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The Roles of International NGOs in the Conservation of Bio-Diversity of Wetlands

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Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are made up of professionals concerned and enthusiastic citizens. NGO experts can be used profitably as consultants to environment authorities and can also be used as teachers in public awareness programmes for the community. This paper will focus on the roles played by these NGOs internationally and the local ones as well in the conservation of bio-diversity, especially on wetlands. The overall aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of the importance roles of NGOs for the conservation of wetlands worldwide and to discuss proposals and recommendations for better implementation of roles by these NGOs.

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1. Introduction

Non-governmental organization (NGO) is an organization that is not part of any government.¹ They are made up of professionals of an ordinary concerned and enthusiastic citizens. As such, NGOs have rich human resources that can be used in conservation of bio-diversity, especially in wetlands. NGOs such as

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the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Wetlands International (WI), Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) play important roles in conservation of wetlands. The phrase “non-governmental organization” only came into popular use with the establishment of the United Nations Organization in 1945 with provisions in Article 71 of Chapter 10 of the United Nations Charter for a consultative role for organizations which are neither governments nor member state. The definition of “international NGO” (INGO) is first given in resolution 288(X) on February 27, 1950, where it is defined as “any international organization that is not founded by an international treaty”. The vital and important role of NGOs and other “major groups” in sustainable development was recognized in Chapter 27 of Agenda 21, leading to intense arrangements for a consultative relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations. This paper will focus on the roles played by these NGOs internationally and also, not forgetting the local ones as well in the conservation of bio-diversity, especially on wetlands. The authors also wish to highlight the current situation regarding this matter in Malaysia. The overall aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of the importance roles of NGOs for the conservation of wetlands worldwide. The authors will also discuss proposals and recommendations for better implementation of roles by these NGOs.

2. What is non-governmental organization?

According to Britannica concise Encyclopedia, non-governmental organization (NGOs) is an organization that is not part of any government and they are not-for-profit. They existed because of their specific missions in certain areas, such as environmental, health, human rights and so on. A non-governmental organization is a legally constituted, non-governmental organization created by natural or legal persons with no participation or representation of any government (Agenda 21, Chapter 27: Strengthening the Role of Non-governmental Organizations: Partners for Sustainable Development, Earth Summit, 1992). Meaning, an NGO may stand by themselves, without any support from government. The purposes of developing NGOs are because they cover the entire range of human interests, which may include domestic or international in scope. NGOs also are committed to addressing social needs and improving the human condition. NGOs also cover the entire range of human interests and may be domestic or international in scope. NGOs are also important for key sources of information for governments on issues such as human rights abuses and environmental degradation.

NGOs are also committed and dedicated in addressing social needs and improving the human condition. They recruit and engage volunteers for most of their activities and are usually led by volunteer boards, they have missions before profits, and when they engage in activities, such as grassroots advocacy campaigns, that would be difficult or impossible for other organizations. By having and focusing on their own specific missions and drawing on the passionate support of all local communities and loyal volunteers, NGOs are able to address issues that organizations in other sectors or government cannot or will not. What is the most important is, NGOs enjoy a unique independence in their service to the public. NGOs also receive support from the government and for-profit corporations, and they often work in collaboration with these groups. With such collaborations, especially those with the corporate sector have often led to an increased professionalism and efficiency in NGOs.

Globalization during the 20th century also gave rise to the importance of NGOs. There are many problems which could not be solved within a nation. For example, international treaties and international organizations such as the World Trade Organization were perceived as being too centred on the interests of capitalist enterprises. In order to counterbalance this trend, NGOs have developed to emphasize humanitarian issues, developmental aid and sustainable development. Other example is there was a World NGO Conference on Wetlands which was held in Changyeong and Suncheon, Republic of Korea, (World NGO Conference on Wetlands, “NGOs for Healthy and Sustainable Wetlands, Changnyeong and

Suncheon, Republic of Korea, 25-27 October, 2008. Organized by the Korea NGO Network for Ramsar COP 10). The conference was attended by more than 400 members on NGOs, indigenous people, local communities and local government administrations from 31 countries on 6 continents, all of whom are committed to the conservation and restoration of wetlands.

3. Types of NGO

There are several types of NGOs, which can be understood by their orientation and level of co-operation. NGO types by orientation include charitable, service, participatory and empowering orientations. While NGO type by level of co-operations are community-based organizations, city wide organizations, national NGOs and international NGOs.

4. Legal status

The legal form of NGOs varies and depends upon homegrown of each country's laws, practices and rules. There are four main family groups of NGOs can be found worldwide, (Grant B. Stillman (2007), *Global Standard NGOs*, Geneve: Lulu, pp. 13-14): which are:

- Unincorporated and voluntary association
- Trusts, charities and foundations
- Companies not for profit, and
- Entities formed or registered under special NGO or nonprofit laws.

What seems to be interested to note is that NGOs are not subjects of international law, as states are. An exception is the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is subject to certain specific matters, mainly relating to the Geneva Convention. The other example is the Wetlands International, which is subject to Ramsar Convention, 1971 as its main treaty.

5. What is wetland?

Wetlands are areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. They occur where the water table is at or near the surface of the land, or where the land is covered by shallow water. The Ramsar Convention (The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands was signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971 and provides for international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources) defined wetlands as areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt including areas of marine water, the depth of which at low tide does not exceed 6 meters. In addition, the Convention provides that wetlands "may incorporate riparian and coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands, and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than six meters at low tide lying within the wetlands". There are three main features of wetlands:

- Wetlands are distinguished by the presence of water, either at the surface or within the root zone.
- Wetlands often have unique soil conditions that differ from adjacent uplands.
- Wetlands support vegetation adapted to the wet conditions (hydrophytes) and conversely, are characterized by an absence of flooding-intolerant vegetation (Convention of Wetlands, Ramsar Information paper).

6. Relevant NGOs for wetlands

There are many, but for the purpose of the paper, we will only select those prominent ones.

6.1. *The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).*

IUCN helps the world find pragmatic solutions to our most pressing environment and development challenges by supporting scientific research, managing field projects all over the world. They also are involved in bringing governments, NGOs, the United Nation, international conventions and companies together to develop policy, laws and best practice. IUCN is the world's largest and oldest global environmental network, and is also a democratic membership union with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, and almost 11,000 volunteer scientists and experts in some 160 countries. Over 1,000 professional staff in 60 countries and hundreds of partners in public support IUCN's work and developments. IUCN's headquarters are located in Gland, near Geneva, in Switzerland. (<http://www.iucn.org/what/tpas/biodiversity/>)

6.2. *World Wetland Network (WWN)*

The World Wetland Network (WWN) is a fledgling global network of 200 wetland NGOs initiated at the World NGO Conference on the eve of Ramsar COP10 meeting on November 2008, in Changwon, South Korea. The creation of WWN arose from the need for NGOs to maintain contact with each other at and between Ramsar meetings, but will also help with information exchange, sharing of best practice and lobbying on specific wetlands issues. The WWN will also enable smaller NGOs to arrive at Ramsar COPs (Conference of Parties) well prepared for the meeting and more able to fully participate in the Ramsar meeting themselves. (<http://www.wwt.org.uk/wli/world-wetland-network>)

6.3. *Wetlands International (WI)*

Wetlands International has currently about 150 members of staff, stationed at their headquarters, 12 national and regional offices and several project offices all over the world. They have approximately 1000 specialists advise and help them on different issues. Around 15,000 volunteers help the WI by providing data through monitoring and counting millions of waterbirds. WI has maintained their presence in Malaysia for over 30 years. Beginning as interwader and later as the Asian Wetland Bureau, the name and structure of the organization has changed. Their commitments somehow never changed regarding issues of wetlands.

6.4. *Malaysian Nature Society (MNS)*

Malaysian Nature Society or Persatuan Pencinta Alam Malaysia (in Malay) is the oldest and one of the most prominent environmental not for profit, non-governmental organizations in Malaysia. MNS today is involved in a wide range of environmental activities and campaign. The mission of the society is to place upon itself the responsibility to promote the study, appreciation, conservation and protection of Malaysia's natural heritage. MNS has successfully carried out number of conservation achievements as a result of public campaigns. One of the first of these successes was the halting of the quarrying at Batu Caves in 1980, followed by the creation of Endau Rompin National Park, and their expeditions there in 1985 and 1986.

7. NGOs roles in conservation of wetlands

There are many roles in conservation of wetlands of NGOs towards conservation of wetlands, which varies from each different states. For example, Birds Korea has taken the lead in producing an excellent report of the impact on bird life of the four Rivers Restoration Project. The report sets out exactly how the works are likely to damage habitat for birds (and other wetland species), this include many rare and endangered species, and makes a demand for the project to be stopped, or that mitigation is built in to the scheme to protect wetland species. Meanwhile, WWN is one of the organization that has endorsed the report, which can be found at their own website. (Suncheon NGO Declaration. 27 October 2008. Suncheon City, Republic of Korea.).Meanwhile, at the Suncheon City, Republic of Korea, in October 2008, the World NGO Conference on Wetlands delivered a declaration to the 10th Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Among the points in the declaration involve the formation of World Wetland Network (WWN) to facilitate and enhance information sharing and transfer of “best practices” in regards to planning, monitoring, and management of wetlands and to create a shared vision among stakeholders. Other than that, the declaration emphasized on conservation and wise use of all wetlands as well as designated wetlands of international importance. They urged the Contracting Parties to identify all wetland in the country which fit the criteria to be listed as a Ramsar site, to also prioritise these sites and then to designate sites according to a clearly defined timetable. Each country should aim to designate the best example of each type of wetland habitat under their jurisdiction as a Ramsar site. They also urged to promote wise use of wetlands, carrying out activities based on the local sites themselves. They will also disseminate traditional and indigenous knowledge of community groups through the CEPA (CEPA refers to “The Ramsar Convention’s Programme on communication, education, participation and awareness”) process, in order to conserve wetland sustainability while respecting local customs. To deliver conservation and sustainability both at local and global levels, IUCN builds on its strengths in areas such as science, where 11,000 experts setting global standards in their fields, for example, the definitive international standard for species extinction risk, where they outline the IUCN List of Threatened Species. For action, there exist hundreds of conservation projects all over the world from the local level to those involving several countries, all aimed at the sustainable management of biodiversity and natural resources. (CEPA refers to “The Ramsar Convention’s Programme on communication, education, participation and awareness”).

For Wetlands International, they are responsible for exploring all kind activities to conserve wetland species with a focus on waterbirds and fish. Thousands of volunteers monitor millions of waterbirds annually. The WI then analyse this information to provide overviews of population trends and guidance for site designation to governments and wetland managers (Wetlands for water and life. <http://www.wetlands.org>). They also work on the conservation of networks of sites that support migratory waterbirds (flyways) by checking their condition through regular monitoring programmes, raising awareness among the people living around these wetlands about wetlands values and benefits, thus enabling stakeholders and governments to conserve and manage them. WI also carries out research to elucidate and quantify the role of wetlands in water management. For example, wetlands play a vital role in water purification and in mitigating floods and droughts. The WI would advise governments on how to integrate wetland management into water resource management programmes at the catchment or basic scale. WI Malaysia also urge to stop the loss of peatlands for palm oil productions. The organization calls for the Malaysian government to stop the conversion of peatlands like these and to fulfill their promise of ‘green’ palm oil. (G.W.H. Davison. “Efforts in Wetlands Management in Sabah”. 6th SITE Research Seminar, 13-14 September 2001).

Looking at local situation, there are some works done by the NGOs. For example, the groups comprised of the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Sabah Environmental Protection Association (SEPA),

Sabah Society (SS) and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia, were represented on the management committee of the Kota Kinabalu City Bird Sanctuary, a wetland area, together with local residents' associations and a number of government agencies. MNS also runs programs for Nature Clubs for schools throughout Malaysia. Approximately, 300 schools participate in their programs currently. In addition, MNS also runs education programs at Rimba Ilmu of the Universiti Malaya and at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM).

8. Conclusion

It must be noted that public must also be involved for wetlands conservation. The role of the people always commence with the NGOs. NGOs not only help raise greater awareness of the need to conserve wetlands, but also help to educate the public on wetlands conservation and management. NGOs roles in conservation of wetlands should be encouraged and supported by all, especially from governments. The authors suggest these recommendations, such as works done by NGOs, regardless locals or international, should be encouraged. For local NGOs, funds need to be allocated to them in order for them to proceed with their missions successfully. The government and private sectors should also encourage these NGOs to share their experience and expertise to public, not to shun them away.

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