

Scientists crack economic value of China's mangroves

ENVIRONMENT WRITER

NATURAL scientists and economists, trying to work out the economic value of ecosystems, have come up with an astonishing figure of US\$5.1 billion a year for the mangrove swamps in the South China Sea.

This was one of the projects discussed yesterday at the fourth Biennial International Waters Conference of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in the city.

John Pernetta, director of the UNEP/GEF project that did

the economic assessment, said the project, begun in 2002, had charged nine economists with determining the regional value of certain ecosystems in the South China Sea.

"They started by asking the biologists to identify the goods and services the ecosystems provided. The economists then assembled data for each of the goods and services, and standardised everything to a single currency - US dollars per hectare - and to a single price index.

The biologists listed 24 goods that mangroves yielded, which included timber, firewood, poles, charcoal, fruit, leaves and palm fronds for thatching and fodder.

"They listed nine 'services' provided by mangroves, including ecotourism, providing a nursery for marine fish, the protection of the coast and aesthetic value, which they derived from land prices which were higher for properties with a view of the mangroves.

They calculated the economic value of the mangroves in the separate countries, and then worked out a regional value from the total number of hectares of mangrove in the South China Sea.

"The regional economic value of the 1.8 million hectares of mangroves was calculated at US\$5.1bn.

The cost of managing the entire mangroves ecosystem was US\$300 million a year between all the countries in the region.

Pernetta said this calculation was "more than enough to convince politicians" that the

benefits of investing in management of the mangroves far outweighed the costs.

"These figures took four years to develop, so they are not used in decision-making yet, but I believe they will be used in the future," Pernetta said.

Development was inevitable and could not be stopped, he said. Countries needed to generate income, and had to balance this with the need to conserve. "There were many different ways of measuring the economic value of eco-systems.