

Thirteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention: 22-29 October 2018

The 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (COP13) opened on Monday, 22 October 2018, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, under the theme “Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future.” COP13 will consider progress in the Convention’s implementation on the conservation and wise use of wetlands; share knowledge and experiences on technical issues; and plan for the next triennium. The COP was preceded by the 55th meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee and regional meetings on 21 October 2018.

Expectations for this Meeting

COP13 will address a number of administrative measures, including the budget, as well as 26 draft resolutions.

Key issues are likely to include:

- approaches to improved governance of the Convention;
- guidance on identifying sites for global climate change regulation, including the role of local communities;
- role of the Convention regarding regional initiatives;
- progress on the 2016-2024 Strategic Plan; and
- role of urban wetlands, including implementation of the Ramsar Wetland City Accreditation.

This will also be the first meeting of the COP under Secretary General Martha Rojas Urrego.

Origins of the Ramsar Convention

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar Convention) was signed in Ramsar, Iran, on 2 February 1971, and entered 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.

Originally emphasizing conservation and wise use of habitat for waterbirds, the Convention subsequently broadened its scope, recognizing the importance of wetlands as ecosystems that contribute to both biodiversity conservation and human well-being. Wetlands cover an estimated 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 Convention currently has 170 parties. A total of 2,326 wetland sites, covering nearly 250 million hectares, are included in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites).

Parties commit themselves to:

- designate at least one site that meets the Ramsar criteria for inclusion in the Ramsar List and ensure maintenance of each site’s ecological character;
- include wetland conservation within national land-use planning to promote the wise use of all wetlands within their territory;
- establish nature reserves on wetlands and promote training in research and management; and
- consult with other parties about Convention implementation, especially regarding transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, shared species, and development projects affecting wetlands.

Contracting parties meet every three years. In addition to the COP, the Convention’s work is supported by a Standing Committee (SC), a Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), and the Ramsar Bureau, which carries out the functions of a Secretariat.

Key Turning Points

The Conference of the Parties has met 12 times since 1980. Extraordinary COPs (ExCOPs) were held in 1982 and 1987. The Ramsar ExCOP (December 1982) established the Paris Protocol for amending the Convention and adopted official versions of the Convention in six languages. The Ramsar ExCOP (May-June 1987) adopted the Regina Amendments, which defined the powers of the COP, and established the SC, Ramsar Bureau (secretariat), and a budget.

COP6 (March 1996) adopted the first Ramsar Strategic Plan for 1997-2002.

COP7 (May 1999) articulated the “three pillars” of action: wise use of wetlands; designation and management of Ramsar sites; and international cooperation. COP7 also confirmed BirdLife International, IUCN- International Union for Conservation of Nature, Wetlands International, and World Wide Fund for Nature as International Organization Partners (IOPs) of the Convention.

COP8 (November 2002) focused on the role of wetlands in water provision, as well as their cultural and livelihoods aspects. Delegates approved the Convention’s Work Plan for 2003-2005 and Strategic Plan for 2003-2008.

COP9 (November 2005) adopted the Convention’s Work Plan for the 2006-2008 triennium, and reviewed its Strategic Plan 2003-2008. An informal Ministerial Dialogue adopted the Kampala Declaration, which emphasized the role of the Convention in arresting the continued loss and degradation of wetland ecosystems.

COP10 (November 2008) adopted the Convention’s Strategic Plan 2009-2015. Delegates also adopted resolutions on wetlands and climate change, and on wetlands and biofuels.

COP12 (June 2015) convened under the theme “Wetlands for our Future.” COP12 adopted 16 resolutions by consensus, including: the Strategic Plan 2016-2024; a new framework for the delivery of scientific and technical advice, and guidance on the Convention; peatlands; disaster risk reduction; and a wetland city accreditation of the Ramsar Convention.

Intersessional Highlights

Standing Committee: The SC has convened six times since COP12. SC50 (June 2015) met immediately following COP12, and decided to, *inter alia*, lead or establish working groups on: resource mobilization and the partnership framework and plan; implementation of the Ramsar Convention Programme on communication, capacity building, education, participation and awareness (CEPA); and improvements to existing management instruments between the IUCN, the SC, and the Secretary General. SC51 (November 2015) established a working group on implications of proposed new operational guidelines 2016-2018

for the regional initiatives. SC52 (July 2016) selected Martha Rojas Urrego as the new Secretary General; approved the STRP and Secretariat work plans, and the CEPA action plan; endorsed four new Ramsar regional initiatives; and adopted the resource mobilization work plan framework. SC53 (May-June 2017) agreed to review the effectiveness of the Convention's governance to, *inter alia*, increase the participation and representation of the parties; and instructed the Secretariat to conduct a review of all current and proposed cooperative agreements. SC54 (April 2018) reviewed draft resolutions for consideration at COP13. SC55 (October 2018) considered, *inter alia*: final preparations for COP13; financial implications of draft resolutions; financial and budgetary matters; and legal status of Ramsar regional initiatives.

Scientific and Technical Review Panel: The STRP met twice since COP12. Actions included developing a draft work plan for 2016-2018, which focused on five thematic areas relating to:

- monitoring methodologies and tools for Ramsar sites;
- developing and implementing management and action plans;
- methods for economic and non-economic valuations of wetlands;
- balancing wetland conservation and development; and
- wetland restoration for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

The STRP also considered work in relation to the CEPA programme and regional priorities, and received a consultancy report addressing a comprehensive review and analysis of the Ramsar Advisory Mission.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (November 2017) made the Ramsar Convention a co-custodian (with UNEP) for SDG Indicator 6.6.1 (monitoring change in the extent of water-related ecosystems), with Ramsar to contribute data from national reports.

Paris Agreement: The Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change entered into force in November 2016, formalizing the responsibility for countries to report their progress on achieving nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The ability of wetlands to sequester carbon has helped raise the profile of wetlands for contributing to climate adaptation and mitigation, including achieving NDCs.

Special Presentation

Before the official opening of COP13, a special event, "UN Ocean Conference Community of Ocean Action on Mangroves: Progress and Opportunities" highlighted voluntary commitments to conserve mangroves and sustainably manage marine and coastal ecosystems, focusing on the critical role of mangrove ecosystems for coastal and ocean resilience.

Opening Ceremony

During the opening ceremony, Uruguay, the COP12 host country, handed over the ceremonial Ramsar flag to UAE, transferring the COP Presidency for the next triennium.

Thani Bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, Minister of Climate Change and Environment, UAE, welcomed delegates to COP13, and highlighted wetlands as extremely biodiverse ecosystems, which provide a wide range of social and economic services. He noted that mangroves in the UAE have expanded from 41 square-kilometers in 2004 to 183 square-kilometers in 2017.

Jorge Rucks, Uruguay, SC Chair, said the SC is striving to act responsibly and transparently to carry out its mandate. He underscored the need to apply scientific knowledge and technology to ensure sustainable protection of wetlands.

Dawoud Al Hajiri, Dubai Municipality, stated that Dubai prioritizes the environment and understands the importance of wetlands. He expressed hope that more wetlands in Dubai will be added to the Ramsar List in the future.

Razan Al Mubarak, Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi, stressed that COP13 is the first time the Ramsar Convention has convened in the Arab region, underscoring the opportunity to celebrate

diversity and address the immense challenges to wetlands through collective wisdom, use of technology, and smart, innovative solutions.

Highlighting the threats that oceans face, Peter Thomson, UN Special Envoy for the Ocean, noted that the Paris Agreement and the SDGs "offer a plan to reverse the cycle of decline." He reminded delegates that SDG14.2 (sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems) matures in 2020, urging immediate action for the sake of future generations.

Stewart Maginnis, IUCN, expressed confidence that COP13 will be another successful milestone in advancing wetlands conservation, emphasizing the urgency of action due to "the relentless pressures on wetlands and the shocking speed of wetlands loss."

Elizabeth Mrema, UNEP, on behalf of UNEP Executive Director Erik Solheim, highlighted the staggering rate of decline in freshwater species, which reached 81% over the last 40 years. She emphasized relevant resolutions of the UN Environment Assembly and outlined achievements over the last biennium in collaboration with the Ramsar Secretariat.

Jane Madgwick, Wetlands International, speaking on behalf of the International Organization Partners, said it is crucial to conserve and protect wetlands to meet the SDGs. She urged parties to commit to act on the links between wetlands, peace, and security.

Martha Rojas Urrego, Ramsar Secretary General, expressed concern that wetlands are being lost three times faster than forests, and since 1970, 35% of all wetlands have disappeared. She said the Global Wetlands Outlook is a "distress signal and a wake-up call" and urged delegates to rise to the challenge, highlighting that COP13 is a moment for decisive action to protect wetlands.

Delegates viewed a video presentation portraying the rich diversity of life in protected UAE wetlands.

Speaking from the business perspective, Florence Fontani, Engie, acknowledged that her company has a duty of care to address impacts on local ecosystems and biodiversity, and said its ambition is to drive urban transformation for green and more efficient communities.

Assma Gosaibat, Total UAE, on behalf of company president Hatem Nseibeh, said the success of her company requires recognizing social impacts where it operates, noting various endeavors to protect wetlands.

Ramsar Conservation Awards

At the close of the evening, Jay Aldous, Ramsar Secretariat, presented the seventh Ramsar Conservation Awards:

- for wise use of wetlands, to Fundación Global Nature, Spain, acknowledging contributions to long-term sustainable use of wetlands in Spain and beyond, including sustainable farming systems, water treatment, and stakeholder engagement; and
- for young wetlands champions, to the Youth Climate Action Network of Samoa, for its work on mangrove and coral reef rehabilitation, public awareness raising, tree planting, and work with sea turtles.

Ma Guangren, China, received a merit award for his work in China and Asia, including on: establishment of national wetland conservation regulations; a wetland status inventory; funding for conservation and restoration projects; and public awareness and education.

Jorge Rucks, Uruguay, presented Danone with an award marking 20 years of successful collaboration and commitment to conserve and sustainably manage wetlands of international importance.

Facundo Etchebehere, Danone, stressed the company's belief on collaborative work with parties and the Ramsar Secretariat on water security and stewardship. He emphasized the role of the private sector, underscoring "everyone's power to contribute to the transformation of food systems through everyday choices."

Secretary General Urrego closed the first day of COP13, reiterating that "every action counts, none is too small if it contributes to a world of healthy wetlands."