



RAMSAR COP7 HIGHLIGHTS TUESDAY, 11 MAY 1999

Delegates at COP7 met in Plenary to hear overviews of implementation of the Convention in Africa, Eastern and Western Europe, the Neotropics and North America, as well as a number of special presentations. They convened for an additional evening session to consider a draft resolution on regional categorization of countries.

REGIONAL OVERVIEWS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Robert Watson, Director of the Environment Department at the World Bank, highlighted the World Bank's efforts to mainstream the environment into its development projects. Noting significant progress in this regard, he underscored the need to determine the direct use value of ecosystems. He emphasized the importance of NGO and local community involvement in wetland management. He highlighted an increasing willingness among Bank clients to borrow for biodiversity projects and noted that the GEF's Medium-Sized Grants are particularly appropriate for such projects. He affirmed the Bank's commitment to working with clients from Ramsar and other environmental conventions. He highlighted the deleterious effects of climate change on wetlands and, in response to a question from the floor on loans for shrimp farming, said the Bank has been developing criteria for sustainable shrimp aquaculture.

Anada Tiega, Regional Coordinator for Africa, presented an overview of implementation of the Convention and the Strategic Plan for 1997-2002 in Africa. He noted significant progress made and identified challenges to implementation, including, *inter alia*, how to: increase the membership of African countries to the Convention; define suitable methodologies for wetland inventories; coordinate between different sectors that impact on wetlands; operationalize the synergies between Ramsar and other international processes; make river basin organizations more responsive to user needs; define a common approach to manage shared wetlands; address wetland degradation at the source; and implement wise use practices. He stressed that wise use and communications are inseparable, and underscored the use of inventories as a basis for decision making. He identified the major threats to wetlands as inappropriate land-use practices, the increased prevalence of invasive species and pollution.

In ensuing discussion, delegates raised a number of issues, including: involvement and possible compensation of local populations living in wetland areas in enforcement of policies; the need for integrated approaches to wetland management; the need for legal and institutional frameworks, availability of technical and financial resources and integrated planning approaches to support Convention implementation; the need for capacity building; the impacts of socio-political problems on wetlands; and the role of NGOs.

Tim Jones, Regional Coordinator for Europe, presented the regional overview of implementation in Western and Eastern Europe. He highlighted achievements in implementing the wise use guidelines in the region, including: wide application of environmental impact assessment; high priority assigned to restoration; and significant progress in implementing wetland policies and establishing national committees. Challenges in implementing wise use include the need for better integration of wetland policies into other sectors, mainstreaming of economic valuation, and stronger links with the private sector. Regarding communication and institutional capacities, he reported progress in implementing wetland education and public awareness (EPA) programmes, particularly those run by NGOs, and an increase in training opportunities. However, EPA programmes in Eastern Europe require greater government support, and there is a need to review training needs and establish new training courses. He highlighted a large number of designated Ramsar sites and significant progress in preparing management plans, but observed that management plans have yet to be initiated for many sites, and most CPs have not completed full inventories of their wetlands. He identified cooperation at national and regional levels on implementation of related environmental conventions and mechanisms for coordination between them. He said there are a number of transboundary sites and initiatives in the region, but stressed the need for better integration of wetland conservation into management of transboundary rivers.

Several delegates pointed to additions to the Ramsar List and collaborative wetland conservation activities in the Eastern and Western European regions. Some observed that although several countries may lack distinct wetland policies, their incorporation within national biodiversity strategies, environmental policies or forest plans may better ensure wise use. Delegates called for priority attention to, *inter alia*: assessing and mitigating wetland threats such as toxic pollution and mining wastes; restoring wetlands; supporting indigenous people's control over wetland resources; and increasing representation of peatlands, seagrass beds and coral reefs.

Geoffrey Howard, Programme Coordinator, IUCN East Africa, made a presentation on invasive species. He outlined their effects on wetlands and other water-dependent ecosystems, including: alteration of flow, water quality and downstream wetland functions; reduction of water quantity; alterations in fisheries; increase in human health hazards; reduction in wetland species abundance and diversity; and alteration of wetland species population integrity, community structure and distribution. He described methods of controlling invasive species. Highlighting the key roles of governments, NGOs, civil society and the international community in combating invasive species, he stressed the need for: awareness of the seriousness of wetland invasions; political will to act on potential or actual invasions; policies and regulations to implement management mechanisms;



research and monitoring; local action and community responses; and novel solutions to invasive species control. He urged the Ramsar Secretariat to cooperate with other organizations, document case studies, develop international perspectives and rally support to manage wetland invasions and prevent new infestations.

Nestor Windevoxhel, COP7 Special Advisor, presented an overview of Convention implementation in the Neotropical region. He said the main achievements since COP6 include increased attention to the conservation and rehabilitation of degraded wetlands, actions to enhance EPA, and development of management plans for one-third of the Neotropical Ramsar sites. He identified priorities for action, including: promoting transboundary and regional actions; strengthening efforts to integrate conservation and wise use of wetlands in planning and management at all levels; encouraging inclusion of wetland themes in school curricula; and developing comprehensive strategies to complete the identification of training needs and adopt a coordinated approach to sharing training resources and expertise.

Dimas Arcia, Sub-Administrator General, Panamanian National Authority of the Environment, presented an initiative to establish a Regional Ramsar Centre for Training and Research on Wetlands in the Western Hemisphere in Panama. He explained that its aim is to support implementation of Ramsar, and drew delegates' attention to the draft resolution before COP7 on the Centre's creation.

Geke Faber, State Secretary for Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries of the Netherlands, called for political will to develop a new vision for Ramsar. Noting the impressive growth in the number of CPs, she cautioned against complacency. She said COP7 presented an opportunity to maintain momentum and called for: a broader perspective for the conservation and wise use of wetlands; an evaluation of the state of Convention implementation; an integrated approach toward relevant conventions; a stronger focus on connecting with and involving the public in wetland preservation; and increased efforts to develop concrete programmes and projects.

Jorge Jiménez Ramón, Biologist, Organization of Tropical Studies, gave a presentation on wetland conservation and sustainable use in Costa Rica. He provided an overview of the extent and diversity of wetlands in the country. He said many wetlands are threatened by expansion of agricultural activities. He highlighted the functional values of wetlands, such as flood control and wildlife refuge, and stressed the need to incorporate these values into national accounts. He noted the recent completion of a national inventory of wetlands, a national wetland strategy and wetland management guidelines. He also noted increased public awareness of the importance of wetlands. He underscored the need for: training of site administrators; technical and financial resources for wetland management; integrative legislation; regional planning processes; and monitoring programmes.

Bill Phillips, Deputy Secretary-General of the Convention, presented progress in implementing the Convention in the North American region, including, *inter alia*: a wide range of EIA and wetland-related policy instruments; integrated and watershed approaches; experimentation with assessments and economic valuation of wetlands; wetland restoration initiatives; institutional capacities and cooperation; bilateral agreements on migratory birds; and donor assistance for wetlands projects. He highlighted potential models for Convention implementation, such as the US Clean Water Act, which targets a net gain in wetland area by 2005; the North American Waterfowl Management Plan; and coordination requirements between Canada's Ramsar focal point and its development assistance agency. He noted that the state of inventories globally is an "embarrassment" to Ramsar, and highlighted challenges to implementation in the region, including to: finalize reviews of national policy frameworks and site management plans; continue rehabilitation efforts; complete inventories; build national networks of Ramsar sites; pursue transboundary site designations; and improving information sharing.

REGIONAL CATEGORIZATION OF COUNTRIES

Louise Lakos, Chair of the Standing Committee (SC), introduced the document on regional categorization of countries and the composition, roles and responsibilities of the SC (COP7 DOC.15.1). She drew

delegates' attention to two bracketed paragraphs. One contains two options for categorization of regional groups (the SC Chair's proposal for Africa, Central and South America and the Caribbean, Europe, North America, Asia, and Oceania, and Iran's proposal for regional categorization as exists within the UN system – Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Others, and Latin America and the Caribbean). The other bracketed paragraph has two options relating to procedures for admitting new CPs into regional groups: the SC Chair's proposal, which prefers that CPs that are near their allocated regional boundary can exercise their sovereign right to participate within alternative regions, and Iran's proposal, which prefers continued deliberation on the preparation of an indicative allocation of present and future CPs.

URUGUAY, on behalf of the Neotropical region, proposed that the SC include an additional alternate representative from their region, and that the SC's composition be determined not only by the quantitative criterion of the number of CPs per region but also by qualitative criteria. BRAZIL supported these proposals, and recommended that the STRP, in consultation with the SC, develop qualitative criteria for regional representation and present these to COP8 for consideration.

Regarding regional categorization, IRAN explained that a decision on categorization should consider regional and political realities and the interests of States concerned. MALAYSIA, PAKISTAN and SYRIA supported the Iranian proposal to use the UN system of regional grouping as it is a well-established practice. GERMANY, URUGUAY, NICARAGUA, AUSTRALIA, SLOVENIA and MACE- DONIA supported the SC Chair's proposal advocating groupings based on bio-geographic concerns.

On procedures to admit new CPs, The EU proposed amending the text to allow CPs located near boundaries of regions to participate at their own request and based on the existence of similar natural conditions within an alternative region, provided that the STRP does not object to the preconditions for the request.

IRAN proposed establishing an open-ended working group to resolve the categorization issue. VENEZUELA, CANADA and ISRAEL instead called for a vote on the two options. MEXICO, supported by EGYPT, SYRIA, IRELAND and IRAN, proposed serious consideration of the EU amendments and urged delegates to seek consensus. The Chair concluded that informal consultations should proceed without a working group and that a decision be taken by no later than Thursday morning, even if voting becomes the only option.

IN THE CORRIDORS

Funding issues could cause controversy today when the sensitive question of the Convention's budget for the next triennium arises. While many agree that the budget needs to be increased, discord is anticipated regarding the question of how much is required, where exactly it would be allocated, and, more importantly, who will supply it. The Standing Committee has taken a realistic approach by proposing only a modest funding increase. Proponents of a more substantial increase point to the Convention's broadening scope and miniscule current budget compared to other environmental conventions. However, with many developed countries facing budgetary squeezes that allow little room for increased contributions, these arguments seem set to fall on deaf ears.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: Delegates will convene in Plenary from 9:30 am-1:00 pm and 3:00-6:30 pm in the Salones La Paz to review implementation of the Convention in the Oceania and Asian regions, discuss issues arising from resolutions and recommendations of previous COPs, and consider proposals for COP7 resolutions and recommendations, the Work Plan and Bureau budget for 2000-2002, and the report of the Credentials Committee.