GMS Core Environment Program
Biodiversity Conservation Corridor Yunnan Pilot
Sino-Laos Transboundary Environmental Cooperation
**Background**

Located in the far south of Yunnan Province, Xishuangbanna Prefecture borders Lao PDR and Myanmar, and is nearby both Thailand and Vietnam. With its 966 km international border, Xishuangbanna is a strategic economic gateway to the Greater Mekong Sub-region countries in Southeast Asia.

It is also an ecological and cultural area of great importance. Located in the Mekong Headwaters landscape, Xishuangbanna has the largest tropical rainforest and monsoon forest in China and is a core area of the Sino-Burma biodiversity hotspot. Some 13 indigenous ethnic groups including Dai, Hani, and Bulan live in the prefecture, reflecting Yunnan’s status as China’s most culturally diverse province.

In recent decades, rapid economic development in Xishuangbanna has greatly improved the standard of living for its population, but has also brought with it significant environmental challenges. Much of the natural forest has been replaced by commercial agriculture including rubber and sugar plantations. With forest habitat lost, the impacts on biodiversity have been severe.

Some of the most important tropical forest remaining in the GMS is located in the border areas between Xishuangbanna and Lao PDR. The extensive old-growth forest there includes rare rainforest ecosystems of international significance and many iconic and endangered animal species, such as the Asian elephant population that regularly migrates between the two countries.

Provincial authorities from Yunnan and northern Lao PDR, as well as the communities living in the border areas must work together to protect these remaining forest areas and the amazing biodiversity they support. In recent years and with support from the GMS Core Environment Program and other development partners, transboundary cooperation on biodiversity conservation has been an important focus for Yunnan.
Timeline of Sino-Lao Biodiversity Cooperation History

- **1990s**: Mengla county and three northern provinces of Lao PDR established a long-term cooperation mechanism for preventing and controlling forest fires in border areas.

- **2006**: China and Lao PDR initiated cooperation to protect the Asian elephant, with support of the International Fund for Animal Welfare and Conservation International. This included joint monitoring and research activities as well as annual meetings to exchange information and experience.

- **2009**: China and Lao PDR established the 54,000 ha Shang Yong-Nam Ha joint protection area.

- **2011**: China and Lao PDR established the 55,000 ha Mengla-Phong Saly joint protection area. The two parties started to implement a biodiversity conservation corridor along the border.

- **2012**: The 36,000 ha Mohan-Oudomxay and 10,300 ha Mohan-Boten joint protection areas were established.

- **2014**: Eight separate protected areas in the two countries were joined by conservation corridors that created a 210,000 ha Sino-Lao Joint Protected Area which is 220km long and on average 5 km wide.

- **2015**: A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Yunnan and three northern provinces of Lao PDR, providing a framework for cooperation in the joint protection area. Key objectives included: capacity building for nature reserve staff, a socioeconomic survey of border villages, a biodiversity survey, joint patrolling and monitoring, public awareness-raising on environmental protection.

- **2016**: Environment officials from China, Lao PDR, and Myanmar begin drafting a joint strategy and action plan for managing the Mekong Headwaters transboundary biodiversity landscape.

Sino-Lao Joint Protection Area Sketch Map
Sino–Lao Transboundary Cooperation Activities

The GMS Core Environment Program’s Landscapes and Livelihood project has worked with Yunnan and Lao PDR provincial environmental agencies to strengthen cooperation. The project has focused on supporting joint protection of the Asian elephant, developing stronger transboundary cooperation mechanisms, and capacity building on transboundary cooperation.

Activities for Joint Protection of the Asian Elephant

Conducted a Sino-Lao joint field survey of Asian elephants in 2015, collecting information on the elephant population, distribution, migration paths, and habitat. This provided key information for joint protection planning.

An Asian elephant cross-border protection plan was completed in 2016. The plan details a spatial protection strategy and how Sino-Lao can cooperate to implement the plan.

Transboundary Cooperation Mechanisms

CEP has supported bilateral exchange and planning visits between provincial authorities in both countries, as well as regional knowledge exchange events on transboundary biodiversity collaboration involving the other GMS countries.

CEP helped facilitate the MOU development process between provincial authorities (signed in September 2015) to officially establish inter-government cooperation and a framework of priority activities.

Since 2015, CEP has been facilitating a process to develop joint strategy and action plans for three priorities transboundary landscapes in the GMS, including the Mekong Headwaters.

Capacity Building on Transboundary Cooperation

In June 2015, the China-ASEAN Environmental Cooperation Center organized a water pollution prevention and control training workshop for provincial officials from Lao PDR and China.

In June 2016, the China-ASEAN Environmental Cooperation Center held a Sino-Laos air pollution prevention and control forum in Xishuangbanna, providing training for officials from both countries.
The Sino-Lao joint protected area covers a large and extremely important forest ecosystem. Joint protection of the Asian elephant is resulting in better connected and healthier habitat for migration as well as helping the maintain and enhance biodiversity in the area. This has great significance for biodiversity conservation in the GMS.

The project activities have improved the conservation and research capacity of authorities from both countries, and facilitated knowledge and information exchange between them.

The establishment of the Sino-Lao joint protection area and formal cooperation mechanism are innovative models for the GMS, and the experience here has important lessons and significance for other areas of China as well as the wider GMS.
Outlook

The implementation of the GMS Core Environment Program built and enhanced the mutual trust and exchange in the region. Under the One Road and One Belt initiative, China and the other GMS countries are facing great challenges and opportunities of economic development and green transformation, and cross-border environment cooperation will be an important way to support the sustainability of regional development. As shown by its collaboration with Lao PDR on biodiversity conservation, Yunnan is an open and willing partner for collaborating with partners to explore transboundary cooperation with its neighbours mechanisms, support biodiversity conservation to address shared sustainable development challenges. Yunnan will continue to deepen and expand its regional environmental cooperation to build a better and greener future for the GMS.