. Among the 224 villagers present, most were fishermen, hunters, and other forest product collectors.

Western Siem Pang IBA, a mosaic of open deciduous forest and small seasonal wetlands (*Trapaengs*), is among the most important sites in Cambodia for the conservation of globally threatened bird species. It supports the only known viable population of the Critically Endangered<sup>4</sup> White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni*, as well as populations of three other Critically Endangered birds: Slender-billed vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*, White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and Giant Ibis *Pseudibis gigantea*. The site also supports the recently described endemic Mekong Wagtail *Motacilla samvesnae* and a number of threatened mammals, including Eld's Deer *Cervus eldii* and Tiger *Panthera tigris*. Poverty and development pressures are currently the overriding factors affecting this IBA. In cooperation with the Forest Administration, BirdLife has been working in Western Siem Pang IBA since 2003 to protect its biodiversity and assist local communities to reduce poverty.

At the meetings, participants all agreed that natural resources are being reduced by human activities such as land clearance for agriculture, new settlements, mine exploration, over-exploitation of timber and urban expansion. These factors are affecting their livelihoods, which are based almost exclusively on the

natural resources of the IBA. Villagers also expressed their concern about their poverty and lack of knowledge which have forced them to engage in illegal activities such as poisoning fish, hunting, trapping, destroying forest to catch monkeys, logging, etc to earn their livings. Negative effects on the local environment have included irregular rainfall, flooding, shortage of fish etc. The root cause of these changes is unsustainable natural resource management in Trapaengs.

The good news is that the new concept of sustainable natural resource management introduced by BirdLife was highly appreciated by all the villagers at the meetings. They themselves also wished to receive support from BirdLife to sustainably manage natural resources in Trapaengs. Trapaeng management protocols were drafted by the villagers so that local needs are reflected. Village leaders signed the meeting minutes to ensure that the villagers would follow these protocols.

*“This project will help address the limited natural resource management skills that exist at the local level in Western Siem Pang IBA. There is a clear need for a mechanism whereby local communities can learn about development proposals, voice their concerns and incorporate local priorities. The contribution of this project to poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation will be demonstrated by establishing improved local management of natural resources and key biodiversity, and monitoring changes over the course of the project”*, said Mr. Jonathan C. Eames, Programme Manager of BirdLife International in Indochina.

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#### NOTES FOR EDITORS

- 1) **BirdLife International** is a global alliance of conservation organisations working in more than 100 countries worldwide who, together, are the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and their conservation. Further information about BirdLife’s work in Vietnam can be found at [www.birdlifeindochina.org](http://www.birdlifeindochina.org).
- 2) **Site Support Group (SSG)**: Site Support Groups are groups of local stakeholders who share a common commitment to the conservation of an IBA. In many cases, participation is voluntary. Stakeholders become involved in SSGs because of the economic, cultural, religious, recreational or livelihood benefits provided by the IBA. BirdLife is aiming to develop networks of SSGs to promote exchange of experience and skills in IBA conservation.
- 3) **Important Bird Area (IBA)**: With the aim of conserving sites of global biodiversity importance, BirdLife International has a programme to identify and conserve Important Bird Areas (IBA). IBAs are areas of international importance for bird conservation that meet internationally recognised criteria. IBAs are not only important for birds but, typically, support a wide range of other important animal and plant species.
- 4) The IUCN Red List of threatened species is widely considered to be the most objective and authoritative system for classifying species in terms of the risk of extinction. Information on a taxon's population size, population trends and range size are applied to standard quantitative criteria to determine its IUCN Red List Category (Extinct, Extinct in the Wild, Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable, Near Threatened or Least Concern). Information about these categories is available at [http://www.iucnredlist.org/info/categories\\_criteria](http://www.iucnredlist.org/info/categories_criteria).



A village leader signs the meeting minutes to confirm the villagers’ commitment to implementing the Trapaeng management protocol in Phabang village.

Photo: Prach Pich Phirun