Tram Chim National Park

Alternative site name(s)
Dong Thap Muoi, Tram Chim Tam Nong, Tram Chim Sarus Crane Reserve
Province(s)
Dong Thap
Status
Decreed
Management board established
Yes
Latitude
10º40' - 10º47'N
Longitude
105º26' - 105º36'E
Bio-unit
05a – Mekong Delta

Conservation status

Tram Chim was designated as a 'Sarus Crane Reserve' by Dong Thap Provincial People's Committee in 1986, for the protection of Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* (Buckton *et al.* 1999). Between May 1991 and December 1992, an investment plan for Tram Chim Nature Reserve was prepared by Ho Chi Minh City Sub-FIPI, which gave the total area of the nature reserve as 7,612 ha (Anon. 1993a). On 2 February 1994, Decision No. 47/TTg of the Prime Minister and Official Letter 4991/KGVX decreed the establishment of a 7,500 ha nature reserve, called Tram Chim Tam Nong (MARD 1997, Pham Trong Thinh and Nguyen Chi Thanh 2000).

In September 1998, a revised investment plan for Tram Chim Nature Reserve was published by Ho Chi Minh City Sub-FIPI, which gave the total area of the nature reserve as 7,588 ha, comprising a strict protection area of 6,889 ha, a forest rehabilitation area of 653 ha and a administration and services area of 46 ha (Pham Trong Thinh 1998). Following the publication of this investment plan, Tram Chim was elevated to national park status by Decision No. 253/1998/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister, dated 29 December 1998. Tram Chim National Park is included on the 2010 list, with an area of 7,588 ha (FPD 1998).

Topography and hydrology

Tram Chim National Park supports one of the last remnants of the Plain of Reeds wetland ecosystem, which previously covered some 700,000 ha of Dong Thap, Long An and Tien Giang provinces (Buckton *et al.* 1999). The national park is located 19 km to the east of the Mekong River, at an elevation of about 1 m. The topography of the national park is flat, and slopes slightly to the east. In the past, several natural streams and rivers flowed from west to east, distributing water from the Mekong River to the Plain of Reeds. Now these streams and rivers have been replaced by a system of canals, a few of which flow through the national park (Pham Trong Thinh 1998).

Prior to canalization, the Plain of Reeds was seasonally flooded with standing water for continuous periods of up to seven months per year. Since canalization, floodwaters drain more rapidly, and the national park is flooded for less than six months per year. Water levels in the canals begin to rise in June, at the beginning of the rainy season. Between September and December, the national park is flooded by 2 to 4 m of water, with a peak in October (Pham Trong Thinh 1998).

Since the mid-1980s, 53 km of dykes fitted with sluices have been constructed around the national park, with the aim of impounding floodwater for longer, and reducing the lowering of the water table during the dry season. The national park is fragmented by canals into five management zones, the water level of each can be managed separately (Pham Trong Thinh 1998).

Biodiversity value

The vegetation of Tram Chim National Park comprises a mixture of seasonally inundated grassland, regenerating *Melaleuca* forest and open swamp. *Melaleuca* is distributed throughout the national park, both in plantations and in scattered patches in areas of grassland or open swamp. There are five widespread grassland communities at Tram Chim, of which the community dominated by *Eleocharis dulcis* and wild rice *Oryza rufipogon* is of the highest conservation significance. Tram Chim is one of the few places in the Plain of Reeds where this community is likely to survive to any extent, and, therefore, one of the most important sites for the conservation of wild rice. The other grassland communities are dominated by *Eleocharis ochrostachys*, *Panicum repens*, *Ischaemum rugosum* and *Vossia cuspidata*. Another vegetation type found at Tram Chim is lotus swamp, which is dominated by lotus *Nelumbo nucifera*, along with *Nymphaea nouchali*, *N. pubescens*, and *N. tetragona* (Buckton *et al.* 1999).

Large populations of waterbirds are found at the site, particularly in the winter when many thousands of waterfowl visit. Of particular importance is the population of Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* of the eastern subspecies *sharpii*, which spends the dry season in the park. Between 1989 and 1999, the maximum dry-season count of Sarus Cranes at Tram Chim ranged from 187 to 814 individuals, with a mean of 496 (BirdLife International 2001). In 2001, however, the numbers had dropped to around 50, while there had been a proportional increase in the number of birds at Kien Luong proposed nature reserve. It is hypothesised that the decrease in the Sarus Crane population at Tram Chim occurred not as a result of mortality but because birds that normally spent the dry season at Tram Chim spent the dry season of 2001 at Kien Luong.

In addition to Sarus Crane, the globally endangered Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* has also been recorded at Tram Chim National Park. The status of this secretive grassland specialist at Tram Chim is not fully known but it is likely that birds vacate the area during periods of substantial inundation in the late wet season. Local people believe that the species breeds at the site, and claim to have found both eggs and young of the species but this has yet to be confirmed. Two other globally near-threatened bird species have been recorded at Tram Chim: Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* and Asian Golden Weaver *Ploceus hypoxanthus* (BirdLife International 2001). Other wetland bird species of note recorded at Tram Chim include Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus*, Cotton Pygmy Goose *Nettapus coromandelianus*, Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* and Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* (Buckton *et al.* 1999).

Conservation issues

Tram Chim now has national park status, which confers a relatively high degree of protection, yet several threats remain. The frequent encroachment of local people into the national park to hunt and collect firewood is a conservation issue. Also, because the site is surrounded by rice cultivation, land-use activities outside the site can have a substantial impact on the integrity of the wetland ecosystem of the national park. Examples of such impacts are pollutant discharge and alteration of natural water levels (Buckton *et al.* 1999).

In 2000, the national park management board began constructing six canals inside the national park, the construction of which could have fragmented the natural habitat and altered the water regime, leading to changes in habitat. Fortunately, construction of the canals was halted after only two were completed.

The construction of canals is not, however, the major threat to the Sarus Crane population at Tram Chim. The most important factor in maintaining suitable habitat for this species is appropriate management of the water level at the site. In 2000, a partial draw-down was carried out, and, in 2001, a full draw-down took place, as a result of which there is a lot of evidence of natural vegetation recovery (J. Barzen pers. comm.). It is hoped that such appropriate

water-level management will result in an increase of the crane population at Tram Chim.

Tram Chim meets the criteria for designation as a site of international importance for wetland conservation under the Ramsar Convention. Indeed, in 2000, an information sheet on Tram Chim National Park was compiled by Ho Chi Minh City Sub-FIPI as a first step to designating the site as a Ramsar Site (Pham Trong Thinh and Nguyen Chi Thanh 2000).

Other documented values

Tram Chim National Park stores water during times of flood and releases it only slowly as floodwaters recede. In so-doing, the site helps to mitigate the negative effects of flooding on surrounding agricultural lands and agricultural communities (Pham Trong Thinh and Nguyen Chi Thanh 2000). Tram Chim National Park is one of the best developed and most well known sites for ecotourism in the Mekong Delta. The national park already has basic tourist facilities, and receives many visitors annually.

Related projects

The International Crane Foundation (ICF) have been active at Tram Chim since 1988. During this time, ICF have developed a management plan for the site, in collaboration with the national park management board, which they are currently supporting the implementation of.

IUCN are currently implementing a full-scale GEF project entitled *Mekong River Basin Wetland Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use*. The goal of this project is to assist countries in the Lower Mekong sub-region to incrementally develop new approaches to integrating the protection and sustainable use of wetland biodiversity with economic development. The project has selected demonstration sites in four different countries: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. In Vietnam, one of these demonstration sites is Tram Chim National Park, where the main demonstration activities will focus on ecotourism.

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