



## EIGHTH MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON WETLANDS 18-26 NOVEMBER 2002

The Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP8) to the Convention on Wetlands opens today at the Prince Philip Science Museum in Valencia, Spain. The theme of the Conference will be "Wetlands: water, life, and culture."

Delegates will consider various substantive agenda items, including the Convention's Work Plan for 2003-2005 and its Strategic Plan for 2003-2008, as well as reports and recommendations submitted by Parties and by the Convention's Standing Committee. COP8 will also consider implementation of the Convention at the global level and reports on a variety of issues, including the proposed budget for 2003-2005 and the work of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel and the Credentials Committee. Five technical sessions are also scheduled to take place during COP8. These will address:

- major challenges and emerging opportunities for wetlands, water and sustainability;
- baselines for sustainable use - wetland inventory and assessment;
- global biodiversity and the sustenance of human life - the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance;
- management of wetlands for sustainable use and human well-being; and
- cultural aspects of wetlands as a tool for their conservation and sustainable use.

COP8 is expected to adopt over 40 resolutions submitted by the Standing Committee and Parties on a wide range of policy, programme and budgetary matters.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

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

**CONVENTION OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE:** Originally emphasizing the conservation and wise use of wetlands primarily to provide a habitat for waterbirds, the Convention has subsequently broadened its scope to address all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use. This shift in focus reflects the increasing recognition of the importance of wetlands as an ecosystem that contributes to biodiversity conservation and to the well-being of human communities. According to some estimates,

wetlands cover at least 6% of the Earth's land surface, and contribute significantly to the global economy in terms of water supply, fisheries, agriculture, forestry, and tourism.

The Ramsar Convention is the only environmental treaty dealing with a particular ecosystem, and currently has 134 Parties. A total of 1229 wetland sites covering 105.9 million hectares are included in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. 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 and management; and consult with other Parties about Convention implementation, especially with regard to transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, shared species, and development projects affecting wetlands.

Contracting Parties meet every three years to assess progress in implementing the Convention and wetland conservation, share knowledge and experience on technical issues, and plan the next triennium. In addition to the Conference of the Parties (COP), the Convention's work is supported by a Standing Committee, a Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), and a Secretariat. The Standing Committee includes Regional Representatives of Ramsar's regions (Asia, Oceania, Europe, Africa, North America, and the Neotropics). Its duties include the supervision of policy implementation by the Secretariat and the administration of the Convention's budget. The STRP provides guidance on key issues related to the application of the Convention. The Secretariat (known as the Ramsar Bureau) deals with the Convention's day-to-day operations, and is housed in the headquarters of IUCN-The World Conservation Union in Gland, Switzerland.

**PREVIOUS MEETINGS OF THE COP:** There have been seven meetings of the COP since the Convention's entry into force: COP1 in Cagliari, Italy (24-29 November 1980); COP2 in Gröningen, 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); COP6 in Brisbane, Australia (19-27 March 1996); and COP7 in San José, Costa Rica (10-18 May 1999), the first time a Ramsar COP was held in a developing country.

At COP7, delegates focused on the interrelations between human societies and wetland habitats under the theme of "People and Wetlands - The Vital Link." They considered several substantive items, including reviews of the Convention's implementation in each region, the Convention Work Plan and Ramsar budget for 2000-2002, and regional categorization of countries under the Convention. Delegates also considered and adopted 30 resolutions and four recommendations on policy, programme and budgetary

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issues to advance the work of the Convention into the next century. In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the Ramsar Bureau and the World Heritage Center, and numerous Parties announced the designation of new Ramsar sites in their countries.

### INTERSESSIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

Since COP7, numerous relevant wetlands meetings have been held, including those of the Convention's Subsidiary Bodies, eleven informal regional and subregional meetings held at the request of the Ramsar Standing Committee, and various other international, regional and subregional events.

**STANDING COMMITTEE:** The Standing Committee has convened six times since COP7, beginning with its 23rd meeting (SC23), which took place on 18 May 1999. At SC23, the Committee established a permanent Subgroup on Finance, in accordance with a COP6 resolution, and agreed that Algeria, Argentina, Japan and Mexico would be the members for the 1999-2002 triennium, with Armenia as Chair. The Subgroup on Finance has convened on the day prior to each Standing Committee meeting to review all financial and administrative matters on the agenda and prepare recommendations to the Committee.

SC24, held from 29 November - 2 December 1999, resulted in an agreement to renew the contract of the Convention's Secretary General Delmar Blasco for a final term ending on 31 July 2003. The Committee also approved the Terms of Reference for the STRP Government focal points. In addition, members discussed the value of consulting Parties in their regions both before and after Committee meetings. Members also endorsed a procedure to draft the Strategic Plan for 2003-2008, and agreed on regional representation for the Subgroup on the Strategic Plan. A Subgroup on COP8 was established.

At SC25, which convened from 23-27 October 2000, the Committee adopted a number of decisions in support of a COP7 resolution on Sites in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance relating to official descriptions, conservation status, and management plans, including the situation of particular sites in the territories of specific Parties. As a result of the Committee's work, a follow-up resolution will be discussed at COP8. SC25 also considered the need for further cooperation with other multilateral environmental agreements. In addition, the Committee considered an analysis on the interpretation of Convention Articles 2.5 and 4.2, which both address changes to Parties' listings of wetlands. This matter was subsequently addressed in a draft COP8 resolution, as was the issue of reviewing Ramsar site boundaries for reasons other than urgent national interest. In addition, SC25 established a Subgroup on the STRP to consider concerns expressed about its *modus operandi* and mandates from the COP, and also took up a number of budget- and funding-related matters.

SC26, held from 3-7 December 2001, examined approximately 30 draft documents and resolutions prepared by the STRP and Bureau for possible submission to COP8. Following consideration by the Committee and, in some cases, its Subgroups on COP8 and Finance, 28 draft resolutions and nine information papers were endorsed for consideration at COP8.

SC27, which met from 15-17 May 2002, addressed numerous matters on the agenda for COP8, including the approval of the draft budget for 2003-2005 and a proposal to establish a Ramsar Endowment Fund.

The Standing Committee also met immediately prior to COP8, on Sunday morning, 17 November 2002. Participants discussed various procedural and organizational issues for COP8, including time management of COP8's extensive agenda. The Committee also approved projects to be supported by the Small Grants Fund, as proposed by the Ramsar Bureau.

**SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL REVIEW PANEL:** The STRP has met three times since COP7, establishing 12 working groups to assist it in its work prior to COP8. These working groups addressed: integrated coastal zone management; the World Commission on Dams; impact assessment; incentive measures; invasive species; wetland inventory; peatlands; wetland restoration; site management and the San José Record; allocations and management of water for maintaining ecological functions; ecological character; and climate change and the Ramsar Convention.

The STRP also provided advice on other scientific and technical topics, including the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, Ramsar site designation guidelines, the Ramsar Sites Database, and the operation of the Montreux Record. In addition, the STRP considered concerns about its *modus operandi*, particularly the increasing number and scope of tasks assigned to it. Various proposals on this issue will be taken up at COP8.

**REGIONAL AND SUBREGIONAL MEETINGS:** In late 2000, the Standing Committee proposed a series of regional and subregional meetings as a way to review and reinforce the Convention's implementation, and to assist in preparing for COP8. During 2001 and 2002, eleven such meetings were held, with participants focusing on achievements and challenges for regional, subregional and national implementation of the Convention, and various COP8 agenda items, including the Strategic Plan for 2003-2008 and the Technical Sessions. The meetings generated various recommendations and conclusions, with many delegates emphasizing capacity building and mechanisms to support implementation, and supporting various methods to promote international, regional and subregional cooperation.

**WORLD SUMMIT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:** Wetland issues were addressed – albeit briefly – during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg from 26 August - 4 September 2002. Delegates agreed to text in the Johannesburg *Plan of Implementation* supporting the Ramsar Convention, including its joint work programme with the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the programme of action called for by the International Coral Reef Initiative to strengthen joint management plans and international networking for wetland ecosystems in coastal zones, including coral reefs, mangroves, seaweed beds and tidal mud flats. The *Plan of Implementation* also supports reducing the “risks of flooding and drought in vulnerable countries by, *inter alia*, promoting wetland and watershed protection and restoration, improved land-use planning, improving and applying more widely techniques and methodologies for assessing the potential adverse effects of climate change on wetlands.” The *Plan of Implementation* contains additional references and goals relating to water management, biodiversity, and other matters relevant to the Ramsar Convention.

**OTHER RELEVANT MEETINGS:** Other wetlands-related meetings held recently include the World Conference of NGOs and Local Communities on Wetlands: “Ramsar, 30 Years Later,” held in Valencia from 15-16 November 2002, and the 17th Session of the Global Biodiversity Forum on the theme “Managing Wetlands for Global Change and Local Livelihoods,” also held in Valencia, from 15-17 November 2002.

### THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

**OPENING PLENARY:** COP8 will begin at 9:30 am in the Prince Philip Science Museum in Valencia with an opening ceremony and speeches. Delegates are then expected to take up various organizational matters, including the adoption of the agenda and rules of procedure, and the election of the COP President and Vice-Presidents. In the afternoon, Parties are expected to consider the appointment of the Credentials Committee and any other committees, and to hear the report of the Standing Committee Chair.