

Siberian Crane Wetland Project Winding Up on a High Note



Bangkok, 20 October 2009 - The final Steering Committee meeting and Project Completion Workshop for the UNEP/GEF Siberian Crane Wetland Project (SCWP) were held in Harbin, China, from 12-15 October. The selection of Heilongjiang province as the venue for the gatherings was appropriate, given China's important contribution to the project. The campus of Northeast Forestry University offered a suitable backdrop for the meetings, which included a special seminar on the conservation of Zhalong Marsh.

There were no surprises at the final Steering Committee meeting, which reviewed progress of the four participating countries (China, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, and Russian Federation) during the final project extension phase in 2009; and considered wrap-up activities to be conducted through the end of this year. China continued to demonstrate excellent progress, with good prospects for internalising and continuing many activities after formal completion of the GEF project. Some of the key project outputs still need to be translated into English for the benefit of other countries and practitioners to learn from; and China is expected to contribute to a regional database (already developed in English) after existing data have been translated from Chinese.

Through the GEF project, Iran has made important breakthroughs in community involvement and participatory management at its SCWP sites. Hopefully these initiatives can be replicated elsewhere in the country. While the known Siberian Crane population that winters in Iran has continued to dwindle during the life of the project, this capacity-building aspect of the GEF project cannot be undervalued. Kazakhstan, which was a latecomer to the SCWP, nevertheless made very good progress in the designation of reserves, development of a vast array of public education materials, and very successful public participation initiatives. It is expected that some of these activities will be continued through a newly created NGO.

Russia did not participate in the project extension phase, but conservation and monitoring activities in Yakutia were well-executed and presented at the meeting. The outstanding efforts of the International Crane Foundation (ICF), as international executing agency, and the consistent backing received from UNEP/GEF in Nairobi since the outset of the project are also worthy of mention.

The third day of the meeting was reserved for a day-long public "Project Completion Workshop". The topics covered included: an overview of project themes and outcomes; flyway monitoring in China and Russia (Yakutia); water management in China; site protection and management in Kazakhstan and Russia; community

participation in Iran and China; flyway education initiatives; targeted research at Poyang Lake, China; and an overview of the current status of the Siberian Crane. Many of the talks were rich in information and provided an interesting overview and comparison of project activities in the different countries.

Towards the end of the workshop, an expert panel chaired by CMS Senior Advisor Douglas Hykle fielded questions about the impact and sustainability of project activities. On the final day of the meeting, a seminar on the conservation of Zhalong Marsh – a key wetland ecosystem in China for migratory birds – was organised, mostly in Chinese, with contributions from the International Crane Foundation.

CMS involvement in the UNEP/GEF Siberian Crane Wetland Project stemmed largely from the early development of the project proposal and contributions to regular meetings of the Steering Committee throughout the life of the six-year project. Despite its comparatively modest involvement (compared to the country actors, international executing agency, and UNEP), CMS received considerable credit – in the form of the appearance of CMS logo on a wide range of project deliverables and acknowledgement of CMS's valuable contributions to the Steering Committee process. As such, CMS has been well rewarded for its long-term commitment to the project. Indeed, it is largely through the prism of this project and CMS' involvement in it that the four participating countries (China and Russia being non-Parties, and the Iran and Kazakhstan being relatively recent signatories to CMS) have come to learn about the Convention on Migratory Species.

A major question mark remains as to whether the CMS Siberian Crane MoU – which was the impetus for the development of the SCWP – will receive a renewed injection of support from CMS and from its 11 participating countries and affiliated organisations; or whether it will be subsumed or superseded by other initiatives. One of the discussions in the margins of the Harbin meeting highlighted the desirability of developing an 'Options Paper' for the forthcoming CMS MoU7 meeting in Iran, which would examine options for carrying forward some of the UNEP/GEF SCWP work under the CMS MoU or other flyway initiatives.

The paper could effectively determine what kind of future the CMS Siberian Crane MoU has: a revitalised CMS instrument, with additional financial support (eg. through a dedicated 'trust fund'), and a remit to develop further the Western/Central Asia site network (as a precursor to a larger network under Central Asian Flyway initiative); or a reduced role of serving as a forum for interested Governments, conservationists and researchers from the relevant flyways to meet less frequently to talk about Siberian Crane conservation – perhaps only at 3-5 year intervals.

Whatever the outcome, the UNEP/GEF Siberian Crane Wetland Project – which was showcased at CMS COP9 in Rome, last December – has accomplished much in the course of six years, and CMS can take pride in having been associated with this successful project since its inception.

Douglas Hykle
Senior CMS Advisor, Bangkok