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DELTAS SHARE NEED FOR TRADEOFFS TO SUSTAIN ECONOMIES, ECOSYSTEMS

Ganges, Zambeze, Okavango, Mekong and Mississippi Deltas cite cooperation as key to survival

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam -- As discussions continue at DELTAS2013:VIETNAM, an international conference hosted by America's WETLAND Foundation, Vietnam National University and the government of the Netherlands, world deltas are sharing the need to identify tradeoffs to save economies, ecological services and cultures.

With the "worst" predicted climate futures among eleven African nations in the Zambezi Delta, Dr. Richard Beilfuss, president of International Crane Foundation, encouraged conference participants to call for assurance of water availability. "Multi-purpose management of our water resources, along with wetland restoration is essential," said Beilfuss. "We must re-think approaches to hydropower and structures on our rivers. This is essential to establishing equity between upstream and downstream authorities."

The World Bank made it possible for some of the world deltas to attend conference and Dr. Genevieve Connors, Senior Water Resources Specialist for the organization in India, pointed out the need for trans-boundary leadership to sustain deltas and that tradeoffs would be required among the adjacent countries. "The world's most populous river basin, the Ganges, with a source of water from the Himalayan range, flows through India and Bangladesh and contains the largest mangrove ecosystem in the world, with vast plains dominated by large irrigation systems, supporting 125 million people. We need modeling to inform decisions on water storage. We cannot assume that the most often used strategies will work for the long term," Connors said.

An example of trans-boundary and trans-disciplinary efforts in the Okavango Basin showed how the region is negotiating options for tradeoffs, while balancing the ecosystem needs and the communities depending upon it. Dr. Ebenizario Chonguica of the Okavango River Basin Water Commission in Botswana said, "Ecosystem impacts from energy development and irrigation are affecting communities, and changes in the flows in the basin are causing a progressive decline. Because of services to the people, the ecosystem provides are being diminished, it is necessary for Botswana, Namibia and Angola to cooperate on a plan to assess options and offer tradeoffs that will be acceptable to the entire region."

Similar changes within the Mississippi and Mekong river basins are occurring and, while the Mississippi River trans-boundary challenges are among states, the Mekong faces trans-boundary issues among the countries sharing its basin. With the construction of dams upriver, the Mekong Delta is vulnerable to many of the same consequences the Mississippi Delta is now experiencing.

Mark Davis, Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Tulane University Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy, pointed out that boundaries are not limited to states or countries, but include legal, professional, governmental, time and cultural ones. "All of these boundaries must be considered if we are to sustain these deltas and the benefits they offer," Davis said. "

Toung Hong Tien of the Viet Nam National Mekong Committee said, "Strategies for trans-boundary decision making must include a high level of political commitment and the willingness for countries involved to share data and information and to make it accessible to everyone as decisions are being considered."

New Orleans, which has endured hurricanes and manmade disasters along with the BP oil spill, is also surrounded by a deteriorating ecosystem, where wetland loss has led to increased vulnerability. Ho Chi Minh City shares an extremely high rate of sea level rise and subsidence like its American counterpart and views increased storm activity in S.E. Asia as an omen for the future.

Both cities are involved with numerous projects and studies to bring greater protection and resiliency to large populations. The need for adaptation strategies has planning experts searching for solutions though spatial planning and mechanisms to better live with water and the natural processes of their rivers.

"For the past two years, we have worked on a practical plan to better integrate water into the urban landscape of the city," said New Orleans architect, David Waggonner. "In partnership with Dutch water experts, we have been able to envision a future for the Crescent City in a way that moves beyond the structural protection of levees alone and more with allowing nature to be a stronger asset using water as a positive reinforcement for neighborhoods," continued Waggonner. Vietnam's largest city is also working with Dutch planners on a similar strategy for Ho Chi Minh City at a time when political forces are considering large dykes or walls to repel the rising tide to protect large populations.

"In the Netherlands, we've learned, after 800 years of trying to manage water, that it is better to live with the natural resources and expand the footprint of water to reduce its damaging potential," said Frits Dirks, Project Leader, Flood and Inundation Management Programme (FIM), Ho Chi Minh City, Royal Haskoning DHV. Derek Hoeferlin, assistant professor, Washington University of Saint Louis, recently completed a series of design charrettes where architects and planners looked at the Mississippi River around Illinois and Missouri and imagined scenarios for allowing the river to be a resource and not a threat. "We have built walls around a river that cannot be contained forever and we are seeing that, with drought and then flood conditions reeking havoc on communities and the economy," said Hoeferlin. "Why not figure out a way to let the river do her thing, take advantage of the valuable fresh water that we carelessly wash out into the gulf?"

Home to more than ten million people exploding to 15 million by 2025, Ho Chi Minh City faces enormous growth and water supply demands while seeing increases in sea levels enveloping communities during storm events.“We cannot afford a Katrina or Rita, yet we are poised for such a disaster if we don't change our ways,” said Mrs. Vu Thuy Linh, vice manager, Climate Change Bureau, Ho Chi Minh City. “The evidence is mounting and our discussions this week about not waiting for the consequences of disasters to act are most compelling.”

The Mississippi and Mekong Deltas face urgent decisions and actions based on new projections that sea level rise is outpacing predictions and that these two coastal regions are at the highest ends of the predictive scales for rising waters. “Unfortunately, we don’t enjoy the luxury of time to address these issues,” said Waggonner. “Only consider the insurance risks now evident in South Louisiana and you realize that we can’t keep doing what we have been doing and expect different results.”

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Please arrange interviews or pose questions through the following contact:

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The America's WETLAND Foundation manages the largest, most comprehensive public education campaign in Louisiana's history, raising awareness of the impact of Louisiana's wetland loss on the state nation and world. DELTAS2013VIETNAM is a unique gathering of global representatives from the many sectors and political circles that converge in watershed management, especially in the intricate trans-boundary dynamics of the Mekong. International delegates will discuss solutions to some of the most acute challenges facing Vietnam and its delta, the broader Mekong River system, and major deltas and watersheds worldwide. For more information visit www.americaswetland.com and www.deltas2013.org.