

AEWA MOP 5 HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 14 MAY 2012

The fifth session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP 5) of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds convened for its first day in La Rochelle, France, on Monday, 14 May 2012, under the theme of “Migratory waterbirds and people - sharing wetlands.” Delegates heard opening statements, witnessed the AEWA Awards Presentation Ceremony, and addressed organizational matters.

During the afternoon, delegates considered progress on implementing the AEWA Strategic Plan, issues related to national reporting and international reviews.

OPENING OF THE MEETING

Sabrina Laconi, Deputy Mayor of La Rochelle, representing Mayor Maxime Bono, welcomed participants and described the importance of species conservation and nature reserves to the city.

Béatrice Abollivier, Prefect of the Charente-Maritime department, outlined efforts to facilitate the sharing of the coast and its wetlands by birds and people, lauding collaborations among hunting and nature protection organizations.

In a video message, Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), highlighted the upcoming Rio+20 meeting, pointing to the links between waterbird conservation and sustainable development in the context of the green economy.

Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), commended AEWA as a “small but effective conservation agreement.” She highlighted successful ongoing activities, notably the African Initiative, which she said boosts the implementation of the Agreement in the African region, and also attracts new African parties to AEWA. She stressed the need to strengthen AEWA’s knowledge base by further developing the International Waterbird Census and ensuring its stable, long-term funding. She announced that the position of AEWA Executive Secretary will shortly be advertised.

Marco Barbieri, Acting Executive Secretary of AEWA, welcomed Ethiopia, Chad, Montenegro and Zimbabwe as the newest parties to the Agreement, noting that they bring AEWA’s membership to 66. He said despite all past efforts and successes under AEWA, many waterbird species are still in decline and knowledge gaps still exist. Barbieri highlighted the need for a suitable coordination mechanism to ensure the success of the African Initiative, and also for adequate funding levels, stating that “AEWA is worth the investment.”

Calling La Rochelle an “iconic venue” for migratory waterbird conservation, Jean-Pierre Thébault, Ambassador for the Environment, France, stressed the threatened status of many migratory waterbirds, and reiterated his country’s support of AEWA. He highlighted, *inter alia*, the importance of AEWA’s Plan of Action for Africa and the value of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in waterbird conservation.

Nick Williams, Programme Officer, Interim Coordinating Unit for the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Conservation of Migratory Birds of Prey in Africa and Eurasia (Raptors MoU) of CMS, welcomed France to the MoU, and Ambassador Thébault, calling the agreement a symbol of his country’s commitment to the conservation of birds, signed the document.

Barbieri introduced the signing of a new MoU between the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance and CMS. Nick Davidson, Deputy Secretary General, Ramsar, noted the new agreement would “update, renew and refocus” their already-existing collaboration, and Bert Lenten, CMS Deputy Executive Secretary, committed to ongoing cooperation, noting the importance of wetlands for not only waterbirds but also other migratory species addressed by CMS.

AEWA WATERBIRD CONSERVATION AWARDS

The 2012 AEWA Waterbird Conservation Awards, which recognize individuals and institutions for contributions to the conservation and sustainable use of waterbirds, were introduced by Sergey Dereliev, AEWA Secretariat, and presented by Øystein Størkersen, AEWA Standing Committee Chair. The award in the Individual Category was given to the late Brooks Childress, for his work on flamingo conservation. Following a moment of silence, Sandra Childress accepted the award on her husband’s behalf, noting his deep appreciation for waterbirds, their habitats, and for people who shared his passion and vision.

The International Wader Study Group was awarded in the Institutional Category. Accepting the award on behalf of the Group, Gregor Scheiffarth pointed to the efforts of the Group’s volunteers, noting that researchers are often subject to the limitations of political boundaries that are crossed by waders and that international collaboration to develop sound knowledge of wader ecology is essential.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Bart Ebbinge, Chair of the Goose Specialist Group, coordinated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission and Wetlands International, delivered a keynote address on managing increasing goose populations. He said many goose populations have increased since hunting regulations were introduced in the 1970s, and noted that hunting has now resumed in many countries to reduce pressure on agricultural land. Ebbinge presented case studies relating to brent, white-fronted and pink-footed geese, describing the fine balance between hunting pressure and population size. Stressing the importance of good hunting bag statistics and data on population sizes and dynamics, he concluded that: hunting can have a major impact on goose populations; some species, including the taiga bean goose, are still declining; more flexible hunting legislation would be useful to respond to changing population densities, and that harvest rates should be coordinated and monitored internationally.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

Introducing organizational matters, Størkersen, said that the meeting would address bureaucratic issues, including the budget, but noted that the central focus of AEWA is “conservation on the ground.” He also highlighted some of the challenges for the meeting, including discussions on climate change, extractive industries, the Central Asian Flyway and funding the International Waterbird Census.

Barbieri then introduced the Rules of Procedure (AEWA/MOP5.2), outlining two proposed amendments to address inconsistencies between the Rules and the Agreement, and delegates adopted the Rules of Procedure as amended.

Delegates elected Paul Delduc (France) as Chair of MOP 5, and James Gichia Njogu (Kenya) as Vice-Chair, and adopted the proposed agenda and work programme (AEWA/MOP5.3/Rev.1). Ukraine, the UK, Togo and Kenya were elected to the Credentials Committee.

Delegates established two working groups, electing Norway as Chair and Algeria, assisted by Uganda, as Vice-Chair of the Finance and Administrative Working Group, and Kenya as Chair and South Africa as Vice-Chair of the Scientific and Technical Working Group.

Delegates then admitted several observers.

OPENING STATEMENTS

ICELAND, CÔTE D’IVOIRE, the RUSSIAN FEDERATION and POLAND announced that they were in the final stages of accession to AEWA.

CHAD, GABON, ETHIOPIA and ZIMBABWE recalled their recent accession to the Agreement. CHAD described its national habitat and species diversity, and ETHIOPIA highlighted relevant activities including biodiversity monitoring, public awareness campaigns and the development of single species action plans. ZIMBABWE outlined its national priorities, including mainstreaming AEWA activities into national development plans.

MAURITANIA, TOGO and the AFRICAN GROUP stressed the importance of waterbird conservation in the larger context of ensuring sustainable livelihoods, with the AFRICAN GROUP highlighting its work on a five-year Plan of Action including activities towards waterbird conservation at the regional level.

OUTCOMES OF CMS COP 10 AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTS OF RELEVANCE TO AEWA

Lauding the growing overlap between CMS and AEWA focal points as an example of increasing synergies, CMS Executive Secretary Mrema presented on the outcomes of CMS COP 10 that are of relevance to AEWA. Pointing to COP 10’s theme of ecological networks, she highlighted the links between species and habitat protection and AEWA’s work on the Critical Sites Network Tool.

She noted a CMS resolution on flyways, along with efforts to organize meetings of Central Asian Flyway range states and synergies with meetings of the Raptors MoU, and a resolution on the development of an action plan for the conservation of migratory landbirds.

Mrema also noted AEWA-relevant CMS work on, *inter alia*: protection of migratory birds from collision and electrocution by power grids; minimizing risks of poisoning to migratory birds; a review of invasive alien species; the impacts of climate change on migratory species; developing a new “CMS family” website to improve data sharing and harmonize reporting; and the future shape of CMS and its instruments, including AEWA.

Germany, on behalf of the European Community (EC), said the EC would present a proposal to mandate the Standing Committee to enhance synergies between CMS and AEWA.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AEWA STRATEGIC PLAN

The Secretariat introduced the report analyzing the overall progress of the implementation of the 2009-2017 Strategic Plan (AEWA/MOP5.11), noting that the report concluded overall progress was “very insufficient.” He said the most progress had been achieved in the systematic sustainable use of waterbirds, and that the least progress had been achieved in improving the conservation status of migratory waterbirds.

The Secretariat explained the report included 12 recommendations to improve implementation of the Strategic Plan. SENEGAL noted that several of the recommendations have been taken up by the Plan of Action for Africa 2012-2017.

NATIONAL REPORTS AND ONLINE REPORTING PROCESS

Discussing the report on national reports and the online reporting process (AEWA/MOP5.12), the Secretariat outlined recommendations to improve reporting, including to: address the wording of questions to avoid misinterpretation; tailor questions to each contracting party; develop an analytical module for the reporting system; and train national respondents in use the system.

In the ensuing discussion, MALI explained it had not submitted its national report due to national political unrest. The RAMSAR SECRETARIAT said several of its parties had expressed an interest in an online platform that allows for harmonization and cross-searching between various multilateral environment agreement (MEA) databases.

The Secretariat outlined the development of the online reporting system (ORS), noting the 69% response rate, and introduced the draft resolution on national reporting and the online reporting system (AEWA/MOP5 DR 1).

SWITZERLAND, DENMARK, SENEGAL and TUNISIA reported technical difficulties with submitting their reports online. SENEGAL questioned the need for harmonization with reporting on the EU Birds Directive, and TUNISIA lamented the Secretariat’s “top-down approach.” The Secretariat recalled that the system and format had been approved by MOP 4, and that the Standing and Technical Committees had been closely involved in the intersessional work on the ORS. He said the Secretariat would circulate a survey on the ORS, and delegates agreed to establish a working group to consider the issue further.

INTERNATIONAL REVIEWS

Szabolcs Nagy, Wetlands International, outlined the 5th edition of the Conservation Status Report (AEWA/MOP5.14) and the preliminary Site Network Report (AEWA/MOP5.15). Nagy presented recommendations from both reports, including, for the former, developing concerted efforts to improve monitoring and reducing impacts of biological resource use and water management activities, and for the latter, designating critical sites and conducting gap-filling surveys in poorly-known areas.

The Secretariat introduced the associated draft resolution on addressing gaps in knowledge of and conservation action for waterbird populations and sites important for them (AEWA/MOP5 DR 2), and announced that the draft resolution would be considered by the Scientific and Technical Working Group. Several delegations commented on the importance of the resolution, and some offered initial comments on, *inter alia*, site designation criteria, whether Ramsar criteria could be used by AEWA and collaboration between AEWA and Ramsar.

IN THE CORRIDORS

Participants arriving in the picturesque 1000-year-old port city of La Rochelle were greeted by warm sunshine and a harbor-side view, which many hoped would inspire MOP 5’s work. Monday, the opening day of the meeting, saw four countries announce they had recently acceded to the Agreement, and another four note they were in the final stages of doing so. Some pointed to the recently-established African Initiative as a key part of the success in attracting African parties and strengthening the Agreement in this region.

Others were more critical in their early-week assessments of AEWA, citing the damning review of the implementation of AEWA’s 2009-2017 Strategic Plan, in which progress was deemed as “very insufficient.” Yet, while cautious in their praise, some seasoned delegates reasoned that AEWA is only one third of its way through the Strategic Plan period and should therefore not be judged too harshly at this point. Looking forward, and foreshadowing the still-to-come budgetary negotiations, they stressed that funding will be critical if AEWA is to meet the objectives outlined in the Strategic Plan.