saving the world’s tallest flying bird

innovative solutions for wetland protection

by rich beilfuss, president & ceo
and tran triet, southeast asia program director

since ancient times, sarus cranes, the world’s tallest flying bird, have been among the most revered birds in asia. they appear in epic poetry, buddhist scriptures, and are engraved on the 900-year-old temple walls of angkor watt in cambodia. in vietnam, they are the holy bird that carries the souls of the departed to heaven. and yet, they are in peril of disappearing across southeast asia due to the loss of their wetland habitat.

for more than thirty years, we have championed the charisma of sarus cranes to secure and restore these wetlands – creating new protected areas, helping local communities improve their livelihoods, and training future leaders in wetland ecology and management. in the name of sarus cranes, we safeguard some of the most diverse and productive wetlands on earth.

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pictured here are two of the 400 sarus cranes living in myanmar. they nest and feed in large, naturally flooded rice fields interspersed with wetlands. although revered, the sarus are in peril of disappearing because intensified rice production is displacing traditional rice farming, which results in the loss of their wetland homes.

our goal in myanmar is to preserve the mosaic of deeply flooded traditional rice paddies and wetlands by demonstrating that they have higher ecological and economic value. photo by darren diserens
An isolated population of about 400 Sarus Cranes occurs in Myanmar, mostly in the Ayeyarwady River Delta. Until recently, most of Myanmar was closed to outsiders. We are just beginning to learn about the status and needs of this population in Myanmar. To the west, Indian Sarus Cranes live year-round on small wetlands interspersed with wetlands that produce their favorite food. The trend is to convert the more traditional paddies to intensified agricultural systems that produce two to three rice crops per year through irrigation, wetland drainage, and heavy application of fertilizers and pesticides. Such intensification converted much of the Mekong Delta into a global rice bowl – but at a great cost to wetlands and their inhabitants.

Our goal in Myanmar is to preserve this mosaic of deeply flooded traditional rice paddies and wetlands by demonstrating that they have higher ecological and economic values and can provide more benefit to local farmers.

This summer in Myanmar, we advanced our goal by bringing leaders from two major agricultural development forces into the field with us – the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), an international fund dedicated to improving the lives of smallholder farmers and landless people in rural Myanmar, and the AWBA Corporation, Myanmar’s largest manufacturer and distributor of agricultural technology.

We delighted in watching their faces light with the joy and wonder of seeing their first Sarus Cranes towering above the green rice fields of the Ayeyarwady Delta. Binoculars aloft, cameras clicking, they began to “see” our vision for an agricultural future that doesn’t come at the expense of cranes and other wildlife.

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We are taking steps now to develop a pilot program together in this area to create a market for naturally flooded rice and to promote community-based ecotourism in this beautiful and diverse landscape. We will help advance other wildlife-compatible rural development, such as fishponds that are compatible with biodiversity goals. We can help Myanmar comply with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and Convention on Biodiversity targets. The pilot project will be part of a new Sarus Crane Action Plan for Myanmar, implemented in partnership with universities, government agencies, and NGOs.

We bring a wealth of experience to make this project successful. At Phu My, we developed a handicraft business that is improving livelihoods through the sustainable production and sale of handicrafts made from the dominant wetland sedge, Lepironia. This award-winning project has tripled local employment in the community and increased household income by 400%, while the Sarus Crane population using these wetlands has increased from fewer than ten to more than 200. Our SarusScape project in India demonstrates how traditional farming practices that focus on a diversity of crops – fruit trees, vegetable plots, fodder grasses, as well as cereal crops – can benefit people and wildlife in one of the most densely settled landscapes on earth. We have also demonstrated how alternative livelihoods and poverty reduction can help crane species in China and several African countries.

A great project needs a great team, and we are excited to have our Myanmar colleagues Myo Sandar Wun and Ko Lay Tin Aung Tun. Myo teaches zoology at Yangon University, with a focus on wetlands and waterbirds, and has spent hundreds of hours in the Ayeyarwady Delta with the Sarus. Her students are monitoring nests and feeding grounds, assessing habitat requirements, and evaluating emerging threats. KoLay is an ecological consultant who has helped many conservation organizations.

Can a commitment to naturally flooded rice save the world’s tallest flying bird in Myanmar and help communities fight their way out of poverty? We think so. The future of the Sarus Crane in Myanmar and across Southeast Asia will require our continued commitment to the innovative solutions for wetland protection and biodiversity conservation that we have championed for more than 30 years – solutions that benefit people and wildlife.

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Celebrating 30 Years of Achievement in Southeast Asia

It was midafternoon in 1989 when nearly 700 Sarus flew low over my head on their way to feed on leftover rice from the harvest – in an area heavily impacted by conflict during the Vietnam War. I was thrilled and understood why locals believed that such huge birds with powerful wings and voices could carry the souls of loved ones to heaven.

Over the past 30 years, it has been exciting to see how much has been achieved to help the Sarus in Cambodia and Vietnam, and by doing so, healed so many other wounds.

—George Archibald, Co-Founder

1988
First expedition to the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, following the rediscovery of Sarus Cranes. Began wetland restoration at Tram Chim.

1992
Established Cambodia Program with comprehensive surveys of northern Cambodia and Tonle Sap Lake Basin.

1998
Designation of Tram Chim National Park (22,000 acres), the largest protected wetland in the Mekong Delta.

1999
ICF spearheaded establishment of Ang Trapaeng Thmaw Sarus Crane Sanctuary (25,328 acres) in Cambodia.

2002
Established the Mekong Wetland University Network that now consists of 24 universities from 7 countries and has provided training for more than 300 university lecturers, researchers, and wetland managers.

2004
Established Phu My Lepironia Wetland Conservation Project in Vietnam introducing a new model of protected area management that combines biodiversity conservation with poverty alleviation.

2006
Dr. Tran Triet wins United Nations Dubai Award and the Equator Prize for impact, sustainability, partnership, and community empowerment.

2012
Completed research on persistent organic pollutants in over 400 wetlands of the Mekong Basin, with more than 80 scientists from 10 universities.

2015
Established Myanmar Program and began regular population and habitat monitoring in the Ayeyarwady Delta.

2016
Phu My became a provincial nature reserve, protecting one of the most important Sarus Crane sites in the Mekong Delta. By 2016, ICF helped establish 6 nature reserves and national parks in Cambodia and Vietnam.

2018
Partnered with IUCN to train wetland managers from 4 Mekong countries in climate change adaptation.

Photo by Pau Tang

Celebrating 30 Years of Achievement in Southeast Asia
In 1995, our Whooping Cranes moved into a new wetland exhibit – lovely and serene – and a favorite oasis for our visitors. A reimagining of the exhibits for our African cranes followed in 2009 and told the stories of the challenges they face in the wild. This month, we begin construction on one of the most exciting and ambitious transformations to take place at the International Crane Foundation as we create expanded natural exhibits for our remaining crane species. Our vision includes enclosures that are more natural for the birds, engaging interpretative experiences for visitors, and a new visitor center with an indoor viewing area of Sandhill Cranes. We are excited to create a fun and immersive environment to learn about cranes and our work around the world. Watch for news of our grand re-opening in the spring of 2020. To receive updates about our progress, visit our website at www.savingcranes.org and subscribe to our e-newsletter. Along with all the other important news from our organization, we will share updates about construction, special upcoming events, and maybe even a surprise or two!

A Change is in the Air

Thanks to our generous donors for making this dream a reality.

In recent years, there are still ways to reduce your tax burden while saving cranes. Gifts of appreciated stock, contributions from donor-advised funds, or Qualified Charitable Distributions from a qualified IRA will make a big difference for conservation and may benefit you as well. Please talk with your tax accountant or financial advisor to learn which option is best for your situation. For more information, visit savingcranes.org/support or call 608-356-9462 ext. 807.

The annual report is available to download at www.savingcranes.org/annual-report

The Bugle - Vol. 44, No. 4 - November 2018
Save the Date for an exclusive performance of...

Ajijaak on Turtle Island!

Al. Ringling Theater
in Baraboo, Wisconsin
January 24 and 25, 2019

In partnership with the Al. Ringling Theater, we are proud to present Ajijaak on Turtle Island. Heather Henson, International Crane Foundation Board Director, IBEX Puppetry Founder, and Ajijaak Co-Director, invites you to this transformative spectacle that follows a young Whooping Crane separated from her parents and forced to experience her first migration alone. You will not want to miss this amazing and inspirational show. Look for information about tickets and sponsorships on our website at www.savingcranes.org

Photo by Theo Cote