CONVENTION ON WETLANDS
CONVENTION SUR LES ZONES HUMIDES
CONVENCIÓN SOBRE LOS HUMEDALES
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

The Convention on Wetlands, signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty which provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are presently 138 Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 1328 wetland sites, totaling 111.9 million hectares, designated under the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance (also called Ramsar sites). The Convention's mission is the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world (Ramsar Conference Of the Parties 8, 2002).

***Key facts and figures…***

- *Less than 1% of the Earth's water resources are freshwater.*
- *20% of the world has no access to safe drinking water and 50% does not have sanitation.*
- *Waterborne diseases kill between 5 and 10 million people each year.*
- *It takes 2000 liters of water to produce 1Kg of rice.*
- *50% of the world's wetlands were lost during the last century.*
- *Over 700 freshwater species are currently on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.*
- *Wetlands produce an estimated value of US$ 3.4 billions each year, according to a recent WWF report.*
- *Hydropower provides 20% of the energy worldwide.*
- *The Mekong River produces US$ 1,2 billion worth of fish every year.*
- *A wetland in Canada (Congaree Bottomland Hardwood Swamp) delivers the same services as a US$ 5 million purifying plant would.*

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Media Brief

# Are we running out of water ?…

*A global strategy is needed to ensure the world's water resources.*

**Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, February 13th 2004 (Ramsar Convention Secretariat):** As the Inland Water Program is still being discussed during CBD's CoP7 in Malaysia, the world is facing one of the major challenges of the history: ensuring enough water for everyone.

> ***Current status: the water crisis.*** *The world population is heavily dependent on freshwater. We use water in our everyday life but we also depend on it for our survival. Similarly, water is essential for the persistence of life on the planet. Biodiversity is strongly driven by water resources and many animal and plant species need water to survive. To ensure our food supplies, we need for example, 2.000 liters of water to produce 1Kg of rice. Yet water is a scarce resource: less than 1% of the planet's water resources are freshwater.*
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> *The geographical division of water is also unequal, as are the resources needed for proper water management. At least 20% of the world population doesn't have access to safe drinking water today, and another 50% does not have any water sanitation system. More generally, 40% of the world population lives in water-scarce river basins. Waterborne diseases, consequences of a bad water management scheme, kill between 5 and 10 million people each year.*
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> *Water is scarce, not ideally managed, but it's also overexploited. We use about 4.000 Km3 of water a year, the equivalent of 20% of the world's rivers base flow (i.e. the amount of water in rivers most of the time). Between 1900 and 1995, water withdrawals increased by a factor of more than six, which is more than twice the rate of the population growth, according to WMO. Of course, water consumption depends heavily on the geographic area, and developed countries are responsible for the great majority of the withdrawals. As population grows, demand for food and, therefore, water for irrigation increases, placing higher pressures on the water left in rivers and streams. The agricultural sector, society's major user of water, withdraws 70% of all water for irrigation.*
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> *While water demand is increasing, pollution from industry, urban centers and agricultural runoff is limiting the amount of water available for domestic use and food production. In developing countries, an estimated 90% of wastewater is discharged directly into rivers and streams without prior treatment. In many parts of the world, rivers and lakes have been so polluted that their water is unfit even for industrial uses.*
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> *From the point of view of biodiversity alone, over 700 freshwater species are currently listed on the IUCN Red Data List of endangered species, and an estimated 50% of the world's wetlands have been lost during the last century, while overexploitation is threatening most of the freshwater and marine fisheries.*

**The importance of wetlands:**

**Often seen as deposits for mosquitoes, worms and diseases, wetlands are really the kidneys of the planet.**

For the purposes of the Ramsar Convention, wetlands include any area where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. They occur where the water table is at or near the surface of land or where the land is covered by shallow water. According to this definition, wetlands can range from ice and snow fields in high mountains ecosystems to coral reefs or coastal and marine ecosystems where the water

is less than 6 meters deep at low tide. They can be natural or human made (shrimp ponds, salt pans, irrigated agricultural land, canals, etc.) and represent, according to the definition above and including some coastal areas in some countries, an estimated 1,279 million hectares (i.e. around 12% of the Earth's surface).

Wetlands are extremely important for biodiversity (they shelter, for example, about 41% of the living fish species and are vital for a great number of snakes, crocodilians, amphibians, but also birds and mammals), but they are even more important for people. Wetlands are natural filters for water. It has been calculated, for example, that the Congaree Bottomland Hardwood Swamp (Canada) delivers the same services as a US$5 million purifying plant would. High mountain lakes and river basins, but also others lowland wetlands ecosystems are very often used as deposits of drinking water. The city of New York (USA), for example, is naturally supplied with drinking water by the Catskill watershed, located some 160 kilometers north from the city. The natural filtering mechanisms of this ecosystem allow the city to get potable water without having to invest in expensive purifying systems.

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on Earth. They can be used directly for food supplies or indirectly for agricultural purposes. The population of Cambodia, for example, obtains 60% of its total animal protein from the fishery resources of the Tonle Sap alone (MRC, 1997), and this percentage is even higher in some landlocked countries. Inland fisheries in Malawi provide about 70-75% of the total animal protein for both urban and rural low-income families (FAO, 1996).

> ***The international game board.*** *The water issue has become one of the first priority in the international agenda after the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002). Already in Johannesburg, the need for a global strategy for water was stressed by several Heads of States, including France among others. Several initiatives have been undertaken like the Ramsar-WWF Living Waters program, trying to put in practice the lessons learnt on water and integrated basins management. Today, the CBD agenda is also dealing with the water issue through it's Inland Water programme of work. But* ***two years after Johannesburg, we still lack a global strategy for water****, the CBD discussions have hardly started to solve a part of the problem and no international instrument is really focusing on the issue.*

**A new focus for Ramsar.** Originally created to preserve wetlands as a vital habitat for waterfowl, the Ramsar Convention was the first international treaty to promote an integrated management of ecosystems: the wise use principle. Similar to the CBD's developing ecosystem approach, the wise use principle recommends an integrated vision of ecosystems, including not only biological or ecological factors, but also human, social, cultural, economic and institutional dimensions, among others. The Ramsar Convention has been evolving since 1971 and is about, today, to take a big step in a new, broadened dimension dealing with the water issue.

This new focus of the Ramsar Convention is based not only on the discussions that happened during its last CoP in Valencia (Spain) in 2002, and the diplomatic strength given to this project by the Swiss Federal Government, beside other countries, but more importantly on a strong experience in water and wetlands management. The Ramsar Convention appears today as the only international treaty able to deal with the water issue.

"The Ramsar Convention is the major global convention on water", said today His Excellency Ambassador Beat Nobs, from the Agency for the Environment, Forest and Landscape of Switzerland.

With the strong basis of the "wise use principle" applied to the sites designated under the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance, the new focus of the Ramsar Convention will integrate the human and social aspects of water management, along with its institutional, economic and cultural dimensions **to shift from the "wetlands for birds" perspective to that of "water for people"**, and ensure water resources and their correct management not only ecological purposes, but also for human development.

***Contacts at Ramsar...***
For any question, comment or for any further information on this document or on the Ramsar Convention, please contact:

**Sebastià Semene Guitart**
*Special Assistant on Media, Outreach and Culture*
ssg@ramsar.org

**Dwight Peck**
*Communications Officer*
peck@ramsar.org

Tel: +41 (0) 22 999 0170
Fax: +41 (0) 22 999 0169

**www.ramsar.org**

*"Right now the world is poised to cope with the issue of ensuring enough freshwater for all – which means ensuring enough water for wetlands and other ecosystems, but integrating also human needs around the world", said Dr. Peter Bridgewater, Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention during his opening statement at CBD CoP7.*

> ***The Niger delta example.*** *Ramsar's efficiency in dealing with the water issue can be well illustrated by the recent designation of the Inner Niger Delta (Mali) on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance. The Inner Niger Delta is one the recently designated sites (on February, 2nd 2004) but also one of the biggest. With 4,119,500 ha, the Inner Niger Delta is the third biggest protected area in the world and the second biggest in Africa after the Okavango delta (Botswana). The delta is a vital ecosystem for Mali and more than 1 million people depend on its resources for their survival. In one of the poorest countries in the world, the Inner Niger Delta provides, each year, up to 130,000 tones of fish and offers a grazing area for more than 5 million of cattle. Overexploitation and unsuitable fishing techniques are the main threats to the delta, together with a risk of uncontrolled human development (partially linked to an increasing tourist frequentation) on the shores that already support more than 20% of the population of Mali.*
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> *The delta's designation under the Ramsar List is subjected to the implementation of a management plan, agreed with the national and local authorities, to ensure the wise (sustainable) use of the delta. This designation is symbolic for the Ramsar Convention, as the Inner Niger Delta is the third biggest designated area in the world, but it's also, and most than everything else a major achievement in preserving Mali's water and food resources as well as testing, in the field, the effectiveness of the "wise use principle".*

***The Putrajaya Wetlands example.*** *The Putrajaya Wetlands in Malaysia are the largest constructed freshwater wetland in the tropics. Construction began in March 1997 and was completed in August 1998. Over 90% of the materials used were sourced locally. Where oil palm plantations once stood, there is now a wetland ecosystem that spans 197 hectares and is inhabited by 12.3 million wetland plants. The wetlands function as a flood control system and a natural filter system for the 400 hectare man-made Putrajaya Lake. Created by damming of Sg. Chuau and Sg. Bisa, the lake is an important landscape and recreational feature of the administrative capital and drains a 50.9 km catchment area.*

*For any information on the Ramsar Convention or on this document, or to ask for an interview with the Ramsar representatives in the CBD CoP, please contact Mr. Sebastià Semene (GSM: +41792906001 / e-mail: ssg@ramsar.org / c.c.: Legend Hotel).*

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For any question, comment or for any further information on this document or on the Ramsar Convention, please contact:

**Sebastià Semene Guitart**
*Special Assistant on Media, Outreach and Culture*
ssg@ramsar.org

**Dwight Peck**
*Communications Officer*
peck@ramsar.org

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