



## RAMSAR COP7 HIGHLIGHTS THURSDAY, 13 MAY 1999

Delegates at COP7 met in Plenary in the morning to take a decision on the draft resolution on regional categorization. The Technical Session on Ramsar and Water convened in the afternoon, and a contact group conducted informal consultations on the Bureau work plan and budget in the evening.

### PLENARY

COP7 Vice President Veit Koester (Denmark) chaired the Plenary consideration of regional categorization. He reported that intensive informal consultations had failed to produce consensus. He presented the draft resolution and its bracketed text, which contains two options. The first, the Standing Committee (SC) Chair's proposal, employs the geographic regions of Africa, Asia, the Neotropics, Europe, North America, and Oceania, and states that Contracting Parties (CPs) near the boundaries of the allocated region can exercise their sovereign rights to participate within an alternative region upon formal notification to the COP. The second option, Iran's proposal, uses the UN system's regional categorization of Africa, Asia and Pacific, Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Others, and Latin America and the Caribbean, and recommends that the Subgroup on regional categorization continue deliberations on preparation of an indicative allocation of Parties. He reminded delegates that on Tuesday evening, it was agreed that Germany's amendment, which allows CPs located near the boundaries of their allocated region to, at their own request, participate within an alternative region if the STRP does not object, would be considered, and that no further proposals could be submitted. He explained the rules of procedure and proposed that delegates first consider voting on Germany's amendment, then proceed to the two options for regional categorization.

IRAN said there was no consensus to rush to a vote. SYRIA requested clarification regarding the status of the amendment it had submitted to the Secretariat prior to the SC's meeting earlier that morning. The Chair suggested that Syria's proposal be read aloud, but reiterated Tuesday's ruling that the session would consider only those proposals presented on Tuesday evening unless a new proposal was based on consensus. SYRIA, with VENEZUELA, IRAN and ALGERIA, insisted that its proposal be treated on equal footing with other amendments and distributed in writing. SYRIA objected to the Chair's suggestion that the Plenary vote on whether to consider his proposal. VENEZUELA and BRAZIL suggested that all options and amendments be considered prior to voting and to allow possible consensus.

The Plenary adjourned to allow distribution of Syria's proposal. SYRIA explained that its proposal, which places Israel in Europe and maintains the other bio-geographical regions, uses the rationale of the

UN and other bodies similar to Ramsar and takes into consideration other groups' concerns. MALAYSIA, PAKISTAN, MOROCCO, JORDAN, ALGERIA and INDONESIA supported inclusion of the Syrian amendments. CANADA and GERMANY supported not admitting additional amendments. The Chair said delegates should vote on whether to consider Syria's proposal. Syria requested that this vote be conducted by secret ballot. Delegates voted by a show of hands against the latter suggestion.

The Chair invited delegates to vote by a show of hands on the consideration of Syria's proposal. MALAYSIA said that not all efforts to reach consensus had been exhausted. He cautioned that the imposition of a decision by voting would not contribute to cooperation between CPs and would affect the functioning of the Convention. SYRIA requested that the vote on its proposal use the roll-call method. Twenty-two voted in favor and 46 against, with 35 abstentions.

IRAN withdrew its proposal for the second part of the bracketed option in the draft resolution, to instruct the Subgroup on regional categorization to continue its deliberations. The Plenary adopted the German proposal, on allowing a CP to participate in an alternative region, by consensus. Delegates then considered the two bracketed options for regional groups. IRAN then withdrew the first part of its proposal to use the UN regional groupings, and the Plenary adopted the remaining proposal of the SC Chair for the regional groups of Africa, Asia, the Neotropics, Europe, North America, and Oceania.

IRAN stated that the Plenary had imposed the membership of one party on a regional group, and observed that this is not a practice or rule in any other treaty body or organization. He said the Secretariat had made a mistake in assigning Israel to the Asian group, and that this will result in the Middle East crisis being transferred to the Asian regional group and the Convention as a whole. He predicted that this would seriously hamper the group's ability to work in the future. EGYPT noted that although the regional groups had now been established, they apply only to Ramsar and do not establish a precedent for any other fora. He stated for the record that he believed that the composition of regional groups should be decided with the full consent of their members. ISRAEL pointed out that it is a member of the Asian region in CITES. He said he was astonished that certain countries can "presume to claim an entire continent to be their own playground" where they can set the rules, and said the international community cannot accept this. He formally notified the COP of its request to participate temporarily within the European region, while remaining a member of its geographical region of Asia.

SYRIA suggested that this process had further complicated rather than resolved the issue. He noted that consensus did not signify unanimity, and disassociated himself from the consensus. He said assigning Israel to the Asian region and seeking a vote on the issue were mistakes, and he held the Secretariat responsible. He said Israel



had indicated its wish to participate in the European group and was not concerned with being part of the Asian region but sought only to make a political point. Secretary-General Blasco responded that the Secretariat had automatically included Israel in the Asian region when it joined the Convention, explaining that the standard practice has been to automatically place countries in their geographical regions. He said the only mistake the Secretariat may have made was not to have consulted the SC on whether it should proceed with this automatic inclusion, but that it had not intended to create problems.

### TECHNICAL SESSION

Malti Sinha (India), Chair of the Technical Session on Ramsar and Water, noted that the aim of the Technical Session was to produce recommendations on the draft resolution for Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management.

Peter Bacon, Professor of Zoology, University of the West Indies, made a presentation on the role of wetlands in the water cycle. He emphasized the important role of wetland conservation in alleviating the global water crisis, as wetlands are a fundamental component in the accessible and manageable portion of the global hydrological cycle. He pointed out that wetlands are both sources within river basins for much of the water needed for sustainable human development as well as the sites that support many resources needed for socioeconomic development. He said the challenge is to develop a methodology for managing wetlands to maximize water availability while ensuring wetland biodiversity and sustainability.

C. Trisal, Alternate STRP member for Asia, presented the draft resolution on Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management (COP7 DOC 15.19). He noted the absence of clear guidance from Ramsar on how to integrate wetlands into river basin management and stated that recent human-induced disasters signal the need for new approaches. He highlighted linkages between wetlands, water and river basin management in the Convention and said the guidelines are intended to assist CPs to pursue the goal of integrating wetlands into river basin management. He detailed guidelines for, *inter alia*: establishing river basin management authorities and strengthening institutional capacity; involving stakeholders and raising public awareness; assessing and enhancing wetlands' hydrological and ecological functions; minimizing impacts of land use and water projects; protecting and restoring wetlands in the context of river basin management; promoting international cooperation on shared river basins and wetlands; and collaborating with relevant conventions and organizations.

Enrique Alonzo Garcia, Spanish Ministry of Environment, outlined Spain's experience with water policy and wetland management. He said it was imperative that CPs review their wetland policies in the context of water policies, using broader geographical and integrated approaches. He highlighted past shortcomings in Spain's wetland policies, including: erroneous perceptions of wetlands as biodiversity reservoirs with definite boundaries; neglect of aquifers and downstream coastal wetlands; exclusion of wetlands from water policies; and weak protection of Ramsar sites. Spain's current approach focuses on, *inter alia*: inventorying and rehabilitating all wetland types; mapping risks and pollution sources; maintaining minimum ecological functions of rivers; combining ecological and economic valuation; and integrating wetlands into inter-sectoral biodiversity, forest and water strategies.

Juan Schnack, Museo de La Plata, Argentina, made a presentation on the role of Ramsar in responding to the global water crisis. He said the Convention must respond to this crisis by: promoting education and environmental awareness; strengthening environmental agencies' management capacity; expanding scientific research; strengthening cooperation with environmental conventions; adopting regional planning; developing and applying EIA; adopting new criteria for classifying wetlands; and implementing contingency plans for emergency situations affecting water quality. He stressed that there must be greater equity in meeting basic needs and increased awareness of decision makers and the public if the Convention's functions to address the water crisis are to be efficiently implemented.

Tian Zhujun, Ministry of Water Resources, China, outlined measures for China's wetland rehabilitation after the 1998 flooding. He highlighted negative ecological character changes from flooding in four Ramsar sites, and described mitigation and rehabilitation measures. He gave an overview of the National Ecological Environmental Construction Plan, noting its targets to restore degraded wetlands, integrate management and improve administrative structures by 2002, and designate an additional 20 Ramsar sites.

The Secretariat reported on the deliberations of a focus group on wetlands and river basin management. These included, *inter alia*: referring to the contribution wetlands make to local people's economic, ecological and social security; ensuring consistency with UN language; including a definition of terms; considering user and polluter pays principles; identifying new sources of funding; and collaborating with the World Commission on Dams. Claude Martin, Director-General of WWF International, made a presentation on WWF's Living Waters Campaign to raise awareness on water resource conservation, which aims to: demonstrate sustainable approaches to freshwater management in at least five catchment areas; and increase by 50% the area of the world's freshwater ecosystems that are newly committed for protection, restoration or effective management.

Following these presentations, delegates met in regionally-based discussion groups to consider the draft resolution on Guidelines for integrated wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management. Issues raised included whether to use the term "stakeholders," "major groups" or "interested actors," the need to consider infrastructure when discussing integrated river basin management, whether to refer to "minimum" or "optimum" flow regimes, inclusion of a reference to supra-national river management agencies and to systems for regular evaluation of water resource information, and whether Ramsar should extend its activities into river basin management and conflict resolution.

### CONTACT GROUP ON THE WORK PLAN AND BUDGET

A contact group convened in the evening to conduct informal consultations on the budget and work plan. Participants discussed the challenge for the Bureau in implementing an expanded work plan with a modest budget increase. One delegate tabled a new proposal for an across-the-board 5% budget increase for each of the next three years. Participants said this may be a welcome compromise between countries wanting large increases and those wanting small increases. Secretary-General Blasco agreed to prepare an alternative option for the draft resolution on the budget based on this proposal and circulate it before the Plenary considers this resolution next week.

### IN THE CORRIDORS

Delegates departed Thursday morning's Plenary debating the surprising defusion of the highly charged negotiation on regional categorization. Most felt that the political motivations behind the discord were certain to resurface and cause problems. Some were upset by the Chair's haste to break Ramsar's unbroken tradition of consensus by calling for a vote. They feared that breaking this tradition would undermine the spirit of the Convention and mar COP7 deliberations. Others felt that, after a shaky start, Chair Koester's handling of the meeting successfully sidestepped a political landmine – at least for the time being. Participants have noted that with Ramsar broadening its scope and doubling its membership in recent years, the intrusion of politics into what had been a narrow scientific convention was inevitable, and although efforts to broaden Ramsar's agenda to incorporate sustainable development concerns entail such risks, the maturity would be worth the growing pains.

### THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

**TECHNICAL SESSIONS:** The Technical Session on National Planning for Wetland Conservation and Wise Use will take place from 9:00 am-1:00 pm and the Technical Session on Involving People at All Levels in the Conservation and Wise Use of Wetlands from 3:00-7:00 pm in the Salones La Paz.