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Continued from page 1

A prolonged drought during the early months of 2009 and human diversions of water reduced fresh water inflow to coastal wetlands so vital to the Whooping Cranes. Many marshes dried and salinity levels increased in others. Availability of blue crabs and wolfberries, important food staples for the cranes, declined. The blue crabs (estimated to comprise over 80% of the Whooping Crane winter diet) moved to deeper water. The increased salinity levels also forced the cranes to expend precious energy searching for new sources of fresh drinking water. During the long dry winter, 23 cranes, mostly juveniles, perished. Starvation is thought to be a major factor for the losses. Only 247 cranes migrated north in April. Normal mortality of Whooping Cranes on the protected wintering grounds is approximately 1%, Last winter 8.5% of the population perished.

Upon arrival at the Texas wintering grounds in early winter, the cinnamon brown juveniles constitute about 12-15% of the population. For example, on that count in December of 2008 Tom recorded 40 juveniles, an excellent crop of youngsters from Canada. By the end of April when the cranes migrate north, the juveniles attain the graying plumage of adults, but 16 of the 40 had not survived the winter. Seven adults also vanished. By counting the number of white birds that return in autumn, the loss of white birds between spring departure from Aransas and return is calculated. Typically, about 8% of the white birds never return. Collision with power lines is considered a major threat during the fall migration. A catastrophic event such as the drought in Texas destroys that population and is one of the reasons why the 70% of the population of White Cranes on the protected wintering grounds is slim, even when everything goes well.

On the bright side, 62 pairs of cranes nested in Wood Buffalo National Park this year as compared to the previous year when 66 pairs nested. Due to the winter losses in Texas one might assume there would have been fewer nesting pairs. Mid-June counts from a National Park this year as compared to the previous year when 66 pairs nested were down 13 cranes from the 270 that arrived a year ago. We can only take more than one good year to climb back up to 270.

On the dark side, the drought in Texas continues unabated. Unless the rains return and the inflow of fresh water from the Guadalupe River increases to bathe the coastal marshes to create good habitat for blue crabs and wolfberries, the Whooping Cranes might suffer great loss again during the upcoming winter. Artificial feeding programs last winter only benefited about 20% of the cranes.

The original flock of Whooping Cranes is threatened by drought, loss of winter habitat to development outside the Refuge, and collisions with ever more power lines from numerous wind farms now popping up along the Central Flyway. These problems augment the importance of establishing additional populations in safer areas. To that end, during the past eight years, captive-produced cranes have been introduced to the flyway between Wisconsin and the southeast. Nesting failures in recent years in and near Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin are thought by some biologists to be caused by batches of black flies in late April that drive birds off the nest. In a future issue, we will report on the intensive studies we conducted at Necedah this spring. Pairing and egg-laying have been excellent in this flock. If the nest failure problem can be managed, we expect the Whooping Cranes can reproduce at an adequate rate to grow the population. In addition, discussions are underway with the State of Louisiana to re-establish a resident flock in the vast marshes of the southwest part of that state. As recently as 1939, non-migratory Whooping Cranes reared young in Louisiana. The habitat is still there and now Louisiana is interested in a reintroduction.

If the winter habitat in Texas survives drought, development, and the east and a future resident population in Louisiana will add to the long-term security of the world’s rarest crane – an international icon for survival that Canada and the USA work together to protect. ICF has a key role in the team that strives to increase the survival margins for these special birds.

We could not have asked for a better day on June 20th as crane enthusiasts from around the world joined generous benefactors Bob and Mary Dohmen to celebrate the opening of our new Spirit of Africa exhibit. We were pleased to welcome Wisconsin Department of Tourism Secretary, Kelli Trumble as a keynote speaker at the ribbon cutting ceremony. In highlighting our new exhibit and plans for the future, Kelli endorsed ICF as a unique attraction and landscape that infuses, motivates and involves people in crane conservation on a global scale.

Only a few weeks later, we welcomed Wisconsin First Lady Jessica Doyle to ICF. Along with the Governor, Jessica served in the Peace Corps in Africa and was keenly interested in seeing Spirit of Africa. A life-long educator, her key initiatives focus on educational excellence, literacy and the promotion of state pride and culture. Jessica took part with our staff in our K-12 classroom and field trip programs, educational outreach and the International Children’s Art Exchange. Spring has transitioned to summer at ICF and once again we are blessed with visits from colleagues around the world. These far-flung relationships enrich us and strengthen the core of expertise that makes us more effective in accomplishing our mission.

• Dr. Atilla Bankovics, the retired Head of Ornithology at the Hungarian Natural History Museum has been working on numerous books and scientific papers, is at the ICF Library for four weeks doing a research book for he is writing books on cranes for a Hungarian audience.
• Bradley Gibbons is the Project Coordinator for the Karoo Crane Conservation Project in South Africa in partnership with ICF and the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) He works mainly with Blue Cranes. His latest project similar to work we do with Sandhills here in Wisconsin. By visiting ICF and comparing notes, he gains better ideas for experiment design needed to study crop damage in his area.
• Dr. Paulo Johnsgard, Professor Emeritus of Zoology at the University of Nebraska is a long-time colleague of ICF. He works a lot with Blue Cranes. His latest project similar to work we do with Sandhills here in Wisconsin. By visiting ICF and comparing notes, he gains better ideas for experiment design needed to study crop damage in his area.

Notes from ICF President Jim Hook... Inspiring a Global Community
Aldo Leopold wrote in his beloved essay Mariland Fläcke, “The sadness discernable in some marshes arises, perhaps, from their once having harbored cranes. Now they stand humbled, adrift in history.” Yet in many places around the world, the wetlands themselves are literally vanishing before the cranes, the life-giving water dwindling by season and year until the last cranes stalk dry mud meadow and flies sweep across what was once marshland. The cranes fly ahead of the flames, but eggs and young perish. Without the safety and remarkable productivity of the wetlands, the cranes themselves merely linger, cast adrift.

In contrast to forests or grasslands, wetlands are often rapidly changing landscapes that over ears have flooded and dried and flooded again, nurturing an abundance of life. These frontiers where land and water mix have been essential not only for cranes and countless animals and plants, but also for humanity and early civilizations under near wetlands.

The ICF’s 2009 Annual Campaign will support ICF efforts here in the United States as well as across Asia and Africa to address urgent needs for water – for the crane marshes and for the human communities living with the cranes.

In the Amur Basin of Russia and China, drought combined with increasing temperatures from climate change has resulted in a disaster for migratory birds. In the last 12 years, 5,480,000 migratory birds have perished. This is a loss of more than 10% of the world’s migratory bird population. The problem has been compounded by the fact that the wetlands are repeatedly burned, forcing them to forage in unfamiliar places. Twenty-three birds, 8.5% of the flock died. As in many places around the world, the timing and locations for water releases still have to be made effective.

The challenges of water management come in all forms. Unlike China, the Yangtze River Basin to the south has abundant water. Poyang Lake, winter home to almost all Siberian Cranes on Earth, rises as much as ten meters from winter lows to summer floods. That extraordinary fluctuation of water is essential to the immense biological productivity that benefits fisheries and livestock production as well as waterbirds. ICF research over the past decade indicates that a dam proposed to stabilize Poyang’s waters in winter would change these unique wetlands forever and pose great risk to the greatest concentration of wintering cranes and other waterbirds in East Asia.

Across Asia, wherever ICF travels, water is the chief issue. At Zhahong and other marshes of northeast China, we worked with farmers to support studies of natural cycles of water, and to assist wildlife and water agencies in designing water management plans that attempt to reproduce these patterns. Our plans have been adapted into regional and national water plans. While the essential needs of these wetlands for water are now recognized, the timing and locations for water releases still have to be made effective. The water is far different than water storage in reservoirs; the marshlands and freshwater shrimp and cranes require more of a dance with water, sensitive to seasons, with the rise and fall of moisture timed around nesting seasons and the works to feed the growing young.

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Back in America, along coastal Texas, the last naturally reproducing flock of Whooping Cranes had a terrible winter (see article on page 1-2). Again, the problem resulted from a combination of drought and water disasters – that led to sharply reduced inflows of fresh water into the estuaries where the cranes feed. As a result, the cranes faced starvation, forcing them to forage in unfamiliar places. Twenty-three birds, 8.5% of the flock died. As in Asia, the vital and complex role of water across landscapes has not been fully recognized – research, public awareness and policy adjustments are all needed.

At our headquarters site in Baraboo, we are highly mindful of water and its uses. As part of our efforts to sensitize visitors, our new Spirit of Africa exhibits enable us to interpret the lives of cranes and the communities that surround them in terms of vital and scarce water resources. While plants will take time to mature in the exhibits, animals responded as soon as water flowed into the Witted Crane marsh, as wetland creatures are adapted to the sudden return of water. Frogs courted in the shallows, as we continued construction all around. Dragonflies patrolled during the dedication ceremonies for Spirit of Africa. We walk on pavement made of recycled consumer glass, permeable to water so that we avoid the destructive runoff from asphalt. The land itself is contoured to feed water into the exhibit’s wetland, and even the roof of the building that houses cranes supplies water for the birds. These are a few examples of the sustainable building choices that were made over traditional and more consumptive construction practices.

Visitors to ICF, like counterparts at crane places on other continents, see the beauty of water and learn through the cranes how foresight and planning can assure waters to fulfill our dreams – a world that has cranes inhabiting healthy, productive landscapes.

Over the years, as ICF has worked on vital crane places around the world, we have witnessed these cycles. I continue to feel surprised and moved by how a few inches of water transform a place. The water surfaces move with the wind, reflect the changing sky, and pulse with life – frogs chant, maymows and water beetles chunter, and terns wheel overhead or dip and seize water flies emerging into the air. Yet when those few inches have been artificially drained away, dust and soil lie seemingly lifelike and abandoned. Leopold’s cranes find no reflection.

Increasingly, people are realizing that water is a defining resource that nurtures our human communities or limits us, sometimes harshly. Water underlies all we do. While climate change is the result of altering the composition of the atmosphere, the water cycles literally reflect the sky and drive many of the impacts we fear from greenhouse gases and temperature rise. Whether or not a specific region will be drier or wetter, our rain will become more erratic and more prone to extremes… worse floods than our parents remember, worse droughts.

The ecosystem services provided by wetlands and their waters are immensely valuable to humanity. Wetlands thrive on fluctuation, and it is this resilience of wetlands and other water systems that we must safeguard or restore. The engineering solutions that continue to be so popular offer a sense of stability and control but tend to lead away from resilience – pushing against natural communities rather than building upon their aid as we all living things adapt to different climates.

ICF is in its early days concerned itself mostly with the loss of cranes, and our programs today still aim to restore crane populations, whether through curtailing illegal trade that may be the greatest threat to Africa’s rapidly declining crowned cranes, or through reintroducing Whooping Cranes into Wisconsin. But for more than two decades, we have recognized the changes and risks as natural cycles and human development threaten the wetlands on which cranes and people depend.

The cranes have proven effective ambassadors for water. Repeatedly, crane conservation has successfully involved governments and communities in action for safeguarding water, an issue of vital importance to us all. ICF’s long-term expertise with how to maintain or restore natural water cycles has become urgently important as extraordinarily valuable wetlands increasingly are threatened.

When I leave Baraboo for travel I think of water everywhere I go. I may drive only as far as Necedah National Wildlife Refuge an hour up the highway, where our released Whooping Cranes nest. Here the refuge manages water through complexes of ditches and dikes, a legacy of the decades when farmers tried unsuccessfully to drain the land. Periodic draw-downs – human-induced “droughts” – multiply the benefits available when water returns to these marshes. Cranes and other wildlife benefit from these re-created cycles. Even now, the refuge is reversing the old features of drainage still on the land, plugging ditches or rerouting water to hold it longer on new parts of the landscape.

Every time I drive to Dane County Airport, on the way from Baraboo to Asia or Africa, the highway passes wetlands among the farm fields. This year, they are full of water and life, the mirrors I love; other years, small clumps of cattails or sedges inhibit the lowest spots while otherwise these wetlands grow corn. Wetlands, cranes, and farmers are intimately linked; instead, most Wisconsin cranes live on privately owned farms, and ICF has joined with the University of Wisconsin and others to work with farming families to manage water on the farmlands to promote crop production while sustaining wildlife.

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ICF trains a Growing Community of Wetland Scientists in Southeast Asia

By Jeb Barzen, ICF Director of Field Ecology

ICF began its work in Southeast Asia in 1988 when George Archibald ventured into the Mekong Delta to learn about the remnant wetlands in the area. Scientists from Hanoi had documented the reappearance of Eastern Sarus Cranes in Vietnam by 1986. George then asked me to get involved at what was to become Tram Chim National Park. Together with Rich Beillifus, I arrived in the Mekong Delta, young and naive, in 1989.

Our first task at Tram Chim was to support the establishment of a conservation area. It was important to halt the rapid conversion of remnant wetland to rice paddies and to restore the remnant wetlands to better health for the cranes and other wetland inhabitants. Rich and I embarked on these goals. What soon became apparent, however, was that two other goals existed as well.

Communication among the many partners that were involved was a difficult language for us foreigners to learn (let it was!), but because there was not a common culture that we shared to express the ecological concepts for which we were working. Improving the capacity of all involved was necessary. Equally important, it was quickly apparent that the waters that flooded Tram Chim each year came from the entire Mekong Basin and not just the Mekong Delta alone. The hydrology of Tram Chim could never be restored if the ebb and flow of the Mekong River was substantially altered. That was more than 20 years ago.

By 1993, Rich and I had accepted a M.S. student, Nguyen Huu Thiien. Thiien’s project focused on integrating the livelihoods of people living around Tram Chim with the conservation objectives of the reserve itself. By 1995, Rich and I also accepted our first graduate student, Trieu (Trie) and Bjorn Larsen. Trieu completed a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin Madison in 1999.

In 1999, Trieu began a joint appointment as professor of botany with Vietnam National University and as a leader of ICF’s Southeast Asia program. Trieu began working with more graduate students. Still, our impact was primarily in Vietnam and not in other countries of the Mekong Basin. To expand beyond these borders, Trieu and I contacted other universities and, in 2002, we formed the University Network of Southeast Asia. In Thailand, Laos, PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam, nine universities wanted to increase their capacity in wetland ecology. We began teaching an integrated wetland ecology course each year.

Now, the University Network of Southeast Asia includes 17 cooperating universities and is still growing. Our wetlands course has 164 graduates, and the network is poised to begin a Sustainable Land Use program in 2010.

In 1995, ICF sponsored a meeting to discuss management issues facing the Mekong. That meeting discovered a consensus over several issues. In particular, development of the Mekong was needed to meet the needs of a growing human population but this development must incorporate the ecosystems within the region because of their great productivity. The four countries of the lower Mekong Basin (Thailand, Laos PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam) have seen so many successes and also many challenges in fulfilling such a vision.

In June, 14 years later, another meeting convened in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Over 130 people attended, including two American Ambassadors and three Cambodia Ministers, foreign experts, government officials, and many alumni of the University Network of Southeast Asia. In the ensuing presentations and discussions we did not solve the many issues facing the Mekong Basin. We did, however, collectively engage and advance many concepts. Compared to 1995, most participants in Siem Reap were from Southeast Asia. Impacts of dams were modeled and alternatives to these dams were broached. Officials pledged their attention, involvement and support. We compared experiences from the Mississippi River Basin (especially the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans) with recent history in the Mekong Delta. The goals of capacity building and sustainable development were alive and advancing.

Though the future of the Mekong is still emerging, it encompasses a future that we can yet shape. Involvement of growing numbers of people with expanding expertise and caring goals increases our chances of preserving sustainable development in the Mekong.

ICF’s 36th Anniversary festivities will focus on our unique headquarters—including our beautiful new Spirit of Africa outdoor crane exhibit and the ICF staff responsible for safeguarding cranes and their ecosystems around the world. We hope you will spend the day and join us in the evening to share friendship, accomplishments, and a special program at a grand crane exhibit.

Crane Items Under $10!

Benefit crane conservation by purchasing these unique crane items without breaking the bank. Choose from lined embroidered Napalese coin purses in three colors ($9.99 ea.); sets of three note cards created from children’s artwork from the Three White Cranes; Two Flyways, One Celebration project (set of 3 blank cards $4.99); or etched earrings in two colors ($9.99 pair). Visit www.craneshop.org or call our Gift Shop for personal attention at 608-356-9462 ext. 121.

Wish List

Electric Golf Carts are needed for our headquarters site. New or used in good condition. Please contact Site Manager Dave Chesky at 608-356-9462 ext. 120 to discuss details.

Celebrate ICF’s 36th Anniversary on Saturday, September 26, 2009!

Program: Good Egg Awards followed by an inspiration presentation by Dr. Rich Beillifus, retired, ICF Tules Lead on Water Issues for the Zumbebi and for Cranes and Their Wetlands Around the World.

For additional details about this event, visit the September Calendar of Events on the ICF website: www.savingcranes.org

ACCOMMODATIONS
For Saturday, September 26, 2009:

Glacier Canyon Lodge at the Wilderness Resort: 45 Hallman Road, Lake Delton, WI. Guest rooms: $115 (plus tax). Upgrade available. Contact Danielle Labit at 608-254-1073 or dhlabit@WildernessResort.com to book under the ICF Member block. Rate deadline: September 24, 2009.

Glacier Canyon Lodge:

For other lodging options, contact the Baraboo Area Chamber of Commerce at 800-227-2286 or www.baraboo.com; or the Wisconsin Dells Visitor and Convention Bureau, 800-223-3557, www.dells.com

RSVP by 9/15/09

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By Jeb Barzen, ICF Director of Field Ecology

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