



## RAMSAR COP8 HIGHLIGHTS MONDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2002

The Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP8) to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands began on Monday morning, 18 November, in Valencia, Spain. Following the opening ceremony and addresses, delegates considered the appointment of committees and contact groups, and the admission of observers. Parties were then briefed on the work of the Ramsar Standing Committee and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP).

### OPENING PLENARY

Ramsar Standing Committee Chair Stephen Hunter opened COP8, inviting delegates to consider the provisional agenda (COP8 DOC.1, Rev.3) and rules of procedure (COP8 DOC.2). These were adopted without amendment. Parties then elected Maria del Carmen Martorell Pallás, Secretary General of Spain's Environment Ministry, as COP8 President. Hector Condé (Cuba) and Javad Amin Mansour (Iran) were appointed Vice-Presidents.

COP8 President Martorell said she would make every effort to be available to hear all delegates' views and concerns and pay close attention to comments and interventions from observers, particularly NGOs.

**AWARD CEREMONY:** Ramsar Secretary General Delmar Blasco presented three Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards, in recognition of the work of those who have made a significant contribution to wetlands conservation and sustainable use. These awards are presented every three years, and are complemented by the Evian Special Prize, a cash award of US\$10,000 donated by the Danone Group. The awards for 2002 were presented to the Chilika Development Authority of India, the NGO Trinational Initiative for the Morava-Dyje Floodplains operating in Austria, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, and Banrock Station Wines in Australia. In addition, Monique Coulet of France and Max Finlayson of Australia were honored for their efforts on wetland conservation and wise use in a "Recognition of Excellence" ceremony.

Delegates then witnessed the signing of the "Danone-Evian Fund for Water, in Support of the Ramsar Convention Programme 2003-2006," an agreement between the Ramsar Convention and the Danone Group Corporation. Danone Group President Franck Riboud highlighted the arrangement as an excellent example of public-private sector partnerships. He outlined his company's support for water management and conservation initiatives, inviting participants to present their ideas for projects that might be funded or supported by his company.

**OPENING ADDRESSES:** Philippe Roch, Swiss Secretary of State, Agency for Environment, Forests and Landscape, spoke on "Sustainable Management of Water: the Need for a Holistic Ecosystem Approach." He stated that the relationship between poverty, development and environmental protection, underscored at WSSD, had been recognized earlier by the Ramsar Convention's

wise use concept. He highlighted Ramsar's visionary aspect, indicating its conceptual and practical role in promoting an ecosystem approach to providing a sustainable supply of water. He called for strengthening cooperation between Ramsar and other institutions, including UNEP and GEF. He also supported a multidisciplinary approach to wetlands management at all levels, involving all stakeholders.

COP8 President Martorell transmitted the address of Prince Felipe of Spain, who was unable to attend the conference. The statement highlighted the importance of the COP in formulating a strategic plan for Ramsar and for its technical sessions, particularly those on sustainable use and management of wetlands and cultural linkages. He called for a new viewpoint on cultural democratization, describing culture as a shared civic responsibility among human communities and between the human community and the environment.

Rita Barberá, Mayor of Valencia, underscored Valencia's commitment to preservation, conservation and public awareness. She expressed hope that UNESCO would soon declare the city's Albufera area a world heritage site.

Ramsar Secretary General Delmar Blasco stated that, with 1200 registered participants, COP8 is the largest Ramsar COP to date, and expressed a desire to involve in the discussions all present and future Parties, other international multilateral environmental organizations, and governmental and non-governmental institutions, including community-based organizations, indigenous peoples, scientists, and the private sector.

José Luis Olivás Martínez, President of the Region of Valencia, noted the importance of traditional and sustainable use for preserving wetlands for future generations. He stressed the need for citizens' and scientists' involvement in the definition and implementation of wise use and sustainable projects, and highlighted the establishment of a wetlands catalogue covering 45,000 hectares in the Valencia Region and the creation of a National Wetlands Centre. He commended the Convention as a dynamic tool for integrated water and watershed management, environmental impact assessment, and the involvement of local communities.

Claude Martin, WWF, outlined the Convention's key challenges, including: implementing commitments; increasing the Convention's voice in international conservation fora; and influencing national and international policy and legislation, including in the areas of water and agriculture. He commended the implementation efforts of Algeria, Bolivia and the UK; expressed concern at the absence of a strategic approach to the wise use of wetlands and about the Spanish National Hydrological Plan; and urged financial support for the Convention. Noting lack of reference to the Convention in the freshwater section of the WSSD *Plan of Implementation*, he recommended that COP8 ensure the Convention's meaningful role in poverty eradication and water management, and proactively plan the next triennium.

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Peter Bridgewater, Global Biodiversity Forum (GBF), reported on the Forum's 17th Session, held from 15-17 November 2002 in Valencia. He highlighted the GBF's call for bridging the gap between global policy and practice and its recommendations for enhancing the Convention's role in sustainable development, including: increasing resources and capacity for effective and transparent implementation adapted to the local context; improving efficiency evaluation mechanisms; promoting a paradigm shift in communication, education and public awareness; addressing emerging issues (agriculture, wetlands restoration, climate change and sound environmental governance); engaging with underrepresented sectors; and securing the financial means to facilitate involvement of indigenous peoples and local communities. The GBF also proposed specific amendments to the relevant draft resolutions and recommended considering the guidelines for mitigation and the ecosystem approach.

Reporting on results of the World Congress of NGOs and Local Communities on Wetlands held in Valencia from 15-16 November, Theo Oberhuber, Ecologistas en Accion, lamented the failure of Parties to abide by provisions and resolutions adopted. She said the Congress supported, *inter alia*: the development of mechanisms to ensure compliance with provisions of the Convention and imposition of sanctions on countries that fail to meet obligations under the Convention; awareness raising programmes focusing on wise use; greater grassroots involvement of indigenous peoples in managing and monitoring their natural environment; respect for indigenous rights; a moratorium on building large dams; environmental impact assessments of projects that might affect wetlands; public sector programmes to provide safe drinking water for all; and a cessation of public sector support for intensive aquaculture programmes and use of wetlands as waste dump sites.

Reporting on outcomes of the Latin American Seminar for International Cooperation for Wetlands, held from 13-14 November in Toledo, Spain, Seminar Spokesperson Maite Martin Crespo called for strengthening funding mechanisms, rapprochement with the private sector, and enhancing effectiveness of donors and recipients. She recommended that COP8 address several priority issues, including regional processes for wetland management, training, planning, environmental management and updating national inventories.

#### **APPOINTMENT OF COMMITTEES AND CONTACT GROUPS**

During the afternoon Plenary, the COP established a Credentials Committee comprised of delegates from The Gambia, Nepal, Latvia, Colombia, Mexico and Papua New Guinea. It also established a Committee on Strategic Plan and Work Plan. The Standing Committee's subgroup and delegates from Benin, Zambia, China, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Costa Rica and Venezuela were designated members to ensure representation of all six regions, although the Committee is open to all Parties and observers. Secretary General Blasco introduced the revised draft Strategic Plan 2003-2008 (COP8 DR 25 rev.1), highlighting that it incorporated input from Governments and observers, as well as implications of the WSSD *Plan of Implementation*.

The COP established a Finance Committee to address the new budget and draft resolutions that have financial impacts and designated as members the Standing Committee's subgroup on Finance and also Kenya, Nigeria, India, Malaysia, Austria, Spain, Switzerland, Chile, Jamaica and Australia. This Committee is also open to all delegations and observers. Parties also agreed to set up a Committee chaired by the US to consider the content and duration of future COPs.

The COP then established a number of contact groups to consider draft resolutions (DRs) expected to require substantial deliberations. Contact groups were established with lead Parties as follows: DRs 1 and 2 (water allocation, World Dams Commission) – South Africa and Indonesia; DR 18 (invasive species) – Senegal; DR 3 (climate change) – Norway and China; DRs 14 and 15 (Management Planning and San José Record) – France and Morocco; DR 28 and 28bis (STRP *modus operandi*) – Canada and

Austria; DR 10 (strategic framework for Ramsar list) – Guatemala; DR 19 (culture and wetlands) – Spain and Suriname; DR 32 (mangroves) – Colombia, Ecuador and Pakistan; DR 34 (agriculture and wetlands) – Slovenia and India; and DR 39 (high-Andean wetlands) – Ecuador and Chile.

Secretary General Blasco emphasized that in determining the schedule for committee and contact group meetings, every effort had been made to avoid simultaneous meetings of any Committee and Contact Group, and to have no more than two concurrent contact groups meetings. However, only the Strategic Plan Committee will have simultaneous interpretation.

#### **ADMISSION OF OBSERVERS**

President Martorell presented the list of registered observers (COP8 Doc.36). ARGENTINA expressed its reservation over registering the "UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum" as UK-based, as this NGO relates to the South Georgia and Falklands/Malvinas Islands. The UK reiterated its position on the sovereignty of the islands. SAMOA announced that it had approved the instrument of accession to Ramsar on 12 November. The list of observers was approved by the COP.

#### **REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE**

Standing Committee Chair Stephen Hunter introduced his report (COP8 DOC.3) on the work of the Committee during the 1999-2002 triennium, highlighted key activities and trends in the Committee's work, including: the spirit of cooperation; increasing cooperation with other MEAs; the effectiveness of the Strategic Plan as guidance for actions; and enlargement of the wetlands policy context.

Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) Chair Jorge Jiménez Ramón presented his report (COP8 DOC.4) and underscored factors limiting the STRP capabilities, including: the large number of tasks on its agenda; membership turnover; and insufficient expertise. He urged COP8 to establish priorities for the STRP's work and address the need to: review STRP's *modus operandi*; increase its resources and expertise; and ensure access to global experts and set out a global expert network.

#### **IN THE CORRIDORS**

The absence of two high-level dignitaries originally scheduled to speak during the opening ceremony did not seem to dampen the upbeat mood of many delegates on COP8's first day. A number of participants seemed impressed by the record numbers attending a Ramsar COP, with some suggesting that the turnout reflects the Convention's growing scope and momentum. One enthusiastic observer reflected that "Ramsar is really on a roll," although another thought it may simply be due to the fact that the meeting is taking place in Europe – a convenient destination for many Parties.

Several delegates felt that the increased attendance and broad agenda were almost certain to result in a more politicized meeting than previous COPs, as linkages with other treaties and issues, from trade to biodiversity to climate change, make their presence felt. According to some, one issue that might become controversial at COP8 is the draft resolution on invasive species, with a number of participants pointing to difficulties on this issue within the CBD. Others suggested that the resolution on agriculture might demand delegates' attention, given perennial sensitivities on this topic. Talks on the World Commission on Dams, funding issues, and climate change were also mentioned by various participants as worth watching.

#### **THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY**

**PLENARY:** A morning plenary session will convene at 9:30 am to consider a report by the Ramsar Secretary General on implementation of the Convention's Work Plan from 2000-2002. The COP will then consider issues arising from resolutions and recommendations of previous meetings of the COP, as well as the Strategic Plan for 2003-2008 and Work Plan for 2003-2005. In the afternoon, delegates will take up the financial report of the Subgroup on Finance and the proposed budget for 2003-2005, and resolutions submitted by the Parties and the Standing Committee.