



Workshop on Wetlands and the Ramsar Convention in the Arabian Peninsula (7th – 9th June, 2010)

Hosted by: Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, Sultanate of Oman
Organized by: Ramsar Convention Secretariat; Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs, Sultanate of Oman
Supported by: Secretariat of the League of Arab States; UNEP-ROWA
Sponsored by: Danone – Evian Fund; Ramsar Regional Centre – Central and West Asia (RRC-EA)

Summary

The ‘Workshop on Wetlands and the Ramsar Convention in the Arabian Peninsula’ was held in Muscat, Oman from 7 – 9 June, 2010 with the aim of providing information about the Ramsar Convention to countries in the Arabian Peninsula that were not yet Contracting Parties to the Convention, and to develop a work plan to support wetland conservation and wise use in the Peninsula. Staff from the Ramsar Convention Secretariat answered a range of questions from all the participants about the aims and work of the Convention. This included questions on the importance and need to ensure the wise use of wetlands, the benefits of accession to the Ramsar Convention, the process of identifying and designating Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites) and the value to the site of such designation; the need for international cooperation for wetland conservation and wise use.

A ‘Muscat Action Plan for Wetlands in the Arab Countries’ was developed from the workshop which will guide the Ramsar Convention Secretariat, national governments, international and regional organizations to cooperate and implement over the coming 1-2 years (until 2012), for the conservation of wetlands on a national level, as well as across the Arab region.

1. Background

The Arab Region supports a unique and diverse range of coastal wetlands, (e.g. sabkha, salt pans, mangrove forests, tidal-flat, coral reefs and seagrass beds), as well as inland wetlands, (e.g. oasis, wadi, rivers and streams). Wetlands in the region may also be human-made, (e.g. sewage lagoons), or may be underground, (e.g. aquifers). In recognition of the importance and diversity of the wetlands in the Arab region, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, in partnership with the League of Arab States and the United Nations Environment Program – Regional Office of West Asia, organized the “Regional Technical Meeting on Implementation of the Ramsar Convention in the Arab Region”, held in Cairo in June 2009. The main outcome of the meeting was the ‘Cairo Statement’ which gave recommendations for the implementation of the Ramsar Convention in the Arab Region. In November 2009, the ‘Cairo Statement’ was formally approved by the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment at their meeting in Marsa Alam, Egypt.

One of the recommendations in the Cairo Statement, was ‘to progress towards universal membership of the [Ramsar] Convention’ as a means for achieving the sustainable management of wetlands in the Arab region. As a result, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs in the Sultanate of Oman and the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands organized the “Workshop on Wetlands and the Ramsar Convention in the Arabian Peninsula”, in Muscat, Oman from the 7th - 9th June 2010. The aim of the Workshop was to introduce the

Ramsar Convention to the countries that were not yet Contracting Parties in the Arabian Peninsula, and to develop a work plan to support wetland conservation and wise use in the Peninsula.

The Workshop was attended by 40 participants, with representatives from the governments of Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates and Yemen, as well as representatives from BirdLife, IUCN, the League of Arab States, PERSGA, Ramsar Convention Secretariat and UNEP-ROWA (Attachment 1).

2. Outline of the workshop

The time during the three day Workshop was broadly divided so that Day 1 was given to country participants to present the current status of wetlands in their countries, and for the organization representatives to present their work on assisting countries to carry out wetland wise use. Day 2 and 3 were given over for the Ramsar Convention Secretariat to provide background information about the aims, processes and work of the Convention, as well as to develop a work plan to support wetland conservation and wise use in the Arabian Peninsula over the coming 1 – 2 years. The agenda for the Workshop is given in Attachment 2.

3. Opening presentations

Mr. Ali Al-Keyumi (Director-General of Nature Conservation, Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs), welcomed participants to the meeting and gave an overview of the situation with wetlands in the country. In particular, he highlighted the importance of wetland conservation and wise use for maintaining ecological balance, as well as the value of wetlands for tourism. As a result, the government of Oman is now considering strengthening its presence under the Ramsar Convention.

Ms. Nermin Wafa (Head of Programs and Activities Division, League of Arab States), then talked about the environmental issues facing the Arab region, particularly the increasing problems of water shortage and pollution which are affecting more and more people. She said that multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) such as the Ramsar Convention, contribute to sustainable development by addressing environmental, social and economic problems. MEAs also assist governments by setting global standards for environmental conservation that countries need to follow. Ms. Wafa stressed the importance of education and raising awareness about environmental issues, particularly amongst women and school children. She said there was also a need for Arabic to be made one of the official languages of the Ramsar Convention so that Arab countries can participate more actively in the work of the Convention.

Lastly, Prof. Nick Davidson (Deputy Secretary-General, Ramsar Convention Secretariat) introduced the range of functions and benefits that wetlands provide for people, especially in ensuring a reliable supply of water 'at the right time, right place and of the right quality and quality'. He also described the history and work of the Ramsar Convention. Prof. Davidson concluded by mentioning that 2011 will be the 40th anniversary of the Convention and he then launched the logo that will be used for celebrating this event.

4. Summary of the discussion during the workshop

During the workshop, 18 presentations were given (see Appendix 2). After each block of presentations, time was allowed for questions and comments from the participants, and these are summarized below.

4.1 *Wise use of wetlands*

The 'wise use' of wetlands is one of the 'three pillars' of the Ramsar Convention, with 'wise use' meaning the sustainable use of wetlands and their resources for the benefit of humankind. The Convention considers wetlands as being important because of the benefits and services they provide to people, as well as their value for biodiversity.

4.1.1 Balancing wetland conservation and economic development

A number of participants spoke about the Arabian Peninsula having undergone rapid economic development in the past years, especially along the coastal regions for tourism, urban development or for petrochemical development. This has caused the loss, or has increased the threat, to many of the important region's important wetlands. Growing maritime activities, such as the transport of oil and petrochemical has compounded the situation. Decision makers need to be convinced about the economic value of wetlands before they will be willing to invest resources into their conservation. Participants also spoke about the lack of political will to implement the Ramsar Convention in the region, such as in identifying and Listing Wetlands of International Importance, and restoring degraded wetlands.

In response, the Ramsar Secretariat staff present explained that whilst there are obvious short-term economic gains to be achieved from development, such developments should not be at the expense of longer-term benefits to the overall population. Ecological economic is still a growing science but from studies that have been conducted on wetlands, the value of a naturally functioning wetland has often been shown to be higher than after conversion to other uses. Ongoing works on *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB) <http://www.teebweb.org/> is pulling such information together and provide a powerful tool to let us talk to decision makers (TEEB 2009). Many of the examples given in the TEEB reports are from wetlands.

Bearing in mind the emphasis of the Ramsar Convention on 'wise use', wetland conservation does not necessarily mean putting a freeze on development. In reply to questions about whether developments close to ecologically sensitive areas should be allowed, examples worldwide have shown that maintaining a healthy and functioning wetland adjacent to a housing or tourism development can often give additional economic value to the development. This is because people would pay a premium if the place where they live, work or spend leisure time is close to nature. One example is how the coral reef ecosystem in and around Shem El Sheik (USAID Egypt. 2003), has lead to a growth in the tourism industry in the area, contributing to employment and livelihood for the local community.

After growing through a rapid period of development, a number of countries in the Arabian Peninsula are now seeing the environmental impacts of development projects that have not been properly planned or managed, especially those for tourism or for the petrochemical industry.

Overall, there will always be trade-off when making decisions between development and conservation. However, at the end of the day, the final decision will be made by the government and society, and the role of the Ramsar Convention is to assist and provide the best possible information on wetlands when they make such decisions, so that 'sustainable development' can be achieved.

In recent years, the value of having healthy wetlands is increasing being recognized by decision makers in the Arabian Peninsula. Restoration projects are commencing to restore degraded coastal wetlands (e.g. Tubli Bay, Bahrain); mangrove replanting programs have also been undertaken to reforest areas where they once occurred (Oman, UAE); and important wetlands are being given protection so that they value can be maintained (Kuwait). Therefore, countries in the Arabian Peninsula are taking steps to conserve and restore their wetlands whilst undergoing economic development at the same time.

4.1.2 CEPA

Promoting wetland communication, education, participation and awareness (CEPA), is an important part of the work of the Ramsar Convention. A separate section of the Ramsar Convention website is devoted to this topic which also highlights the CEPA activities under the Convention http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-activities-cepa/main/ramsar/1-63-69_4000_0. On accession, Contracting Parties are expected to nominate two CEPA National Focal Points for their countries. One is to represent the government and the other to represent the NGO sector.

The Secretariat of the League of Arab States is particularly interested in promoting wetland CEPA in the Arab region. They suggested that such work should use a top down approach, starting with the decision makers and

then students. Wetland education centres should also be developed and wetland issues included in the school curriculum.

In order to promote greater awareness of the Ramsar Convention in the Arab world, many participants voiced that Arabic should be adopted as an official language of the Convention.

4.2 Ramsar site designation

The 'second pillar' of the Ramsar Convention is for Contracting Parties to add sites onto the List of Wetlands of International Importance (hereafter called 'Ramsar sites'), and to ensure their proper conservation and management. During the discussions, there were a number of questions concerning what were the benefits of designating wetlands as Ramsar site, and the process for doing so. The sections below aim to provide a reply to those questions.

4.2.1 How to identify and designate wetlands of International Importance as Ramsar sites?

In order to assist Contracting Parties in taking a systematic approach to creating a comprehensive national network of Ramsar sites, the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* has been produced (Ramsar Convention Secretariat 2007). This reference is important in helping Contracting Parties to identify priority wetlands and then to designate them as Ramsar sites.

The Ramsar Convention emphasizes the wise (sustainable) use of wetlands, especially those that have been designated as Ramsar sites. There is also recognition of the role of local stakeholders in site management so that they can continue to benefit from the wetlands, rather than to manage the site strictly for nature conservation. Traditional management practices have often been shown to be able to maintain the ecological services that the wetland provides.

4.2.2 Benefits of designation as Ramsar sites

A number of independent studies (Castro *et al* 2002; Gardner *et al* 2007, 2009; Lynch-Stewart 2008) have shown that after wetlands were designated as Ramsar sites, then their conservation status improved. For example, there were:

- increased awareness about the importance of the sites;
- increase participation by local stakeholders in the conservation of the site;
- greater support for protection of the site and surrounding (buffer) areas;
- increased conservation funding (both from domestic and international sources), and
- greater promotion of scientific research and ecotourism.

4.3 International cooperation

International cooperation is the 'third pillar' of the Convention and is essential since many wetlands and their resources are shared by a number of countries. Such cooperation can be in the form of information exchange, or implementing joint programs, initiatives and projects.

An example of the need for international cooperation is that for promoting wise use of the basins of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Uncoordinated construction of water control structures is having severe impacts on wetlands in the lower parts of the basin, e.g. Mesopotamian Marsh, where water levels have dropped dramatically and the water itself has become more saline. The impacts are also felt in the adjacent parts of the Persian Gulf and Kuwait where the fisheries have declined.

The League of Arab States is keen to promote greater cooperation in the Arab region on wetland conservation and wise use. At this workshop, it was unfortunate that not all the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) were able to attend, nor the relevant regional organizations, e.g. ROPME. In future meetings, the organizers should try to attract greater representation from Arab countries and organizations.

Despite talking about international cooperation, it must be acknowledged that different countries and organizations may have different goals towards the environment and wetlands. The Ramsar Convention

acknowledges these differences but is keen to find areas of common interests that will allow opportunities for synergy and cooperation. The Ramsar Convention already has strong cooperation synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity.

5. Membership

Wetlands are valuable natural infrastructures that provide multiple benefits for people and for the environment. Accession to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is a clear signal of a country's acknowledgement of the importance of wetlands, and commitment towards their conservation and wise use as a means towards sustainable development.

As mentioned above (Section 4.1.1), the Ramsar Convention does not aim to restrict development but to provide the best possible information to governments on how best to balance conservation and development so as to achieve development whilst maintaining a healthy environment that can continue to provide benefits for people. The Ramsar Convention also provides Contracting Party with greater access to regional activities and cooperation on the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

The Ramsar Convention Secretariat can provide information and support for countries interested in accession, and this support continues even after the country is a Contracting Party. This is facilitated by the Ramsar Convention Secretariat having a dedicated Senior Regional Advisor for each of the Ramsar regions, and this person is responsible for all Ramsar issues in that region. Contracting Parties therefore have easy access to communicate with the Secretariat.

Of the 22 members of the League of Arab States, 16 are Contracting Party to the Ramsar Convention. Kuwait and Oman are two of the non-Contracting Parties in the Arabian Peninsula, and they were both represented at the workshop. Below is a summary of the wetland situation in those countries.

5.1 Kuwait

The coastal wetlands in Kuwait have been deteriorating over the past eight years for a range of reasons, all mainly stemming from the rapid industrial and tourism development in the country. The coastline is being impacted by a growing numbers of hotels, chalets and beach houses, and the coastal waters affected by jet skis; pollution from the discharge from desalination plants; oil pollution; a poorly managed fishing industry; and the arrival of invasive species from the ballast water of ships that have arrived from foreign water. Corals from reefs have been removed for household decoration.

In response, the Prime Minister of Kuwait has declared a number of protected areas, such as the northern part of Boubyan Island, the coral rich areas along the southern coast of Kubbar Island and Kawa Island. Whilst there are national legislations to protect the environment, the country hopes to join the Ramsar Convention in 2011 to give greater support to their national efforts.

5.2 Oman

In his presentation, one of the presenters from Oman stated that 'Water is a bliss from GOD', and that importance of water is being increasingly recognized by both developing and developed countries around the world. The Sultanate of Oman is no exception to this as was shown by the three presenters from the country. For example, the Ministry of Water Resources is placing great effort to conserve the traditional *afalag* water management system because of their highly valued economic and cultural values. In addition, the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs has an active mangrove restoration project where mangrove seedlings are being replanted across different parts of the country where historically, mangroves have occurred before, or where the site has been shown to be suitable.

The Sultanate of Oman is in the process of accession to the Ramsar Convention, which has already been approved by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs. Final endorsement needs now to be taken at the highest level in the country. At present, 7 sites (Qurm Nature Reserve, Khawr Quriyat, Khawr Batah, Khawr

Jauramah, Khawr Gawi, Khawr Dahariz, Khawr Qurm Al-Kabir) in Oman have been identified which can be designated as Ramsar sites.

6. Way forward

During the workshop, a 'Muscat Action Plan for Wetlands in the Arab Countries' was developed (Attachment 3). This Plan aims to provide a list of concrete actions for the Ramsar Convention Secretariat, national governments, international and regional organizations to cooperate and implement over the coming 1-2 years (until 2012), for the conservation of wetlands on a national level, as well as across the Arab region.

7. Useful references

7.1 Economic value of wetlands:

USAID Egypt. 2003. Economic Valuation of the Egyptian Red Sea Coral Reefs.

http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADF666.pdf

TEEB. 2009. The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for National and International Policy Makers – Summary: Responding to the Value of Nature 2009.

<http://www.teebweb.org/InformationMaterial/TEEBReports/tabid/1278/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

7.2 Benefits of Ramsar site designation:

Castro, G., Chomitz, K., Thomas, T.S., The World Bank and World Wildlife Fund. 2002. The Ramsar Convention: Measuring its Effectiveness for Conserving Wetlands of International Importance.

http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/cop8/cop8_doc_37_e.pdf

Gardner, R.C. and K. D. Connolly. 2007. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: Assessment of International Designations Within the United States. Environmental Law Reporter.

http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/wurc/wurc_gardner_elr2007.pdf

Gardner, R.C., Connolly, K. D. and A. Bamba. 2009. African wetlands of International Importance: assessment of benefits associated with designation under the Ramsar Convention. The Georgetown International Environmental Law Review. http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/wurc/wurc_africa_survey_2009.pdf

Lynch-Stewart, P. 2008. Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites) in Canada: Survey of Ramsar site managers 2007. http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/wurc/wurc_canada_survey_2007.pdf

7.3 How to identify and designate Ramsar sites

Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2007. Designating Ramsar sites: The Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance. Ramsar handbooks for the wise use of wetlands, 3rd edition, vol. 14. Ramsar Convention.

Arabic version: http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/lib/lib_handbooks2006_a14-DesignatingRamsarSites-final.pdf

English version: http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/lib/lib_handbooks2006_e14.pdf

Appendix 1:

Participant's List

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Attachment 2:

Workshop Agenda

DAY 1 (7th June, 2010) (Compere – Ms. Aziza Saud Al-Adhubi)	
08:30 – 09:00h	Registration
09:00 – 09:15h	Welcoming Remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government of Oman: Mr. Ali Al-Keyumi (<i>Director-General of Nature Conservation</i>). • League of Arab States: Ms. Nermin Wafa (<i>Head of Programs and Activities Division</i>). • Ramsar Convention Secretariat: Prof. Nick Davidson (<i>Deputy Secretary-General</i>).
09:15 – 09:25	Global launch of the Ramsar Convention's 40 th Anniversary logo (<i>Prof. Nick Davidson, Ramsar Convention Secretariat</i>)
09:25 – 09:35h	Group photograph
09:35 – 09:55h	<i>Coffee break</i>
09:55 - 10:55h	Keynote presentation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Ramsar Convention (<i>Prof. Nick Davidson</i>) • Wetlands and the Ramsar Convention in the Arab region (<i>Prof. Mohamed Reda Fishar, representative of the League of Arab States</i>)
Session 1: (Chairperson – Ms. Nermin Wafa)	
<i>Session 1 aims to allow international organizations to explain how they have been assisting countries in the Arabian Peninsula to conserve and manage the wetlands in their region. This session also aims to allow the country participants to inform the workshop on the situation with wetland and water use in the territory, as well as the challenges and opportunities they see in future.</i>	
10:55 – 13:00h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNEP (<i>Ms. Diane Klaimi, UNEP-ROWA</i>) • PERSGA (<i>Mr. Zaher Al-Agwan, PERSGA</i>) • BirdLife International (<i>Dr. Ibrahim Khader, BirdLife – Middle East</i>) • IUCN (<i>Dr. Mohamed Eltayeb, IUCN – West Asia/Middle East</i>) • Ramsar Regional Centre – Central and West Asia (<i>Ms. Yasaman Rabjahah, RRC-CWA</i>) • Kuwait (<i>Ms. Manal Mubarak Al-Dulaimi, Environment Public Authority</i>) • <i>Questions and comments</i>
13:00 – 14:00h	<i>Lunch</i>
Session 2: (Chairperson – Ms. Diane Klaimi)	
<i>Session 2 aims to allow the country participants to inform the workshop on the situation with wetland and water use in the territory, as well as the challenges and opportunities they see in future.</i>	
14:00 – 15:15h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oman – <i>Falag</i> system (<i>Mr. Mahmoud Al-Azri, Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, Oman</i>) • Oman – Wetlands and mangroves in Oman (<i>Mr. Bader Al-Baloshi, MECA, Oman</i>) • Oman – Valleys in Oman (<i>Ms. Aysha Mohammed Al-Khatry, Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, Oman</i>) • <i>Questions and comments</i>
15:15 – 15:30h	<i>Coffee break</i>
15:30 -	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bahrain (<i>Dr. Shaker Khamdan, Public Commission for the Protection of Marine Resources, Environmental and Wildlife, Bahrain</i>) • Iraq (<i>Ms Sameerah Abed Muhi Al Shabeeb, National Committee for Wetlands in Iraq</i>) • United Arab Emirates (<i>Mr. Abdulrazzaq Abdulla Anwahi, Ministry of Environment and</i>

	<p><i>Water)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yemen (<i>Abdulghani Ali Musaeed Al-Bokwali, Environment Protection Authority, Yemen</i>) • <i>Questions and comments</i>
17:00 – 19:30h	<i>Rest</i>
19:30h	Depart hotel for dinner hosted by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Affairs

DAY 2 (8th June, 2010)	
Session 3: Wetlands of International Importance in the Arabian Peninsula	
<i>(Chairperson – Mr Hilal Al-Nabhani)</i>	
<i>Session 3 aims to allow the update of information on the internationally important wetlands in the Arabian Peninsula, and for the Ramsar Secretariat to describe how such sites can be listed as Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention.</i>	
09:00 – 10:30h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important wetlands in the Middle East (<i>Prof. Nick Davidson</i>) • Identification of Wetlands of International Importance in Arabian Peninsula (<i>Dr. Ibrahim Khader, BirdLife – Middle East</i>) • Identification of Wetlands of International Importance in Arabian Peninsula (<i>Dr. Mohamed Eltayeb, IUCN – West Asia/Middle East</i>) • <i>Questions and comments</i>
10:30 – 10:45h	<i>Coffee</i>
Session 4: Way forward (Part 1) (Facilitator – Prof. Nick Davidson)	
<i>Session 4 will discuss the main themes for a plan of action for wetland conservation and wise use in the Arabian Peninsula. These discussions will identify the necessary actions, the organizations responsible for implementing and funding those actions, and a timeline for doing so.</i>	
10:30 – 10:45h	Report back on the main themes highlighted in the presentations on Day 1, and the main themes from the Cairo Statement (<i>Prof. Mohamed Reda Fishar, representative of the League of Arab States</i>)
10:45 – 12:15h	Exercise for participants to prioritize the issues that most affect their wetlands and report back (<i>All</i>)
12:15 – 13:00h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Ramsar Convention (I), e.g. accession process and obligations, recommended approaches to wetland conservation and wise use (<i>Dr. Lew Young</i>) • <i>Questions and comments</i>
13:00 – 14:00h	<i>Lunch</i>
Session 5: Field visit to the Qurm National Nature Reserve	
14:00 – 17:00h	Field visit
17:00h	<i>Return to hotel and bus into Muscat City for dinner</i>

DAY 3 (9th June, 2010)	
Session 6: Way forward (Part 2) (Facilitator – Prof. Nick Davidson)	
<i>Session 6 will continue discussion on the main themes for a plan of action for wetland conservation and wise use in the Arabian Peninsula. These discussions will also need to identify the necessary actions, the organizations responsible for implementing and funding those actions, and a timeline for doing so.</i>	
08:30 – 09:00h	Introduction to the Ramsar Convention (II), e.g. process for identification and designation of Wetlands of International Importance (<i>Dr. Lew Young</i>)

09:00 – 10:30h	Break-out into two groups to discuss priorities and next steps following on from the discussions in Session 4 (<i>All</i>)
10:30 – 10:45h	<i>Coffee</i>
10:45 – 12:45h	Report back from the two groups, focusing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcomes (after 1-2 years) and targets; • Who does it, who helps, partnerships; • Timing; • Issues and comments. Sources of capacity and resources
12:45 – 13:00h	Summing up and closing
13:00h	<i>Lunch</i>