



RAMSAR COP9 HIGHLIGHTS WEDNESDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2005

Delegates to the Ninth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP9) to the Ramsar Convention met in Plenary throughout the day to hear reports on intersessional activities, statements by Parties and observers, and a special presentation by the host country. Delegates elected COP9 President and Vice-Presidents, and addressed other organizational matters.

PLENARY

Antonio Fernandez de Tejada, Spain, officially opened COP9, inviting delegates to consider the agenda and other organizational matters.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: Adoption of the agenda: Delegates adopted the agenda without amendment (COP9 Doc. 1, Rev. 2), and the rules of procedure (COP9 Doc. 2), with minor amendments.

Election of officers: Ramsar Convention Secretary General Peter Bridgewater informed delegates that the Standing Committee at its 32nd meeting held on Monday, 7 November nominated Kahinda Otafiire, Minister of Lands, Water and Environment, Uganda, as COP9 President. Delegates then elected Otafiire as COP9 President, and Tony Slatyer, Australia and Flavio Cházaro, Mexico, as Vice-Presidents.

Appointment of committees: The COP established a Credentials Committee comprised of delegates from each of the six Ramsar regions, namely: Benin (Africa), Thailand (Asia), Switzerland (Europe), Peru (the Neotropics), Canada (North America), and New Zealand (Oceania). Delegates also established a Finance Committee, to be chaired by Nick Kiddle (New Zealand), with Canada, Albania, Algeria, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, China, Colombia, Japan, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Nigeria, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, the UK, and the US being designated members. The Secretariat noted that the Committee is open to all Parties and observers.

Admission of observers: COP9 President Otafiire presented the list of registered observers (COP9 Doc. 31), stating this list would remain open as new observers are registering daily. ARGENTINA objected to registering the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum as UK-based, as this NGO relates to the Falkland/Malvinas, South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands and rejected all references to these as UK territories. The UK reiterated its position on the sovereignty of the islands.

REPORTS: Report of the Chair of the Standing

Committee: Gordana Beltram (Slovenia), Standing Committee Chair, presented the report on the Committee's work during the current triennium (COP9 Doc. 3), highlighting work related to: preparation for COP9; review of work by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP); financial matters relating to the implementation of the Convention; and creating synergies between the Convention and other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). She called for greater attention to social and economic consideration related to wetland ecosystems in the Committee's future work.

In the ensuing discussions, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION suggested special attention to synergies with other Conventions, especially the UNFCCC, CBD and CCD, in the Committee's future work, while KENYA stressed the need for more focus on feedback from Parties on the Committee's work. The report was adopted without further comments.

Report of the Secretary General: Addressing the Ramsar COP for the first time as Secretary General, Bridgewater reported on the implementation of the Convention at the global level over the 2003-2005 triennium (COP9 Doc. 5 and Doc. 6) and highlighted the prospect of reaching 160 Contracting Parties by COP10. Bridgewater noted that the Secretariat has managed to balance the Convention's budget since COP8, but underscored the need to work "smarter, not harder" in the 2006-2008 triennium.

Noting that 110 Parties had submitted national reports, a smaller number than desired, Bridgewater stressed the need to simplify the national reporting format and continue regular communication between the Secretariat and the Parties.

On the Strategic Plan 2003-2008, he highlighted the need to focus on key issues in order to increase the percentage of attainable targets. He also highlighted six imperatives extracted from Parties' national reports: understanding new international institutional frameworks and how Ramsar fits into them; reinforcing and developing the Convention's strong scientific basis, which he mentioned as one of its main strengths; effectively managing the List of Wetlands of International Importance; promoting integrated management approaches; developing a communication, education and public awareness programme that responds to the needs of local people; and ensuring the Convention is effectively managed intersessionally through the Standing Committee and the Secretariat.

Report of the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel: Max Finlayson (Australia), STRP Chair, presented the report on the STRP's work during the current triennium (COP9 Doc. 4). He outlined the Panel's work in areas including: inventory and assessment; wise use concept; water resource



management; Ramsar site designation; wetland management planning; and effectiveness of the Convention's implementation.

In providing technical advice for COP9, Finlayson highlighted the Panel's work in preparing the following documents (COP9 DR1 and Annexes A, B, C, D, and E): a conceptual framework for Ramsar's wise use concept; a revised Strategic Framework and guidelines for further development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance; an integrated framework for Ramsar's water-related guidance; and an integrated framework for wetland inventory, assessment and monitoring.

During the ensuing discussions, countries expressed general support for the frameworks prepared by the STRP. They also agreed to establish a contact group to consider COP9 DR1 Annexes A and B, and decided that comments on Annexes C, D and E would be informally exchanged between Parties and the Secretariat.

STATEMENTS: During a general discussion, many Parties highlighted progress made in national implementation of the Convention, in particular designation of new Ramsar sites since COP8.

The UK, speaking for the EU, called for strong outcomes during the COP to assist in implementation of the Convention consistent with international conservation commitments, including the Millennium Development Goals and the target adopted by the CBD to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. He supported: increasing synergies with the CBD and its work programmes; harmonizing reporting; striking a balance between maintaining a strong scientific basis and supporting outreach activities; and maintaining rights of Parties to make voluntary contributions, including towards regional support funds and the STRP's work.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO, ARGENTINA, PARAGUAY, KENYA and MALAWI called for simplifying the national reports format, with JAMAICA calling for STRP to assess reporting aspects that could be standardized with other Conventions. MEXICO, EL SALVADOR, CHINA and LESOTHO highlighted the importance of synergies with other MEAs, while PERU urged the COP to provide the Secretary General with clear instructions and a "roadmap" to develop such synergies.

CHILE highlighted the importance of establishing ties between the public and private sectors to develop national policies and strategies for wetland conservation. ZAMBIA called for promoting economic valuation of wetlands as a way to reduce poverty. BURKINA FASO supported an integrated approach to managing wetlands based on the needs of local communities, while ST. LUCIA supported local community involvement in the Ramsar process. MALAYSIA stressed the importance of integrated water resources management and integrated coastal zone management. IRAN noted the establishment of a Central and West Asia regional center, highlighting its role in awareness raising, training and information exchange. SAMOA stressed linkages between wetlands and livelihoods, particularly in small island developing States. COTE D'IVOIRE urged Parties to support a resolution on cross-border wetlands, while COSTA RICA called for greater focus on cross-border Ramsar sites. EGYPT called for a resolution urging countries to take a precautionary approach to deal with avian flu.

GUINEA requested assistance with developing management plans for its Ramsar sites. DJIBOUTI noted a lack of resources for implementing the Convention. BANGLADESH and the DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO highlighted the need for experience sharing. GUATEMALA informed delegates of its recently finalized national policy on wetland conservation. Noting that few Caribbean countries are currently Parties to the Ramsar Convention, BARBADOS expressed its intention to become a Contracting Party in the near future.

SWITZERLAND introduced a WWF publication entitled "Freshwater Ecoregions of Africa and Madagascar," noting that the book highlights the outstanding biodiversity of African ecoregions, identifies threats to these ecosystems, and addresses information gaps. Noting the scarcity of data on biodiversity resources in many African countries, WWF highlighted the need for wetland inventories.

SPECIAL PRESENTATION ON WETLAND CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE IN UGANDA: Paul Mafabi, Uganda National Wetlands Programme, provided an overview of wetland conservation and sustainable use over the last 15 years in Uganda, noting that wetland management began with a ban on wetland drainage. He said that wetland issues were incorporated into a poverty eradication plan in 2000, and that a wetlands sector strategic plan was created in 2001. Mafabi said this was achieved through strategies such as awareness and appreciation, and through promoting best use practices. In describing current achievements, he highlighted an increased level of awareness; creation of policy and legal frameworks; and the creation of inventories, which have provided vital information for decision-making. Mafabi also highlighted specific challenges for wetland policy, including the need to improve enforcement mechanisms. He underscored the need to: develop a solid knowledge base; create political and public interest by using the right arguments; build capacity at all levels for implementation; and adopt realistic policies and laws. Mafabi closed by highlighting the importance of ensuring institutional sustainability, and stressed that wetland ecosystems can play a vital role in peoples' livelihoods, contribute to their income, and that wetland ecosystem services can "pay their own way."

After the presentation, COP9 President Otafiire, jointly with Yoka Brandt, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Uganda, and Alice Kaudia, Regional Director for Eastern Africa, IUCN, launched a publication entitled "From Conversion to Conservation," which provides an overview of wetland management in Uganda over the past 15 years.

At the close of the afternoon session, Ugandan schoolchildren performed a song and read out a poem that underscored the theme of the Conference.

IN THE BREEZEWAYS

After a slightly slow start at half-past-ten, COP9's Plenary quickly moved into full swing. Seemingly undaunted by the prospect of contact group discussions, some delegates welcomed proposals to harmonize and update the Ramsar conceptual framework and Strategic Plan. A number of delegates agreed with the general thrust of the Ramsar Secretary General's opening statement on Tuesday that the Convention should not be about targets for targets sake, and emphasized wise use, representativeness and systematic listing of wetlands. Others, however, pointed out the benefits a Ramsar listing provides as a deterrent to developers, therefore supporting the ambitious goal of designating 2500 Ramsar sites by 2010.

In the afternoon, temperatures rose, both literally and figuratively, as delegates engaged in lengthy debates on how best to structure discussions on the conceptual framework and the revised Strategic Framework developed by the STRP. Although delegates eventually agreed on a single contact group to address these issues, the discussions hinted at the political sensitivity involved.

By the end of the day, the Secretariat heaved a sigh of relief when the long awaited Synthesis Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment arrived, with one delegate suggesting that the key issues outlined in its opening pages could provide useful guidance to COP9. Delegates were in excellent spirits as they headed off for a reception infused with traditional Ugandan drumming, singing and dancing.