

Recent developments in the
implementation of the
Ramsar Convention
in countries of the Arab Region

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First, a historical reminder

- The Ramsar Convention originated in the Mediterranean area
- The first call by scientists and experts for a formal inter-governmental agreement on wetlands came at the “MAR” Conference, held at the Tour du Valat, Camargue, the delta of the Rhone in southern France in 1962.

Why the “MAR” conference?

- The three letters “MAR” were the first letters of “marsh” (English), “marais” (French), “Marsch” (German) and “marisma” (Spanish).
- Would it work in Arabic too?
- Since then, the newly coined word “wetland” has come into general use, thanks in no small measure to the Ramsar Convention.
- One of the crucial elements of the Ramsar text is its extremely broad definition of the term “wetland”, including not just marshes, but also rivers, coasts, shallow seas, desert wadis and oases.

Two important concepts from MAR

- In addition to the obvious values of wetlands for water supply and biodiversity, the MAR conference introduced two important wetland values that Ramsar has adopted:
 - Heritage
 - Productivity

Wetland heritage

- The MAR Conference underlined the values of wetlands as an essential part of people's heritage, with the phrase

“You would not pull down the Cathedral of Chartres to plant a field of potatoes; you would not destroy a great wetland either”.

Wetland productivity

- The MAR Conference also coined another phrase about wetlands, which has been widely quoted since

“The productivity of wetlands is eight times greater than that of a wheat field”.

Ramsar application in the Arab Region

- These brief historical comments are intended as an introduction to Ramsar application in some Arab countries, notably in North Africa.
- Most countries in the region began by designating a small number of sites for the Ramsar “List of wetlands of international importance”.

New Ramsar sites in North Africa

- In the last few years, with strong support from the WWF Living Waters Campaign (which will address the present meeting on this subject), Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have designated many additional sites.
- Morocco currently has 24 Ramsar sites covering 270,000 hectares
- Algeria currently has 42 Ramsar sites, covering over 3 million hectares

Tunisian Ramsar sites

- After listing Lake Ichkeul as its first Ramsar site in 1981, Tunisia added 19 sites in 2007, and a further 21 sites are to be added in 2009.
- The Government of Tunisia, in listing its new Ramsar sites, paid attention to the concept of wetland heritage by choosing a variety of wetland types from peat bogs to karstic wetlands, freshwater lakes, brackish “sebkhas” and very importantly the tidal wetlands of the Gulf of Gabes.

Tidal wetlands in the Gulf of Gabes

The Gulf of Gabes, the only major tidal area in the Mediterranean outside the Venice Lagoons, has a tidal range of 2 metres between high and low water



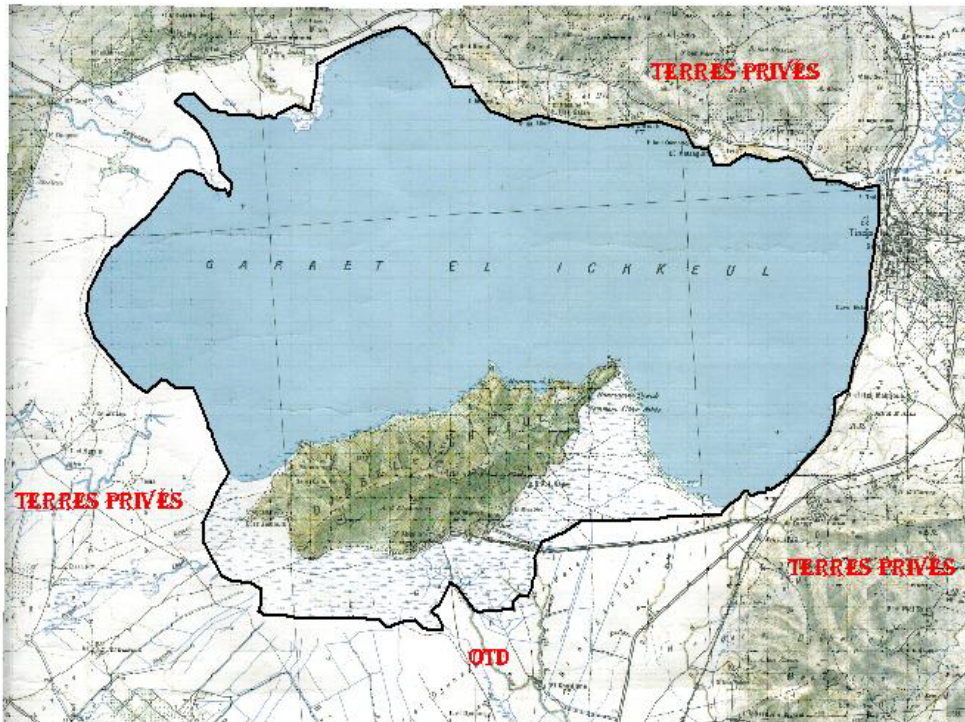
Ichkeul




Ichkeul map

CARTE DE DELIMITATION DU PARC NATIONAL D'ICHKEUL ET DE SA ZONE TAMPON

EXTRAIT DE LA CEM MENZEL BOURGUIBA ECHELLE 1/50000



LEGENDE

 Limite du parc nationale
de l'ichkeul et de sa zone tampon

Ichkeul: water supply and biodiversity

- As the best source of high quality fresh water in the country, Ichkeul is a major feature of the Tunisian national water supply plan
- The plan involves building of dams in the wetter northern parts of the country, and transferring water through pipelines to other drier areas.
- Six dams are planned on rivers which flow into Ichkeul, and three have already been built.

Ichkeul – effect of dams and drought

- The building and filling of the largest dam in the 1990s coincided with a period of poor rainfall over nearly ten years.
- The decreased inflow resulted in greatly increased salinity in the lake and surrounding marshes: fish production declined to zero, vegetation and wintering water birds disappeared.
- As a result, Ichkeul was included on the list of World Heritage in Danger, and on the Ramsar Montreux Record.

Ichkeul: the solution

- Extremely detailed scientific monitoring of the situation at Ichkeul is being carried out (Ichkeul is probably the most consistently monitored wetland in the Mediterranean).
- Normal winter rains returned from 2002/03, and the sluice on the outflow has controlled salinity and water levels.
- As a result, fisheries have been restored, most of the vegetation and water birds have returned.

Ichkeul: future policy

- Most important of all, the Government of Tunisia has adopted a policy which states that, in management of Ichkeul's waters, priority will be given to water supply, but that - as long as rainfall is adequate – agriculture and “ecological water” shall have equal second priority.
- This far-reaching decision offers a possible example for other countries in arid areas, who wish to maintain the many values of wetlands of international importance.

Azraq, Jordan

- Delegates from Jordan took part in the original Conference at Ramsar in 1971
- Jordan was the first Arab Contracting Party and the Azraq oasis and its famous “Qa” was the first Jordanian (and Arab) Ramsar site.
- The population of the oasis increased greatly in the 1980s and 1990s, so exploitation of surface water and the underground aquifer increased sharply.

Water extraction at Azraq

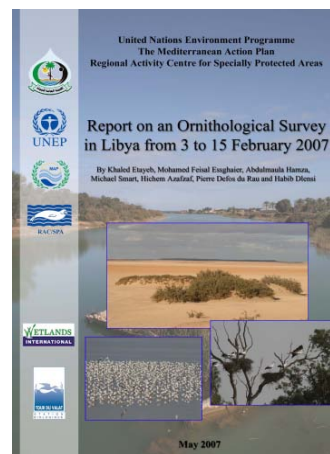
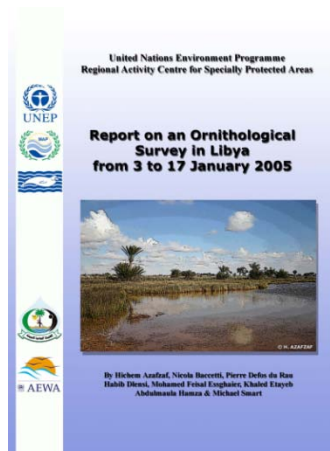
- Average annual inflow of water to Azraq is estimated at 25 MCM (million cubic metres).
- In recent years, annual pumping of groundwater is estimated at 35 MCM, plus 70 MCM for local agriculture.
- One of every four glasses of water drunk in Amman come from Azraq!

Azraq: the solution

- The “Azraq Dialogues”, organized by the Jordanian Government and the Royal Society for Conservation of Nature, have allowed extensive consultation between the national authorities, local residents and agriculturalists.
- A vision for Azraq 20 years ahead has been developed, involving a decrease of water extraction and re-establishment of the original conditions.
- Here is another case of forward planning which may offer an example for other countries of the region.

Surveys of Libyan wetlands

- In Libya, recent surveys in summer and winter, carried out by the Libyan Environment General Authority and the UNEP Regional Activities Centre (RAC/SPA), have documented the richness of Libyan wetlands.



Future activities in Libya

- The winter reports provide basic data on the wetlands of Libya which could be used for designation of further Libyan Ramsar sites, in addition to the two already designated.
- Surveys have also been carried out on wetlands in summer in particular on nesting sites of Lesser Crested Tern, 99% of whose Mediterranean population nests on three Libyan islands. There are exciting possibilities of studies of comparable colonies of this species in the Red Sea.

Lesser Crested Tern, Sebkhet Jeliana



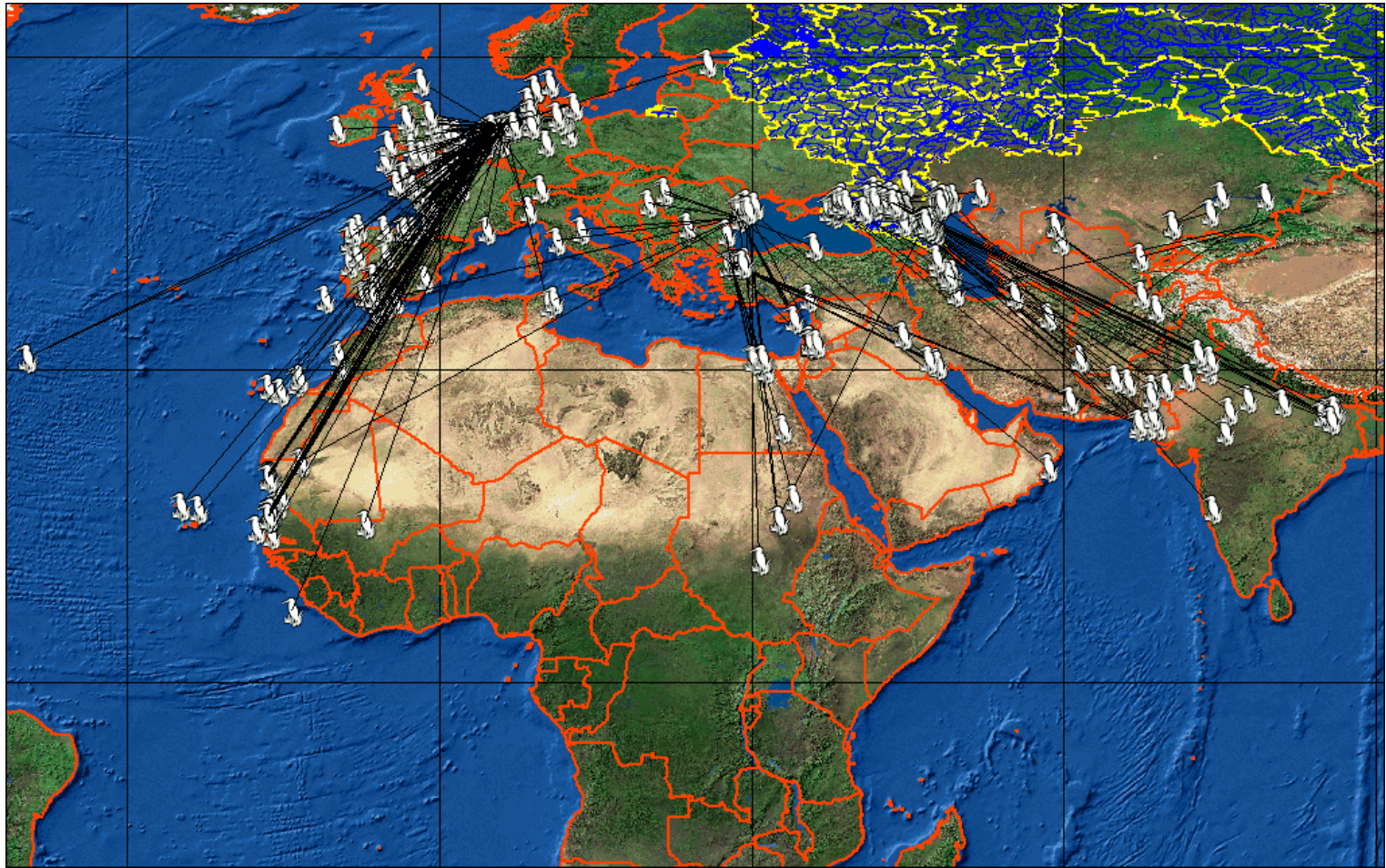
From the Rhone Delta in the Camargue to the Nile Delta in Egypt?

- The MAR Conference was held in the Rhone Delta, southern France.
- The Nile Delta is much the largest on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.
- Water management in the Nile Valley and Delta is one of the key factors in the historical development of human civilization and heritage.
- While the Nile Delta lakes are Ramsar sites, little recent detailed information on their fauna and flora is available.
- Might it be possible to envisage future surveys of the Nile Delta lakes, like those carried out in Libya?

Spoonbill - a Nile topic of special interest

- Spoonbills nesting in western Europe winter along the Atlantic Coast; birds from Central Europe winter mainly in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Those nesting in eastern Europe winter either along the Nile, in the Red Sea or the Arabian Gulf, but information on numbers is limited.
- Recently, AEWA has drawn up a Species Action Plan for Spoonbill.

Map of ringing recoveries of Spoonbill



Spoonbill colour rings: More readings needed along the Nile!



Another Nile/Red Sea conundrum

- Slender-billed Curlew is one of the rarest birds in the world, listed by IUCN as Critically Endangered (CR), with a maximum world population of 100 individuals.
- It may still winter in the Mediterranean or the Red Sea.
- AEWA is supporting a last search in winter 2009/10 to look for surviving birds.
- Participants in the present meeting are urgently requested to assist in the search, and leaflets are available.

The last Slender-billed Curlew?

