

REPORT OF THE STRASBOURG WORKSHOP  
OF TRANSBOUNDARY RAMSAR SITES  
JANUARY 29<sup>th</sup> 2010

RAMSAR CONVENTION ON WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE

ARTICLE 5: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Article 5 states that: « “The Contracting Parties shall consult each other about implementing obligations arising from the Convention especially in the case of wetlands extending over the territories of more than one Contracting Party or where the water system is shared by Contracting Parties. They shall at the same time endeavour to coordinate and support present and future policies and regulations concerning the conservation of wetlands and their flora and fauna.”

Contracting Parties are urged to give priority to site twinning and networking as a way to promote information sharing among site managers, to provide training opportunities, and where appropriate to direct development assistance.

The concept of Transboundary Ramsar Site refers to a coherent ecological system of wetlands that lie across national political boundaries and to national authorities in charge of Ramsar Sites deciding to officially cooperate to the management of the cross-border Site and to inform the Secretariat of their intention.

While not a comprehensive global assessment, the report prepared by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) « Shared wetlands and river basins of the world » provides a preliminary basis for the identification of shared wetlands. This report indicates that of 955 Ramsar sites considered in the analysis, 92 (9.6%) sites may be subject to impacts from adjoining jurisdictions and could therefore benefit from cooperative management approaches between countries.

Whenever In the past, priority has been given to encouraging the Contracting Parties with shared wetlands included in the List of Wetlands of International Importance to cooperate in their management. Article 3.1 of the Convention indicates very clearly that cooperation should extend to all shared wetlands, whether Ramsar-listed or not.

The Ramsar Site “Rhin supérieur/Oberrhein” (Upper Rhine) has been designated Transboundary Wetland of International Importance in 2008. It is the 9<sup>th</sup> Site on the List. Presently, 12 Sites are officially designated Transboundary Ramsar Sites. 11 are located in Europe, 1 is shared between Gambia and Senegal in West Africa.

Preparing for designating the French-German Ramsar Site ‘Upper Rhine’ took 14 years for different reasons. All transboundary sites experiment the same difficulties despite the political will of partners. International cooperation is one of the Ramsar Convention’s obligations for Parties (art.5). Nevertheless, if out of 1885 designated sites, only 26 officially requested the transboundary status, it certainly means that the task is not that simple!

The regional authority of the Alsace, formally manager of the French side of the Upper Rhine R.S. together with its partners, the regional administrative environmental authority and the Alsace Nature NGO federation, wondered about the reasons of these difficulties and how they could be overcome.

They then came to the idea of contacting the other Transboundary Ramsar Sites and exchanging with them on various challenging issues like governance, management, inventories and monitoring. After analysing and comparing these factors, it could be envisaged to find practical solutions and work out a common frame or at least a common vision.

The invitation to a first technical meeting of Transboundary Ramsar Sites managers and Ramsar focal persons was warmly welcome. All concerned were willing to participate despite financial restrictions in their administration, lack of priority of the Ramsar Convention over other obligations and difficulties in getting a visa for the EU. Eventually few persons have been prevented from participating: Senegal, Gambia, the Czech Republic, Belarus and Estonia. A total of 40 participants took part in the meeting on January 29, 2010.

Participants were warmly welcome by Mrs. Danièle Meyer in the name of the Conseil Régional d'Alsace. She is an elected councillor as well as mayor of the city of Rhinau located in the Ramsar Site and also President of the Rhin Vivant association (Living Rhine). Mr. Michel Guéry, director of the regional environment authority, addressed the audience on the importance of biodiversity and wetlands conservation and on the added value of networks like Natura 2000 and Ramsar Sites.

The programme was built on two axels: in the morning presentations were made on TRS Management and on tools for transboundary governance. In the afternoon, the session was devoted to discuss over the possible network.

## **I – Valuing Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Strategy: experiences of joint Management Plans:**

Moderator: Jana Durkosova

- Two presentations were given: the trilateral Site Morava-Danube-Tisza shared by Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic and the Haute-Sûre Site shared by Belgium and Luxemburg. These two examples underlined the differences existing between a site shared by two authorities dealing with the same language, the same legal and administrative system and an other shared by three entities with different languages and systems. It also emphasized the methods and solutions that were adopted and adapted to their contexts. In the case of the trilateral site, obstacles could be overcome by NGOs cooperating across the borders. Moreover they originated most of the common initiatives that succeeded in overstepping legal, administrative or financial constraints. The NGO role was mentioned several times during the meeting nevertheless it was also brought up that the State must assume its responsibility in managing the site and that NGOs cannot substitute for it. In this connection, it is upsetting to note that environmental authorities in almost all countries are weakening and in certain cases even questioned and that the Ramsar convention is far from having priority over other objectives.
- In both cases, it was stressed that successful transboundary cooperation starts with good communication between NGOs or local groups and governments/authorities and also towards the public at large. EU Programmes, the WFD as well as the Ramsar STRP (Scientific and Technical Review Panel) strongly recommend it.

## **II – Available tools for Governance: Transboundary experiences**

Moderator: Jean-Luc Sadorge

- Two constructive examples of international cooperation were presented to the audience: Mr. Hoeffel explained the Rhine Council, cooperation body made of 71 elected representatives and local politicians of Alsace (France), the Land of Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and the Basel City and Basel Canton (Switzerland). This Council discusses over day to day problems of the people and transmits its resolutions to relevant authorities for and expressed its whole support to the establishment of the Ramsar network.

- Mrs. Vogel put forward the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River to which 19 countries are a party in the river basin. Diverse or differing languages, geography, political and administrative regimes could be overcome especially thanks to the implementation of the EU water framework directive. For this convention as well as for the Rhine or other river basins conventions, the transboundary cooperation on wetlands is a major asset for reaching the good ecological status.
- Mrs. Salambo presented her organisation: the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (Operational Transboundary Mission in France). It works on a legal framework for cross-border governance basing on the Principles set up by the Council of Europe. Its main goal is to ease their implementation and provide for legal framework for institutional cooperation as in the case of the Hainaut National Park or the Mercantour National Park. Presently there is no European status for a transboundary territory.
- The Association Rhin vivant (Living Rhine Association) has been created to develop ecotourism along the Upper Rhine in Alsace as well as in Baden-Württemberg. It is working within the Ramsar Site boundaries with all local stakeholders. It follows the Principles of the Europark Charta. Its activities are linked to nature conservation and one of its tasks is to mobilize stakeholders in favour of natural habitats and to mitigate potential conflicts. The Conseil Régional is recommending Rhin Vivant as the coordinating body for the Upper Rhine Site. Mr. Charton, its director is presently working on new statutes in order to adapt them to this new task.
- Mr. Guillermo Martinez told us about the network of border regions Euregio/ARFE based at Gronau in Germany. Grounded in the fifties it counts 100 members at pan-European level to date. The Alsace Region is an active member. Their main activities are to lobby for their specific interests, in particular: positive discrimination for areas that are most of the time peripheral, desindustrialised, depopulated but with ecotourism opportunities.

### **III – Which objectives for the network?**

Moderator: Tobias Salathé, senior Ramsar advisor for Europe

The second main line of the programme was devoted to discussing the opportunity of establishing a network of transboundary Ramsar sites and how to organise it. All participants are motivated for creating the network and to help one another to best manage their sites.

Tobias gave the main lines of transboundary cooperation:

- from the Ramsar convention side, the following factors are to be considered: the catchment approach, the wise use process of transboundary areas that includes:
  - unilateral work on each side
  - establishment of contacts across borders
  - joint planning
  - undertaking common, coordinated activities
  - administering a shared site jointly (share staff and resources...)
- managing a transboundary site while integrating site management within broad-scale environment planning could include:
  - identify objectives
  - identify factors that affect the site
  - resolve conflicts
  - define monitoring requirements
- Different instruments already exist that could be used:

- Europarc Transfrontier Protected Areas and Recommendations for policy-makers and site-managers
- Managing International Rivers and Wetlands: several international instruments are the UN-ECE Water convention, the EU-WFD, the series of International River Basins Conventions...

The discussion continued on how to proceed further with the network. The following is a synthesised report of the main challenges:

- how to increase the Ramsar network: why not contact Border Ramsar Sites to become part of it (the Prut, the Danube delta, the Prespa lake, etc.)
- the network could create a base for common language and joint projects and create many opportunities to promote T.R.S.
- it could become a good tool to improve the management of sites
- it could emphasize the river basin scale : upstream/downstream aspects like the Danube basin
- a greater autonomy could be given to simplify cooperation and increase political will if a frame can be created for protected areas
- different types of Ramsar sites share ecological services and also dangers around them. Work with local stakeholders outside the Site (forest cutting, agriculture, mining...), economic users and other stakeholders could be useful. Ramsar sites can also be affected by upstream pollution like the Black Sea and the Danube River. In this case, the Black Sea Wetlands Initiative was created to address this issue.
- A cooperation Government/NGOs and site managers is recommended.

Useful leads for financing the network, at least for the first years, were presented especially through EU funding programmes. Mr. Virciglio (Alsace Region posted in Brussels) elaborated on how to fund the network. It seems quite sure that the Interreg IV C priority 2 that is running from 2007-2013 would be the best possible funding to date. It covers 60 to 75% of the costs for 24 to 36 months and the counterpart could be partly provided in kind.

#### Organizing the network:

The main issues for that are:

- Which added value for the network?
- How to coordinate?
- The work load of participants
- Which activities select? :
  - lobby work
  - Communication, awareness, education
  - Exchange of good practices
  - Common vision
  - Smaller projects
  - Supplement gaps
  - Inventories of wetlands and interlinkage
  - Training for managers
  - Ecosystem services and cost/benefit analysis vs. economic uses

The overarching aim could be beyond legally binding legislation ?

#### **Conclusion of the workshop : what next?**

A single working day was not enough to enter into much detail; therefore it was decided to create a think tank in charge of working out proposals on objectives and priorities for the network. This core group will be coordinated by the Région Alsace and its members will represent sites with different characteristics and geographic areas. At the time being volunteers are Mr. Sigmund, Mr. Urtans, Mr. Liesse, Mr. Kadlecik and Mr. Baboianu. Our initiative and its development will be presented at the next COP in Romania in 2012.

#### **IV – Field Visit on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup>**

The workshop was followed on the next day with a field visit of the Ramsar site.

- Christian Dronneau (Alsace Region) took the opportunity of the bus trip to explain the Rhine River situation since it was regulated in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and equipped with 10 hydropower dams. After this technical development, efforts are made to improve the ecological situation in reconnecting the ancient floodplain to running water and also to take measures to recreate flooding areas. Interreg Programmes are leading these measures.
  
- The City of Strasbourg (Mr. Lux) explained to participants the restoration works undergoing in the Neuhof Forest (600 ha) that is to become a nature reserve. Presently reconnecting old arms and groundwater filled watercourses to the Rhine drainage canal will give back the alluvial character to the forest.
  
- On the German side Mrs Ulrike Pfarr (responsible of the Integrated Rhine Programme) guided the group into the « Altenheim polder » where she explained the need to recreate flooding areas to hold back as much flood waters as possible upstream after the regulation of the Rhine River cut it shorter by 30 km. At the same time these retention areas will restore the floodplain and its rich biodiversity.
  
- Despite the cold and snow, guides and participants exchanged thoughts on the specific problems of the Upper Rhine. Some among the group were quite upset by the rather artificial character of the site and dubious about the wetlands quality but at the same time restoring wetlands is highly recommended by the Ramsar Convention. This activity on top of the fulfilling of the Ramsar criteria gives an idea of the regional political will to bring back the Upper Rhine to an as much ecological possible functioning.

At the end of this report it must be mentioned that the quality of exchanges among participants to the workshop was definitely favoured by tasting together the local gastronomy generously offered by the Région Alsace..