

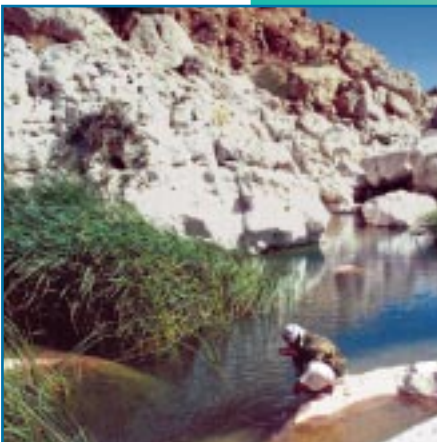
What is the Convention on Wetlands ?

In 1971 the representatives of 18 countries went to the small town of Ramsar in Iran to put their signatures to the Convention on Wetlands, or the Ramsar Convention as it has become known. The architects of the Convention had the foresight to recognise the importance of wetlands as key elements of inland waterways and coastal systems. They also recognised the many services, functions and benefits that wetlands provide and formulated the concept of “wise use” with which the Convention is synonymous today. As of October 1999 there were 116 signatory countries to the Convention.

Ramsar promotes the integrated approach to managing wetland systems so that human uses of these areas are undertaken in such a way as to retain their natural “capital” for future generations. This is “wise use”, and Ramsar is now a leader in its implementation globally.

Perhaps the best known aspect of the Ramsar Convention is the List of Wetlands of International Importance, or the “Ramsar List”. The List includes sites which the countries concerned have determined meet the Ramsar criteria as “internationally important”. They are sites which at the global, regional and national scale contribute to maintaining biodiversity and the natural functioning of our precious water ecosystems.

The Ramsar Convention also encourages and supports countries to develop and implement national policy and legislative frameworks, education and awareness raising programs, as well as inventory, research and training projects. Cooperation between countries for the management of shared wetland systems or species is also a Ramsar priority.



Conservation and Wise Use of Wetlands in Western Asia



CONVENTION ON WETLANDS
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands
Rue Mauverney 28
CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland
Tel: +41-22-999 0170
Fax: +41-22-999 0169
e-mail: ramsar@ramsar.org
Web: <http://ramsar.org>

What are wetlands?

Under the Ramsar Convention “wetlands” have a very broad definition. They are defined as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres”. The Convention also provides that they “may incorporate riparian and coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands, and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than six metres at low tide lying within the wetlands”. So, under Ramsar, wetlands are everywhere, and it is probably simplest to think of the Convention as having an interest in the management of all water ecosystems (whether permanent or temporary) that are not deep marine waters.

Wetlands in Western Asia

Western Asia, comprising the Middle East and Central Asia, holds parts of the world’s main arid zone. Western Asia embodies many types of fragile ecosystems including deserts, semi-arid lands, mountains and wetlands. Although an arid region, drought is not a limiting factor for the formation of a unique diversity of wetland types. The Ramsar Convention recognises some 30 natural wetland types and of these all but 3 (non-forested peatlands, forested peatlands and tundra wetlands) are found in Western Asia. This area, extending from the Palearctic to Palearctic realms, has a great variety of wetlands from mountain lakes to mangroves and coral reefs.

Why conserve the wetlands in Western Asia?

The key conservation issue for most wetlands in the arid zones of the world is the supply of water. Some wetlands contribute to the drinking water supply by collecting and releasing water to groundwater systems and surface water reservoirs. During the dry season, groundwater-fed wetlands offset the effects of droughts and water shortage. Wetlands are also natural water filters. The degradation and loss of wetlands can impact water supplies and, in some cases, result in water shortages. It is important to recognise that wetlands are vital elements of water systems, and that in addressing freshwater management problems, integrated water resources management has to be built upon protecting and maintaining “healthy” wetland ecosystems. Population increase and a corresponding increase in demand for water for development purposes has created an urgent need for effective management approaches to balance conservation and development in wetland areas.

The importance of wetlands in arid zones is outstanding and they play a vital role in Western Asia. The people of the region may exploit the components of wetlands directly as products or they may benefit indirectly from the functions and the attributes of wetlands. It is the use of these various characteristics that gives wetlands high economic value and supports the local people directly, whilst also providing goods and services of benefit to the nation. In the past wetlands have been undervalued because many of the ecological services, biological resources, and amenity values they provide are not bought and sold, and hence are difficult to value. Wetlands protect our environment and our society and support economic development.

Direct uses and products

Water supply

Streams, rivers, ponds and lakes are very frequently used as a source of water for domestic, industrial and agricultural use. Some wetlands are recharge areas for groundwater and some are discharge areas where groundwater flows into the wetland. Water which moves from the wetland to an aquifer can then remain as part of the shallow groundwater system, which may supply water to surrounding areas and sustain the water table. Alternatively, it may eventually move into the deep groundwater system, providing a long-term water resource. It is very evident that those wetlands which supply water for direct use by humans and those wetlands that interact with groundwater must be well protected.

Products of wetlands

Many wetlands are a source of products used by humans, apart from water itself. Proper management of these wetlands should ensure the sustainable yields of these products. This is a broad category encompassing animal, plant and mineral products, which may be harvested directly from wetland areas. Wetlands are the foundation of the economically important fishing industry and food security in the region. Most fish depend on wetlands for their survival. Freshwater fish depend on wetlands either directly, for food, habitat, or breeding, at some point in their lifecycle; or indirectly by consuming prey which are wetland dependent. Fishes in coastal waters spawn or nurture their young in estuarine wetlands and shellfish depend on tidal flats for survival.

Functions

Flow regulation and flood control

Wetlands can act as storage for excess amounts of water (which may occur during times of heavy rainfall or high flows in rivers). The water can come from rain, run-off and rivers or from underground sources and is slowly released into the water system, helping to mitigate the impacts of the flood.

Prevention of saline water intrusion

Wetlands help to prevent saline water intrusion in surface and groundwater. In low-lying coastal areas where the underlying substrate is permeable, a wedge of freshwater frequently overlies deeper saline water. The existence of this freshwater wedge is frequently maintained by coastal freshwater wetlands. The outward flow of freshwater from a watercourse, such as a river or a stream, usually limits the entry of seawater into the watercourse.

Protection from natural forces

The physical characteristics of wetland vegetation prevent or reduce erosion of coastlines, estuaries and riverbanks, especially at times of high flow or storm surge.

Sediment and nutrient retention and toxicant removal

The physical properties of some wetlands (e.g. vegetation, size, water depth) tend to slow the flow of water. This is especially true of swamps, marshes and floodplains. This facilitates the deposition, and therefore the removal of sediments. This deposition is closely linked to the beneficial removal of toxic substances and nutrients since these are often bound to sediment particles.

Contribution to the maintenance of natural processes and systems

Wetlands frequently contain or contribute to ecological, geomorphological and geological systems or processes. These processes can be short term or long term. Wetlands act as a carbon sink, they contribute to carbon fixation and carbon dioxide balance and also help prevent the development of acid sulphate soils. Wetlands also help maintain the microclimate. Evapotranspiration from wetlands maintains local humidity and rainfall levels. If the wetland is destroyed, the amount of local rainfall or humidity will decrease, and this has adverse effects on human activities especially agriculture. The impacts of human activities on wetlands surrounded by desert or those set in internal basins are severe. In arid regions, the degradation of wetlands and therefore changes in the microclimate extend the harsh climate, contribute to desertification and adversely affect human communities in the area.

Contribution to global biodiversity at three levels: genetic, species and ecosystem

Wetlands are a major contributor to global biodiversity and some are centers of endemism. Some wetlands are habitats of unique, rare or endangered species. Wetlands have rich biodiversity in terms of taxa and important gene pools. There is an immense difference in the level of biodiversity between an arid area with a wetland and one without. Wetlands are transition zones (ecotones) between land and water, and thus they support not only the communities directly associated with them but those from the aquatic and terrestrial habitats. Representative areas of wetlands should be maintained as part of a general conservation policy for the preservation of genetic, biotic and habitat diversity.

Recreation and ecotourism values of wetlands

Wetlands moderate the arid environment and are well known for their landscape and aesthetic values. These elements contribute to the recreational and eco-tourism values of wetlands in Western Asia. Recreation and tourism in wetlands may contribute significantly to local, regional and national economies. Pristine wetlands are potentially of considerable economic significance for nature-based tourism.

Research and educational values

Many wetlands are used as sites for scientific research, including monitoring, experimentation and reference.

Joining the Ramsar Convention is the most effective way for countries to promote the conservation and wise use of their wetlands. As with all conventions, the Ramsar Convention is dependent upon the will of the member countries in achieving its mission of "conservation and wise use of wetlands by national action and international cooperation as a means to achieving sustainable development throughout the world". The Ramsar Convention Bureau is responsible for providing necessary support services to the Contracting Parties. It is noteworthy that the Bureau is an advisory and support body with no executive power.

Joining the Convention on Wetlands has the following advantages for Contracting Parties:

- ◆ Membership in Ramsar gives countries a focal point and direction for the actions necessary to ensure that wetlands, as critical elements of the total environment, are protected and managed sustainably.
- ◆ Membership in Ramsar brings with it increased opportunities for seeking expert assistance and support. Ramsar has four official international NGO partner organizations: BirdLife

Attributes

Advantages of joining the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Synergy with counterpart conventions

Obligations for signatories

International, IUCN – The World Conservation Union, Wetlands International, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Through the extended networks provided by these organizations the Contracting Parties have access to a large global community of experts on wetland conservation and wise use.

- ◆ Increasingly the donor community and private/commercial sectors are providing support to Ramsar signatories for the conservation and improved management of wetlands.
- ◆ The Contracting Parties of the Ramsar Convention are well placed to advise the global community about their special environmental concerns and needs. These needs are brought to the world's attention and considered in global environmental planning and support programs. Ramsar's 7th COP in May 1999 adopted a "toolkit" of guidelines to assist with implementation of the convention.
- ◆ As more and more countries of the same eco-region join the Ramsar Convention, the Bureau is more likely to develop support tools for their particular wetland ecosystems and problems. It would be to the benefit of all the countries of Western Asia to join the Ramsar Convention, thereby completing the network of international wetlands in this region.

The Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention are cooperating closely on a wide range of issues under the Joint Work Plan adopted by their Conferences of the Contracting Parties and the Memorandum of Cooperation in place between the secretariats. Under the Joint Work Plan, Ramsar is taking the lead role in encouraging the implementation of appropriate actions for wetland ecosystems. Similarly, the Ramsar Convention has signed Memoranda of Cooperation with the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Convention on Migratory Species, and the World Heritage Center and is presently pursuing collaborative activities with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Ramsar is a natural partner with these conventions and is seeking to ensure that efforts are not duplicated and to reduce the administrative burden on signatory states.

While the act of becoming a signatory to the Ramsar Convention requires the country to agree to take certain actions as set out in the text of the Convention (see below), it does not diminish or remove the exclusive sovereign rights of the member states.

The Convention text sets out five primary obligations for signatories:

- ◆ to designate and promote the conservation of at least one Ramsar site (although members are encouraged to designate all of their sites that are "internationally important");
- ◆ to formulate and implement planning for the wise use of all wetlands in their territory;
- ◆ to establish conservation areas and promote training in wetland research and management;
- ◆ to cooperate internationally on transboundary wetlands and water resources, shared wetland species and development aid for wetland projects; and
- ◆ to contribute to the Convention budget

Over the nearly 30 years that the Convention has been operating, there have been seven Conferences of the Contracting Parties where these obligations have been further elaborated by the member states. While these guidelines for interpreting the Convention text do not impose additional "obligations", they do provide detailed information on how countries can be more effective in implementing the Convention.

Procedure for joining Ramsar

Joining Ramsar is procedurally very simple. But as with any international treaty, Ramsar urges that within the country there be widespread consultation to ensure there is support for, and an understanding of, what is expected of the country once it joins.

To join Ramsar requires only a short letter to UNESCO from the Head of State or Minister of Foreign Affairs, with parliamentary ratification if necessary, declaring that the Government will implement the Convention fully. This should be accompanied by the necessary documentation for designating at least one Wetland of International Importance according to the agreed criteria. Designating a site requires the preparation of a site description ("Ramsar Information Sheet") and map according to the guidelines prepared by the Convention. This is not an onerous task, especially if there already exists a description of the site in a national or regional Directory of Important Wetlands. If the site proposed for designation includes areas under customary or private ownership, it is recommended that the understanding and agreement of the landowners be gained. The formation of site management committees in the local communities is advisable and encouraged under the Ramsar Convention.

For further assistance,
please contact:

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands
Rue Mauverney 28
CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland
Tel: +41-22-999 0170
Fax: +41-22-999 0169
e-mail: ramsar@ramsar.org
Web: <http://ramsar.org>

or the closest office of one of the
Ramsar "Partner Organizations":

BirdLife International
IUCN – The World Conservation Union
Wetlands International
World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

Front cover photos:
Top left: WWF/Dr. Petocz,
Top right: Bijan Farhang Darehshoori,
Bottom left: WWF/Dr. H. Jungius,
Bottom right: WWF-Canon/Rodney Salm