



SEVENTH MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF CONTRACTING PARTIES TO THE RAMSAR CONVENTION ON WETLANDS 10-18 MAY 1999

The Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP7) to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) begins today, Monday, 10 May 1999, at the Sheraton-Herradura Conference Centre in San José, Costa Rica. COP7 will focus on the interrelations between human societies and wetland habitats, and the general theme of the Conference will be "People and Wetlands –The Vital Link."

Approximately 1500 participants are expected to attend COP7, including officials from at least 140 countries, several national and international NGOs, representatives of other convention secretariats and intergovernmental institutions, donor agencies and wetland scientists. The agenda includes five technical sessions on: Ramsar and Water; National Planning for Wetland Conservation and Wise Use; Involving People at all Levels in the Conservation and Wise Use of Wetlands; Tools for Assessing and Recognizing Wetland Values; and Frameworks for Regional and International Cooperation Regarding Wetlands. COP7 will also adopt a series of resolutions on policy, programme and budgetary questions that will advance the work of the Convention into the next century. Delegates will consider several substantive agenda items, including: review of Convention implementation in each region; issues arising from resolutions and recommendations of previous meetings of the COP; the Convention Work Plan and Ramsar budget for 2000-2002; and consideration and adoption of proposals for resolutions and recommendations submitted by Parties and/or the Standing Committee.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONVENTION

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands), was signed in Ramsar, Iran, on 2 February 1971, and came into force on 21 December 1975. The Convention provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. It is the only environmental treaty dealing with a particular ecosystem.

There are presently 114 Contracting Parties to the Convention. There are 977 wetland sites, totaling 71 million hectares, designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance ("Ramsar List"). Contracting Parties meet every three years to assess progress of the Convention and wetland conservation, share

knowledge and experience on technical issues, and plan for the next triennium. There have been six Meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COPs) since the founding of the Convention: COP1 in Cagliari, Italy (24-29 November 1980); COP2 in Groningen, the Netherlands (7-12 May 1984); COP3 in Regina, Canada (27 May-5 June 1987); COP4 in Montreux, Switzerland (27 June-4 July 1990); COP5 in Kushiro, Japan (9-16 June 1993); and COP6 in Brisbane, Australia (19-27 March 1996). COP7 will mark the first time that a Ramsar COP has been convened in a developing country.

Parties to the Convention commit themselves to: designate at least one site that meets the Ramsar Criteria for inclusion in the Ramsar List and ensure maintenance of the ecological character of each Ramsar site; include wetland conservation within national land-use planning in order to promote the wise use of all wetlands within their territory; establish nature reserves on wetlands and promote training in wetland research, management and wardening; and consult with other Parties about Convention implementation, especially with regard to trans-frontier wetlands, shared water systems, shared species and development projects affecting wetlands.

In addition to the COP, the subsidiary bodies of the Convention include the Standing Committee (SC), the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), and the Secretariat. The SC includes Regional Representatives of Ramsar's seven regions (Asia, Oceania, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa, North America and the Neotropics), and meets annually. The STRP provides guidance on key issues related to the application of the Convention. The Secretariat, based in Gland, Switzerland, coordinates the day-to-day activities of the Convention.

MEETINGS OF THE CONVENTION'S SUBSIDIARY BODIES SINCE COP6

STANDING COMMITTEE: The SC has met four times since COP6: the 18th meeting (SC18) convened immediately after COP6 on 27 March 1996; SC19 from 29 October-1 November 1996; SC20 from 29 September-3 October 1997; and SC21 from 19-24 October 1998.

At SC18, the Committee established a permanent Subgroup on Finance, which has convened on the day preceding each SC meeting to review financial and administrative matters on the agenda and prepare recommendations to the SC. At SC19, the Committee, *inter alia*: approved new Operational Guidelines for the Small Grants Fund (SGF); agreed that 2 February should be recognized as World Wetland Day beginning in 1997; approved the triennial work plan for the



STRP; endorsed the establishment of and terms of reference for a Mediterranean Wetlands Committee under the aegis of the Convention; and decided to establish a Subgroup to respond to the COP6 mandate on the "Consideration of overall cost reduction and in particular of possible relocation of the Ramsar Bureau and its operations."

At SC20, the Committee, *inter alia*: approved the Criteria and Procedure for the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award; reviewed the recommendations of the third meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) on continuing cooperation between the CBD and the Ramsar Convention and supported increased cooperation at the national level in implementation of the two conventions; approved the STRP's proposal to reorganize the existing Ramsar Criteria for designation of wetlands of international importance into two groups (representativeness/uniqueness and biodiversity) and asked the STRP to investigate the Criteria further, especially with regard to criteria based on cultural values and benefits; agreed to establish a subgroup to review existing regional categorization procedures and suggest revisions or a new process; established a subgroup on COP7 and approved the draft agenda for COP7; approved a revised format for National Reports; and decided to develop criteria for the admission of new NGO partners.

At SC21, the Committee devoted considerable attention to COP7 preparations. The SC, *inter alia*: decided to recommend that the STRP's composition and membership mirror the regional composition of the SC; endorsed proposals or processes to generate draft recommendations or resolutions for COP7 on a number of issues; endorsed in principle the Convention's draft Outreach Programme and the proposal to urge Contracting Parties to establish national Education, Public Awareness and Communications focal points; and endorsed the Joint Work Plan with CBD, the planned signature of a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Convention to Combat Desertification, and continued work on the draft Guidelines for international cooperation being developed for COP7. The Committee discussed at length the status of Yugoslavia in the Convention, and adopted the decision to instruct the Bureau to request that the depositary of the Convention clarify the status of the current Federal Republic of Yugoslavia with regard to the Ramsar Convention, based on the stipulations of the Convention's text and in light of international law, and to prepare a paper transmitting the results of this clarification for COP7.

At SC21 it was also agreed to: present for COP7 consideration a minimum core budget for the next triennium, with a 5% increase the first year, 2% the next, and 2% the next; recommend to COP7 that a minimum annual contribution of Contracting Parties should be established at 1000 Swiss Francs as of 1 January 2000; and recommend to COP7 that the Convention continue to use the UN scale of assessments for determining Contracting Parties' financial contributions to the Convention's budget. The Committee also selected the 1999 laureates for the Wetland Conservation Award; adopted a new Ramsar logo; and supported the Panamanian Government's initiative to create a Ramsar Center for Training and Research in the Western Hemisphere.

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL REVIEW PANEL: The STRP has held three meetings since COP6: STRP5 from 15-20 June 1996; STRP6 from 15-17 April 1997; and STRP7 from 22-23 April 1998. At STRP5, the seven-member Panel defined its work plan and prioritized its tasks. It determined that its top priority tasks are the review of Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance, ecological character, and changes in ecological character. Its medium priority tasks are consideration of wetlands restoration/rehabilitation and guidelines for management planning, and lower priority

tasks include economic valuation of wetlands, global review of wetland resources, strengthening links with other conventions and agencies, and the Ramsar sites database.

The STRP discussed the Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance at all three meetings. It decided to revise the criteria as follows: criteria based on representativeness, rare or unique wetland types; and criteria based on biodiversity, with three sub-criteria based on species and ecological communities, waterbirds, and fish. The Panel debated at length the possibility of establishing a third cluster of criteria dealing with significance of wetlands for humans, and concluded that development of such criteria was not considered appropriate, and issues related to significance for humans would be best addressed in the revised guidelines on the Convention's wise use concept. In cooperation with the Bureau and others, the STRP developed a "vision" for the Ramsar List, revised guidelines to complement the revised Criteria, and a comprehensive glossary of terms.

The STRP assessed the working definitions of "ecological character" and "change in ecological character" adopted at COP6, and recommended revised definitions for consideration by COP7. The Panel discussed an assessment of the adequacy of the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for providing baseline data to describe and monitor change in ecological character, concluded that the RIS is inadequate for recording such change, and recommended that rather than revising it, a new instrument should be designed.

On restoration/rehabilitation of wetlands, the Panel focused on evaluating the significant amount of work already done in this area and recommending ways of handling wetland restoration and rehabilitation. At STRP7, the Panel considered a draft paper that described ecological, technical, ethical and socio-economic considerations and five possible outputs (preservation, conservation, rehabilitation, reconstruction and nature development) that need to be considered in wetland restoration and rehabilitation. The output from this work has been incorporated into the background paper for the COP7 Technical Session II and the associated draft decision.

On the Management Planning Guidelines, the STRP discussed the conclusions of two questionnaires distributed to and completed by Contracting Parties on the relevance, application, training assistance and viability of the Guidelines, the process applied in developing and updating management plans, and implementation and constraints to implementation of management plans.

On strengthening links with other conventions, the STRP identified a number of international bodies that the Ramsar Convention could link with in promoting the latter's objectives, including, *inter alia*: the CBD's SBSTTA; the GEF's Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel; the Scientific Council of the Convention on Migratory Species; the World Heritage Convention; the World Water Council; the Global Water Partnership; and the International Coral Reef Initiative. The STRP reviewed reports on the status of the Ramsar database and provided comments for improvement, agreed on a revised RIS and concluded that the RIS is adequate for the purpose for which it was established. It also recommended that the updating of the RIS should be applied to all Ramsar sites designated before 31 December 1990 in order to maintain synchronization with the three-year cycle of COPs.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

OPENING PLENARY: Delegates at COP7 will meet in an opening Plenary from 10:00 am -1:00 pm and from 3:00-6:30 pm in the Salones La Paz at the Sheraton-Herradura Conference Centre to hear opening statements, take care of procedural matters, and consider the Reports of the Chair of the Standing Committee, the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, and the Secretary-General.