



RAMSAR COP7 HIGHLIGHTS SATURDAY, 15 MAY 1999

Delegates at COP7 participated in Technical Sessions on Tools for Assessing and Recognizing Wetland Values in the morning and on the Framework for Regional and International Cooperation Regarding Wetlands in the afternoon. A contact group also met to conduct informal consultations on the status of Yugoslavia in the Convention.

TOOLS FOR ASSESSING AND RECOGNIZING WETLAND VALUES

Gordana Beltram (Slovenia), Chair of the Technical Session, highlighted the need for broader assessment of policies, programmes and plans to ensure that they do not promote or allow destruction of wetlands. She underscored the need to go beyond narrow environmental impact assessment and include social and economic impacts of converting wetlands.

Andrea Bagri, IUCN Economic Services Unit, made a presentation on Ramsar and Impact Assessment. She said impact assessments have been identified as key tools for assisting countries in implementing various conventions, including Ramsar and those on biodiversity, migratory species, and desertification. She outlined: the role of strategic environmental assessments; the linkages between impact assessments and wetland monitoring and assessment; the use of impact assessments as opportunities to incorporate economic values in decision making; and collaboration between Ramsar and other biodiversity-related conventions. Noting that impact assessment processes provide an opportunity to bring local and indigenous communities into decision making, she said CPs should seek to strengthen participatory procedures.

Max Finlayson, Environmental Research Institute of the Super-Vising Scientist, discussed the Wetland Risk Assessment Framework. He noted the STRP's work on early warning systems to predict and assess change in ecological character. He said wetland risk assessment involves a series of steps to help predict and monitor adverse change and should identify the nature, effects, seriousness, extent and potential risks. He explained that such assessment enables the formulation of risk management and reduction strategies and facilitates monitoring. He said indicators should be anticipatory, predictive, sensitive, cost-effective, diagnostic, socially relevant, non-destructive, and applied in a timely manner.

Nick Davidson, Wetlands International, presented a global review of wetland resources and priorities for wetland inventory. He said the review's key finding was that inventories are incomplete and difficult to undertake. Only 7% of countries currently have adequate national wetland inventories; a majority have partial inventories, some have no inventory coverage of their wetlands, and inventories generally contain little information on wetlands' status and trends. He stated that

a wholly reliable estimate of global wetland resources cannot yet be made using existing inventories. The review made several recommendations, including to: prioritize national inventories where they are inadequate; conduct basic inventories prior to collecting management-oriented information; develop global standardized methods; establish a central repository for inventories; and extend support for the completion of the global review of wetland resources and priorities for wetland inventory.

Suzanne Palminteri, Biodiversity Conservation Specialist, discussed how user-friendly geographic information systems (GIS) can assist wetland site-level managers to assimilate and interpret data for addressing management questions. She noted that, in contrast to costly and complicated high-end GIS technology, site-level GIS is available for less than US\$1000, simple to teach and learn, and valuable for spatial management of wetlands and associated biodiversity. She described how user-friendly GIS can: guide wetland resource and land-use planning through data layering at multiple spatial scales; answer specific management questions such as where to focus research, ecotourism and protection efforts; conduct spatial analyses such as measuring and intersecting information on species and habitat distributions; monitor and model wetland habitat changes using field-generated data; and communicate key relationships and situations to site-managers, local communities, politicians and the public.

Several delegates noted problems associated with interpreting satellite imagery of wetlands, maintaining complex and costly GIS technology, and failing to take local community knowledge of wetlands seriously. Delegates watched a video on karsts in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico and the environmental impacts of tourism.

Following these presentations, delegates met in regionally-based discussion groups to consider draft resolutions relevant to this technical session. The need to complete and document additional and suitable standard protocols for wetland data gathering and handling was emphasized in discussions on the Wetland Risk Assessment Framework. Regarding Ramsar and impact assessment, delegates discussed whether to replace the term "economic valuation" with "impact assessment," and the need for context-specific methodology. On priorities for wetland inventory, delegates considered: focusing on future action by highlighting inventories of wetland sites with potential for restoration; giving priority to wetland types identified as being high risk or "with poorest information"; promoting common international standards; and including reference to the Wetlands for the Future initiative as a source of funding.

FRAMEWORK FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION REGARDING WETLANDS

Nayon Moses Bilijo (Ghana), Chair of the Technical Session, said the Convention is an act of international cooperation that sets CPs on new paths and presents new challenges.

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Javier Beltran, World Conservation Monitoring Centre, presented the preliminary findings of a GIS analysis on the world's shared wetlands and river basins. He said the project sought to identify Ramsar sites that are vulnerable, cross-border or within close proximity of a border, and located within international catchment basins. It also assessed the need for international cooperation directed at broad areas of wetland habitat. He said the results revealed that 267 of the 955 Ramsar sites are within shared catchment basins; 191 of these were ranked as significantly vulnerable and 35 within close proximity of a border. He highlighted areas requiring further work, including: analysis of the levels of risks in vulnerable sites; assessment of the extent of wetlands designated as protected areas; prioritization of coastal marine wetland habitats; and assessment of the management regimes of cross-border sites.

Maureen Ballesterio, International Network of Basin Organizations, spoke on international cooperation through river basin commissions. She highlighted gaps that need to be filled in the international legal framework on shared water resources. She recommended expanding international legal provisions by, *inter alia*: promoting the principles of polluter pays and limited territorial sovereignty with respect to water resources; developing an International Water Charter; establishing a means of appeal and reconciliation through an International Water Tribunal under the aegis of a UN agency and the International Court of Justice; and forming a global forum for international river protocols and commissions through gradual approaches that consider technical issues prior to political ones.

TURKEY expressed its reservation to the guidelines on transboundary watercourses, stating that they are politically sensitive and a "different playground" than Ramsar's domain of transboundary wetlands. Bill Phillips, Ramsar Deputy Secretary-General, read aloud COP6 Strategic Objective 7.11 on cooperation for transfrontier wetlands and shared river basins and water catchments and Article 5 of the Convention, which obligates CPs to cooperate on wetlands and water systems that extend into territories of more than one CP.

Stevie Monna, Botswana National Conservation Strategy Agency, discussed the framework for international cooperation to manage the Okavango River, shared by Angola, Botswana and Namibia. He said the Okavango Delta is one of the world's largest remaining inland wetland ecosystems and is threatened by water use for development, the absence of a comprehensive management plan, overgrazing, and post-civil war resettlement. He said Botswana is collaborating with the Ramsar Bureau to develop a delta management plan that can be integrated into a plan for the entire Okavango Basin. He described the Permanent Okavango River Basin Commission (OKACOM) established by the riparian states to coordinate and collaborate on sustainable management. He said OKACOM has completed a transboundary diagnostic assessment as part of its baseline data development and is seeking GEF support for a basin-wide environmental assessment and integrated management plan.

Cheah Kong Wai, SC Representative for Asia, presented guidelines for international cooperation under the Convention. He noted a growing recognition of the value of multi-State river basin management commissions, and said the guidelines seek to foster such commissions to facilitate cooperation. The guidelines also encourage CPs to, *inter alia*: identify all shared wetlands and river basins and develop appropriate cooperative management arrangements; participate in regional frameworks on shared wetland-dependent species; harmonize national implementation of environmental conventions; support training of wetland practitioners; encourage site twinning to accelerate sharing of expertise; review all trade in wetland products to ensure sustainable harvesting; establish cooperative arrangements with relevant CITES and CBD focal points; urge the assessment of impacts of foreign investment proposals; and promote codes of conduct for the private sector.

Faizal Parish, Global Environment Centre, outlined the results of a project to examine existing donor arrangements for wetland conservation and wise use. The project highlights a major decrease in bilateral funding since 1992, an increase in multilateral support to wetlands, an increase in the number of environmental projects, and the integration

of environmental considerations into donors' sectoral strategies. He said the analysis was constrained by slow responses from the development assistance community and the lack of reporting systems that specifically categorize wetland conservation projects. He outlined recommendations and guidelines for enhancing and monitoring funding for wetland conservation and its consideration in sectoral strategies and development programmes, and building the capacities of development assistance agencies and recipients. He underscored the need for a coordination mechanism between the Bureau, national Ramsar focal points and development agencies.

B. Y. Ofori-Frimpong (Ghana) reported on the deliberations of a focus group on international cooperation. He explained that Turkey had difficulty with certain terminology and submitted several amendments to delete references to management of shared river basins and to alter references to "transboundary (international) wetlands" to "transboundary and international" wetlands. Norway said it could accommodate Turkey's concerns if the document was considered as a COP7 recommendation rather than a resolution. Other amendments included a reference to indigenous people's expertise and a suggestion to pursue Memoranda of Understanding with specific UN agencies.

Following these presentations, delegates met in regionally-based discussion groups to consider the draft resolution on guidelines for international cooperation under the Convention. Support was expressed for the Norwegian proposal to consider the document as a recommendation rather than as a resolution. Many disagreed with Turkey's contention that shared river basins do not fall under Ramsar's purview and rejected their proposal to delete text on management of shared river basins. Some remarked that Ramsar should not deal with trade or international watercourses, and suggested deleting references to CITES and the convention on international watercourses. Others considered CITES to be a key Ramsar partner and inadequate for dealing with sustainable harvesting of all wetland-derived products.

CONTACT GROUP ON THE STATUS OF YUGOSLAVIA IN THE CONVENTION

A contact group conducted informal negotiations on the status of Yugoslavia in the Convention. Participants discussed a draft resolution, tabled by nine countries, that seeks to clarify the position of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and determine whether it is the automatic successor of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, and whether it is entitled to represent the CP to Ramsar. Participants observed that the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia has ceased to exist and has been replaced by five successors. Noting that successor States in general continue to be bound by a predecessor's treaty obligations, the draft states that three of the successor States are CPs and another is in the process of becoming one. It calls on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to clarify its status in the Convention as other successor States have done or are doing. Participants expressed a desire to resolve the issue, however, it was noted that since all key CPs were not present, further negotiation would be required.

IN THE CORRIDORS

Delegates have been praising the Bureau's experiment of combining technical session presentations with regionally-based consultations. Ramsar newcomers have found them to be "safe havens" for learning about the Convention's new directions and expressing their views in an informal setting. Some delegates said they had expected regional recommendations to be difficult to pull together, but were pleased to discover that drafting groups have been successful in integrating regionally-based amendments. Many delegates have expressed satisfaction with the technical sessions, and the process of regionally-based consultations seems to have conferred a sense of ownership of the COP resolutions.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: Delegates will convene in Plenary from 9:30 am-1:00 pm and 3:00-7:00 pm in the Salones La Paz to consider the reports of the technical sessions, appoint the members of the STRP, and adopt COP7 resolutions and recommendations.