

Environmental Flows highlighted at Zambezi Stakeholders Forum

November 29 2007

VICTORIA FALLS – The subject of ecosystem functions and environmental flows attracted considerable attention at the Zambezi Stakeholders Forum in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe held from November 27th-29th. An environmental flow is the water regime provided within a river, wetland, or coastal zone to maintain ecosystems and their benefits where there are competing water uses and where flows are regulated. The aim is to have a close to natural flow regime that can maintain a river at the level of health depending on the judgments from society, which can vary between countries and regions.

Tabeth Chiuta, Regional Programme Coordinator, from the World Conservation Union Regional Office of Southern Africa (IUCN-ROSA), gave one of the opening presentations' on Articulating Wetland Functions and Governance Issues in the Zambezi River Basin. Tabeth recommended that it was important "to manage water infrastructure and developments to maintain ecosystem functions, and this means incorporating environmental flows." This set the scene and created interest for the sessions on ecosystem functions and environmental flows at the Forum.

In southern Africa and the Zambezi River Basin, water is often viewed as a physical product and not as an integral part of ecological processes taking place in the river basin. Water resources management including ensuring environmental flows is not always carried out as an integral part of managing ecosystems. Participants discussed why and how environmental flows can be incorporated into management plans.

The issues of trade-offs was also debated as there are many competing interests in the Zambezi Basin. This includes hydro-power generation, fisheries, agriculture, domestic use, industry, navigation, tourism and of course the environment. There are possibilities of releasing water from dams that could have minimal impact on hydropower generation. However, monitoring must be carried out to evaluate the effects of such releases on all stakeholder interests.

During discussion on the inputs to the integrated water resource management (IWRM) strategy for the Zambezi River Basin, participants emphasized the importance of awareness raising and building capacity on environmental flows. Such education and training should be at all levels from the national government level to communities so as to ensure buy in from all stakeholders.

One way to share ideas and experience as well as access tools for technical and policy implementation is through the newly established Global Environmental Flows Network (www.eflownet.org). A regional network for Southern Africa is also being developed.

The Zambezi Stakeholders Forum was convened for the third year running under the Zambezi Action Plan Project 6, Phase II (ZACPRO 6.2) - a Southern African Development Community (SADC) initiative. The World Conservation Union's Regional Office for Southern Africa (IUCN-ROSA) was one of several partners supporting the forum. Other partners included the Global Water Partnership Southern Africa (GWP SA), SADC/DANIDA Awareness Creation Component, the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC) and the Institute for Water and Sanitation Development

(IWSD). The aim of the Forum was to strengthen stakeholder engagement in the process of developing the Zambezi Basin IWRM Strategy.

For more information please contact:

Tabeth Chiuta, IUCN Regional Programme Coordinator for Southern Africa,
tabeth.chiuta@iucn.org

or

Katharine Cross, IUCN Water Programme Project Officer, Katharine.cross@iucn.org,
Ph: +41 22 999 0189