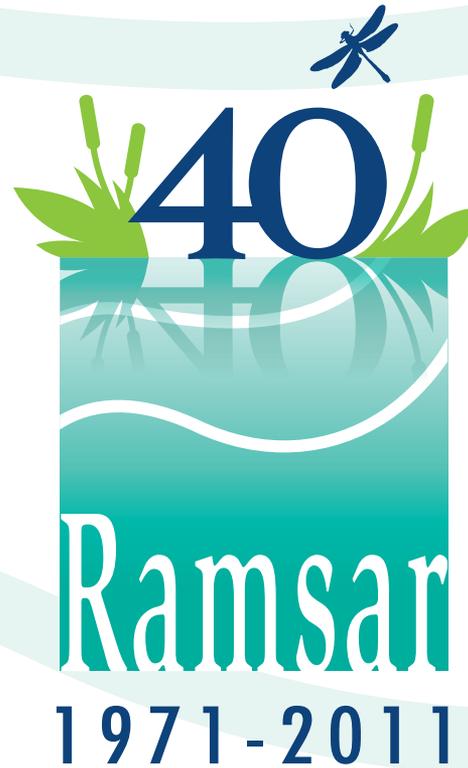


Ramsar's Liquid Assets



40 years of the Convention on Wetlands

Foreword



Prof. G.V.T. Matthews,
one of the Convention's
'founding Fathers'

It is hard now to imagine the state of wetland conservation a generation ago. The statistics on the distressing loss of wetlands were accumulating, but they were known only to a few. The vital importance of wetlands for environmental and human well-being was being thoroughly documented, but this, too, was little understood outside of scientific circles.

The historic MAR conference of 1962 set out to remedy this situation, and that meeting can probably be said to mark the beginning of the international wetland conservation movement. It is an honour and a privilege to have been part of this historic event. The MAR participants called for an international convention on wetland conservation, a quite radical idea, since at that time there were no global intergovernmental treaties for the environment.

The signing of the Convention on Wetlands in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, by the representatives of 18 nations, came as the culmination of the hard work and skilful diplomacy of many dedicated people over nearly a decade. I can well remember the prolonged applause that greeted our confirmation on 2 February that the text had finally been approved. However, we knew then that the signing of the convention was really only the beginning.

Now, 40 years on, and with a nine fold increase of nation signatories to more than 160, we look back over the remarkable progress that has been made. Very many people have a right to be extremely proud of the accomplishments highlighted in this booklet. Nevertheless, it is still true now, as it was 17 years ago, when Dr Luc Hoffmann wrote in his Foreword to my book, *The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: its history and development*, that “the treaty will have to adapt itself continually in order to do justice to the wetlands’ vital importance in today’s world”.

Professor G.V.T. Matthews

Welcome



Anada Tiéga,
Secretary General
Ramsar Convention
on Wetlands

For many years, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands has been the lead actor in the world's efforts to conserve and make sustainable use of our wetland and water resources. This year, in 2011, the Ramsar family of secretariat, government representatives, non-governmental organizations, scientists and knowledgeable citizens is taking the occasion of the treaty's 40th anniversary to take stock of what has been achieved so far and what challenges lie ahead of us.

Throughout the year, we will be engaging with our partners and the Convention's member countries to refine our vision of what needs to be done and how we can help to do it. We will also be organizing anniversary celebrations and publishing key messages regularly to give momentum to a global wave of activity throughout 2011 – to celebrate wetlands, why we care about them, and what we have achieved over the last 40 years.

We hope that this little brochure will give you a lively sense of who we are and what, with your help, we hope to accomplish in the coming years.

Anada Tiéga



How did we get here?



The importance of wetlands

Today, not many people still need to be told about the importance of wetlands. But that was not always so – until recent years, wetlands were widely considered to be waste lands. They were drained or paved over, for urban development, for agriculture, for cheap disease control, for suburbs, fun parks, and luxury hotels. The losses to our heritage and livelihoods have been enormous.

Wetlands are areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. Under the Ramsar Convention's broad definition, wetlands are “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”. This includes marine and coastal areas, estuaries, lakes and rivers, marshes and peatlands, as well as groundwater and human-made wetlands such as rice paddies, shrimp ponds, and reservoirs, and it embraces virtually all aspects of freshwater management and conservation.

Wetlands are among the world's most productive environments. They are cradles of biological diversity, providing the water and productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival.

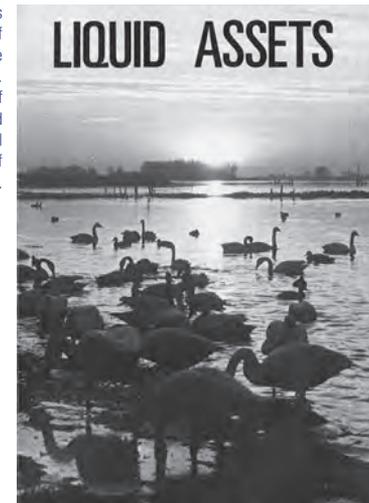
The many roles of wetland ecosystems and their value to humanity, the “ecosystem services” they provide – for freshwater supply, food and

building materials, biodiversity, flood control, groundwater recharge, climate change mitigation (the list goes on and on) – are indispensable today and tomorrow.

Despite all this, some people have other priorities, and the loss and degradation of wetlands continues – perhaps even more rapidly than ever.

And that's a big problem!

The original edition of 'Liquid Assets' is based on the papers and proceedings of the First International Conference on the Conservation of Wetlands (MAR project). This is the cover of the revised edition of 'Liquid Assets' that was published and distributed by The International Waterfowl Research Bureau in 1979 with the help of a grant by UNESCO.



Something had to be done

Education, raising the public's awareness of the essential values of wetlands, as well as the threats to them, is obviously important, and a number of landmark popular publications a generation ago began to dispel the old ideas about wetlands as places to be “reclaimed”.

But more was needed, something that would give structure to the commitments that decision-makers and public officials could make to turn the situation around.



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Something that could turn individual efforts to make use of wetland resources sustainably into a common international enterprise – something that would encourage collaboration and mutual help among national governments and wetland managers alike, and with broad public support.

International cooperation was the key. Many wetlands are systems lying across the boundaries of two or more countries, or are part of river basins that include more than one country – their health depends upon the quality and quantity of the transboundary water supply from rivers, streams, lakes, or underground aquifers. Human impacts on water sources, such as agricultural, industrial or domestic pollution, may occur at long distances from wetland areas, often beyond the borders of the countries affected. Many wetland-dependent species are migratory and require reliable habitats through several countries to survive.

The best intentions of countries on either side of national frontiers can be frustrated without a framework for international discussion and cooperation toward mutual benefits.

A generation ago, a group of forward-thinking organizations recognized the urgent need for a network of protected wetland habitats and an international convention to involve governments in working together for their management.



Towards an international treaty

The initial call for such a network of international wetlands came in 1962 during a conference which formed part of Project MAR (from “MARshes”, “MARécages”, “MARismas”), a programme established two years earlier because of concerns at the rapid destruction of European marshes and other wetlands with a resulting decline in the numbers of waterbirds.

The MAR Conference was organized by Luc Hoffmann, one of the founders of the *World Wildlife Fund* (WWF), and held in November 1962 in Les Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer in the French Camargue, not far from the Tour du Valat wetland research station (which was also founded by Luc Hoffmann). Some 80 experts from non-governmental environmental organizations, governments mostly from European countries, and hunting associations published their recommendations, in which they called for a list of internationally important wetlands to be protected and for the development of an international treaty to give that list legal force.

Over the next eight years, a wetland convention text was painstakingly negotiated through a series of international technical meetings (St. Andrews, 1963; Noordwijk, 1966; Leningrad, 1968; Morges, 1968; Vienna, 1969; Moscow, 1969; Espoo, 1970), driven largely by NGOs and the Netherlands.

For their leadership during this long process, G.V.T. Matthews and Erik Carp of the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau

(IWRB) and Luc Hoffmann of WWF, along with Eskandar Firouz, head of the Iranian Game and Fish Department, are remembered as the “Founding Fathers” of the Ramsar Convention.

At first, the draft text was directed specifically at the conservation of waterfowl through the creation of a network of refuges, but as it developed the conservation of wetland habitat (rather than species) became the main focus.

Sichuan Rouergai
Ramsar Site,
P.R. China



© Zhang Wei

An international treaty on wetlands

Finally, at an international meeting organized by Iran's Game and Fish Department, held in the Caspian seaside resort of Ramsar, the text of the Convention was agreed on 2 February 1971 and signed by the delegates of 18 nations the next day. The treaty entered into force in December 1975, upon receipt by UNESCO, the Convention Depository, of the seventh instrument of accession to or ratification of the Convention.

Ramsar is thus the first of the modern global intergovernmental treaties on the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, and it is still the only one that addresses a specific ecosystem. The



Delegates signing the treaty in Ramsar, Iran, 1971

text of the Convention was inspirational for its time in the way it strongly emphasized both the interdependence of people and wetlands and the critical roles that wetlands play in the hydrological cycle and sustainable water management.

The official name of the treaty, *The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, reflects the original emphasis upon the conservation of wetlands primarily as habitat for waterbirds. Since that time, the Convention has broadened its philosophical horizons to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise (i.e., sustainable) use, recognizing wetlands as ecosystems that are vital for biodiversity conservation, for water management, and for the well-being of human communities, thus fulfilling the full scope of the original text of the Convention.

Over the years, the Conference of the Contracting Parties has succeeded in keeping the work of the Convention abreast of changing world perceptions and priorities in environmental thinking, responding quickly to new information and ideas as they emerge.



What the Convention says

In their foresight, the framers of the Convention began the text by establishing a number of concepts that anticipated and have helped to define environmental thinking to this day.

In the treaty's preamble, the drafters recognized “the interdependence of Man and his environment”, and they emphasized “the fundamental ecological functions of wetlands as regulators of water regimes and as habitats supporting a characteristic flora and fauna”, thus establishing the Ramsar Convention as what is still the only global agreement explicitly addressing water and water-related ecosystems.

Emphasizing “that wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value, the loss of which would be irreparable”, the framers expressed their confidence “that the conservation of wetlands and their flora and fauna can be ensured by combining far-sighted national policies with coordinated international action”, and they defined their ambitious objective to “stem the progressive encroachment on and loss of wetlands now and in the future”.

In addition to matters of administration and governance, the Convention text addresses three main subjects.

- Each Contracting Party “shall designate suitable wetlands within its territory for inclusion in a List of Wetlands of International Importance”.
- The Parties “shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List, and as far as possible the wise use of wetlands in their territory”.
- And the Parties “shall consult with each other about implementing obligations arising from the Convention especially in the case of a wetland extending over the territories of more than one Contracting Party or where a water system is shared by Contracting Parties”.



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The Three Pillars of the Convention

These key parts of the treaty are now referred to as the “Three Pillars” of the Convention, to which all Parties have expressed their commitments upon their accession.

First, *Wise Use* – There is a general obligation to include wetland conservation in national land-use planning, and the Parties have committed themselves to implement this planning to promote the wise use of all wetlands in their territory, not just those that are listed as internationally important.

Secondly, the *List of Wetlands of International Importance* – Each Party must designate at least one wetland for the List and promote its conservation, and then continue to “designate suitable wetlands within its territory”.

This “Ramsar List” now includes more than 1,900 wetlands, called “Ramsar Sites”, which Parties have selected according to agreed Criteria for being considered “internationally important”. They have committed themselves to “promote the conservation” of all of those listed sites, and this system forms the world’s largest network of protected areas.

And thirdly, *International Cooperation* – Member governments have agreed to consult with other Parties about implementation of the Convention, especially in regard to transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, and shared or migratory species, and to share expertise and resources with Parties less able to meet their commitments.

In addition to these three pillars the Convention also recognizes two additional goals – that of enhancing implementation capacity through capacity building and training, and achieving universal membership.

The Ramsar Convention is not a regulatory regime – nevertheless, its terms do constitute a solemn treaty and they are binding in international law in that sense.





The “Wise Use” of Wetlands

Under Article 3.1 of the Convention, Parties commit themselves to national planning for the “wise use” of the wetlands in their territory.

This core concept of “wise use” was pioneering when the Convention was developed – it makes clear that human uses of natural resources on a sustainable basis are entirely compatible with Ramsar principles and wetland conservation in general.

The Ramsar wise use concept applies to all wetlands and water resources in a Contracting Party’s territory, not only to those sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance. Its application is crucial to ensuring that wetlands can continue to deliver their vital role in supporting the maintenance of ecosystem services, biological diversity, and human well-being for future generations.

As this term “wise use” gained currency within the Ramsar community and elsewhere, the Conference of the Parties recognized the need for greater precision and adopted a clear definition in 1987, which was subsequently updated in 2005:

“Wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.”

These definitions and the thinking that went with them established a congruence between Ramsar “wise use” and the terminology of the *World Conservation Strategy*, developed by WWF, IUCN (the International Union for the Conservation of Nature), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1980 to link human well-being and our dependence upon nature as integral parts of a whole, of the 1987 UN World Commission on Environment and Development definition of “sustainable development”, and subsequently of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2001-2005) with its focus upon “ecosystem services”.



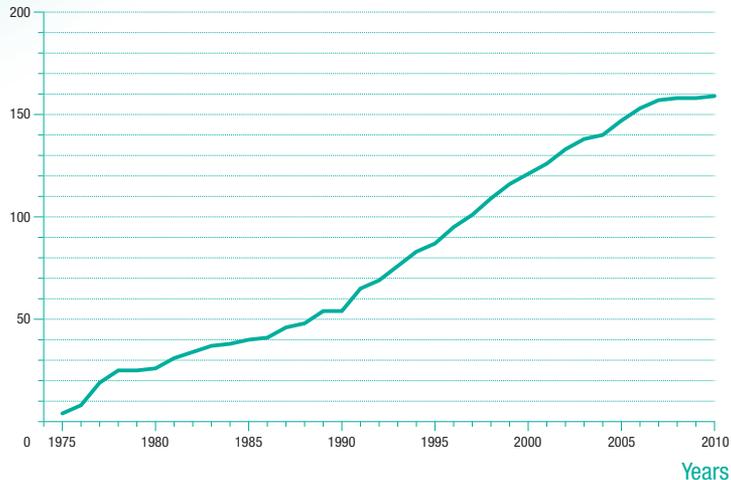
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The growth of the Convention

The Convention began slowly – it was four years after its signing in 1971 before it entered into force with the ratification of its 7th Contracting Party – but by 1980, at the time of the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP1), there were already 28 member States.

Most of those were European countries, however, and most of the substantive concerns of the early COPs were ornithological in nature. In those years, there was no budget for the Convention's work, and the Parties depended upon the non-governmental organizations IUCN and IWRB to carry out the basic continuing secretariat duties on a voluntary basis.

Cumulative number of Contracting Parties



The original treaty was modified in 1982 by the “Paris Protocol”, which created a mechanism for further changes as needed, and by the “Regina Amendments” of 1987, which established a financial budget, a Standing Committee, and a permanent secretariat.

Throughout the 1980s the Convention continued to grow, from 35 Parties and 300 Wetlands of International Importance (“Ramsar Sites”) at COP2 in 1984 to twice that, 77 Parties and 610 Ramsar Sites, by the time of COP5 in 1993. Much of that growth came through the accession of new Parties from the developing world, and so quite naturally the context of the Convention's work expanded from “sustainable use” to embrace “sustainable development” as well.

The Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), a subsidiary advisory body of independent scientific experts, was created in 1993 and began to develop what has become a formidable suite of guidelines and recommendations for adoption by the Conference of the Parties.

The Ramsar Advisory Mission, which had begun in 1988 as an informal way of offering advice and technical assistance in solving particular problems especially in Ramsar Sites, developed through the 1990s to become one of the Convention's most important tools. Associated with this is the Montreux Record, a mechanism launched in 1990 to allow Parties to officially call attention to Ramsar Sites “where changes in



ecological character have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur” and thus encourage actions to safeguard these sites.

The Convention's communications work developed rapidly in the 1990s. The Ramsar website was begun in 1996 and soon became the centerpiece of the Secretariat's daily contact with the Ramsar family and the public. The annual World Wetlands Day was first celebrated in 1997 and has since that time been the keystone of Ramsar's public visibility, and the triennial Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards were first bestowed in 1999.

The “Wetlands and Water” Resolution of COP6 in 1996 signaled the Convention's understanding, not only of the importance of water for

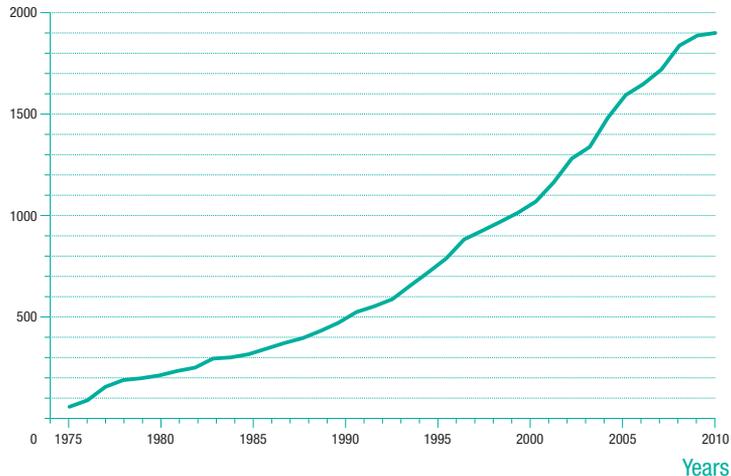
wetland ecosystems, but also the centrality of wetlands to the looming crisis of freshwater scarcity in many parts of the world.

Ramsar's formal collaboration with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), beginning in 1996, became a model for such relationships among nearly all the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in subsequent years, and the official recognition of the “International Organization Partners” in 1999 formalized a collaborative relationship with the non-governmental organizations that remains unique amongst the MEAs.

By the end of the 1990s, the Ramsar Convention was well on its way towards universal coverage, celebrating its 100th Contracting Party in 1997 and its 1000th Ramsar Site in 1999, and had established itself as an indispensable partner in global environmental collaboration. At the end of that decade, Ramsar had reached its maturity and, in many ways, its modern shape and role.

The Convention has continued to grow steadily in the 2000s, reaching 160 Parties in 2010. In 2005 the Parties recognized the relevance of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment's findings on the interlinkages between ecosystems, the services they deliver to people, and human well-being, and COP9 adopted this as the Convention's framework for the achievement of “wise use” through the maintenance of the ecological character of wetlands.

Cumulative number of Ramsar Sites





What are we doing?



The Ramsar Convention in operation today

The implementation of the Ramsar Convention is a continuing partnership between the more than 160 Contracting Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Secretariat, with the advice of the subsidiary expert body, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), and the support of the International Organization Partners (IOPs).

The scope of the Convention's work is coordinated by means of a six-year Strategic Plan which sets out the priority actions expected or requested of these bodies and other collaborators. The third Strategic Plan covers the period 2009-2015.

The Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) is the policy-making organ of the Convention. Representatives from each of the Parties meet every three years to receive national reports on the preceding triennium, approve the work programme and budgetary arrangements for the next three years, and consider guidance for the Parties on a range of ongoing and emerging environmental issues.

The Standing Committee is the intersessional executive body which supervises the Convention's work between meetings of the COP, within the framework of the decisions made by the COP. The 18 Parties that are members of the SC are elected by each meeting of the COP to serve until the next one.

The Secretariat carries out the day-to-day coordination of the Convention's activities, working in the three official languages of English, French, and Spanish. Its facilities are provided under contract by IUCN (the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) in Gland, Switzerland. The Secretary General supervises the work of about 20 policy/technical, communications, and administrative staff, with one outposted representative in Apia, Samoa.

10th Meeting of the Conference
of the Contracting Parties
in Changwon, Republic of Korea



© Ramsar Secretariat

40 years of service

In the 40 years since its creation, the Ramsar Convention has come a long way, both in its philosophical and political development and in its recognition and spread around the world.

There are many ways in which the Convention assists Parties in safeguarding their wetland heritage at the same time as they strive to meet their development goals and improve the lives of their people. These include, among others, the provision of guidance for Parties, support on the ground through project funding mechanisms and Ramsar Advisory Missions, as well as working together with NGOs, Multilateral Environment Agreements, the private sector, and through regional mechanisms. Some of these are described on the following pages.

World Wetlands Day

First launched in 1997, World Wetlands Day on 2 February has now grown to be the Convention's key campaign day to raise awareness of wetland values and benefits in general and the Ramsar Convention in particular. It is now celebrated by almost 90% of Contracting Parties.

The illustration on this page comes from the 2009 campaign "Upstream, downstream – Wetlands connect us all".

National and local adaptations of the Secretariat's campaign materials as well as reports of each year's activities are available online: www.ramsar.org/WWD/



40 years of service

Guidance for the Parties

Over the years, the Conference of the Parties has adopted a large body of scientific, technical, and policy guidance, prepared by the STRP. It covers a wide range of topics and fulfills the dual purposes of providing technical advice, assisting policy-makers and site managers alike as needed, and establishing a common standard for what is expected of Parties to the Convention.

The range of guidance for the Wise Use pillar includes such key planning matters as developing National Wetland Policies and reviewing national laws and institutions to embody wetland wise-use principles; practical advice on wetland inventory and monitoring and standards for impact assessment; people-related advice on communicating wetland values to the public and encouraging stakeholder participation in wetland management.

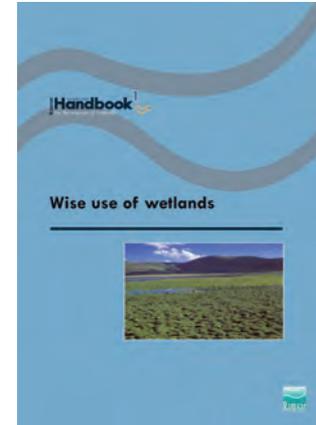
Most importantly, there is considerable water-related guidance on water allocation and management to maintain the ecological functions of wetlands, river basin management, and the management of coastal areas and groundwater resources.

For listed sites, there is advice on strategically choosing wetlands for the Ramsar List, describing them scientifically, and monitoring changes in their ecological character. The third pillar, too, is covered in the *Guidelines*

on International Cooperation and on promoting cooperation over waterbird flyways.

All of the guidance is published on CD-ROM and the Ramsar website as *The Ramsar Handbooks for the Wise Use of Wetlands* (the “Ramsar toolkit”), blending the official guidelines with illustrative materials and case studies that provide additional practical help. The 4th edition is now in preparation and will run to 21 volumes.

Additional STRP material that is useful to the Parties is published in the *Ramsar Technical Reports* series, now covering such matters of valuing wetlands, choosing GIS software, and adopting a wetland inventory metadatabase.



40 years of service

Support on the ground – Project funding

The Secretariat does not operate on-the-ground conservation projects directly, but the Convention does maintain three funding assistance programmes for small projects (or parts of larger projects) for the conservation and wise use of wetlands. The Secretariat staff evaluate project proposals, make recommendations on their suitability, and perform the monitoring and follow-up to ensure that chosen projects are implemented successfully.

SGF: Effective site management in Moldova

A recent SGF project carried out by BIOTICA Ecological Society, in cooperation with the Ministry of Ecology in the Republic of Moldova, was aimed at developing a management plan and implementing the wise use approach in the Unguri-Holosnita Ramsar Site, on the banks of the Dniester River near the border with Ukraine. The project helped local authorities and stakeholders to raise awareness about the outstanding natural and historical heritage values of the site and to promote the Ramsar Convention on a broader scale, influencing environment policies at national level.

The *Ramsar Small Grants Fund (SGF)* was established by the Parties in 1990 to provide financial assistance in the form of small grants of up to 40,000 Swiss francs for wetland projects that help to fulfill the Ramsar Strategic Plan in developing countries and countries with economies in transition. Since 1991, the SGF has provided some 7.5 million Swiss francs directly to more than 200 projects in over 100 countries, and the Secretariat also publishes an annual portfolio of well-evaluated proposals for possible adoption by other donors.

Since 1997, the Secretariat has also managed the *Wetlands for the Future Fund (WFF)*, generously funded by the United States State Department and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, to benefit Latin American and Caribbean institutions and individuals through capacity building and training in the conservation and wise use of wetlands. More than 250 projects have been supported so far, and more than 3.3 million US dollars have been disbursed.



WFF: Wetland education in Colombia

A Colombian WFF project recently developed an innovative programme on wetlands in Latin America, stressing the role of Ramsar in the region. The result of a joint effort involving the students, teachers and parents of local communities around Fuquene lake, the approach focused chiefly on elementary schools. It sought both to promote understanding of Ramsar's work and to develop a strategy to spread knowledge from schools to the entire community, emphasizing the measures that need to be taken to preserve the local wetlands.

SGA: Control of invasive weeds in Senegal

Following the 1999 appearance of the invasive weed *Salvinia molesta* in the Senegal river, a joint expert mission from Ramsar and the World Heritage Convention made a number of recommendations for responding to the threats to the Djoudj National Park in Senegal and Diawling National Park in Mauritania. An SGA grant provided by the Ramsar Secretariat contributed to local implementation of those recommendations in the Djoudj National Park, and today, *Salvinia molesta* has been controlled there and the ecological character of the park has been restored.

The *Swiss Grant for Africa (SGA)*, administered by the Secretariat since 1989, is a generous voluntary contribution offered by the Federal Government of Switzerland to support the implementation of the Convention in Africa. The SGA is especially useful for financing emergency responses or specific activities in particular African wetlands and for promoting the Convention in the region.

40 years of service

Support on the ground – Ramsar Advisory Missions

The RAM in action

The Srebarna Ramsar Site on the Danube river floodplain includes a freshwater lake and reedbeds with many globally threatened species. During the late 20th century, water abstraction, the abandonment of traditional land-use practices and increased fertilizer and pesticide use in the surrounding agricultural area caused eutrophication, lowering of the water level, and a decline in biodiversity. A first Mission, composed of two Ramsar experts, visited the site in 1992 and provided advice on improving the link with the Danube and elaborating a site management plan. To sustain the international support for the needed restoration and management activities, the Bulgarian authorities inscribed Srebarna on the Montreux Record, and this triggered significant activities and international assistance through USAID. Two further Missions in 1998 and 2001, conducted jointly with the World Heritage Centre (since it is also a World Heritage site), IUCN and Ramsar, were able to verify the positive results, provide additional advice, and recommend removing the site from the Montreux Record. Thanks to the Convention's support mechanism and international solidarity, the ecological character of the Srebarna wetland was restored.

Special attention is given to assisting member States in the management and conservation of listed sites whose ecological character is threatened. This is frequently carried out through the Ramsar Advisory Mission, a formal mechanism for technical assistance that has been benefiting the Parties for more than twenty years.

In most cases, the RAM consists of a visit by a team of experts who produce a report on their findings and recommendations. The team's report, after review by the authorities, becomes a public document which can provide the basis for conservation action at the site and a resource for others, and may help to attract Ramsar or external funding for implementing its recommendations.

Between 1988 and 2010, the RAM has been applied at 67 Ramsar Sites or groups of sites. In recent years, most missions are led by a Ramsar staff member and have involved multi-disciplinary teams, frequently in collaboration with other bodies such as the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, IUCN, the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species and its Agreements, and the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme.





40 years of service

Working together with the MEAs

The benefits of coordination and collaboration amongst the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) – the conventions and other intergovernmental organizations that have related or overlapping missions – have been widely recognized for many years.

The Ramsar Convention has been a pioneer in developing collaborative relationships, beginning with its first MOU with the Convention on Biological Diversity back in 1996 and the CBD/Ramsar Joint Work Plan, first formalized in 1998 and now in its fourth iteration, 2007-2010, both of which have become models for emulation for collaboration between other multilateral environmental agreements.

Over the years, Ramsar has developed close, mutually beneficial relationships, including formal agreements and sometimes with joint work programmes, with global intergovernmental bodies such as the Convention on Migratory Species, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the Man and the Biosphere Programme; with regional conventions

and programmes (Caribbean, Mediterranean, Carpathians, South Pacific) and basin commissions (Lake Chad, Niger, Congo); and with such international bodies as the World Bank, UN World Tourism Organization, European Environment Agency, European Space Agency, UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Organization of American States, and so on.

Ramsar also participates actively with the other biodiversity-related conventions – CBD, CITES, CMS, and World Heritage – in the Biodiversity Liaison Group (BLG) and as an observer in the work of the Joint Liaison Group (JLG) of “Rio conventions”. Ramsar is also an active member of the Environment Management Group (EMG) of specialized agencies, programmes and organs of the United Nations, including secretariats of the MEAs, all of which groups are working to increase cooperation and eliminate duplication in global environmental and related activities.

And finally, Ramsar is active in the CSAB, the group of Chairs of the MEAs' subsidiary scientific advisory bodies.



Srebarna Ramsar Site in Bulgaria |

40 years of service

Working together with the NGOs

The Ramsar Convention is unique among MEAs in its relationships with its five partner organizations. A number of international conservation organizations were instrumental in helping to develop the Convention on Wetlands during the 1960s, and over the years the relationship with these key organizations has been extraordinarily close and fruitful.

In 1999, the four NGOs that were historically associated with continuing Ramsar collaboration were confirmed in the formal status of “International Organization Partners” (IOPs) of the Convention, and in 2005 the Conference of the Parties added the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) as the fifth official partner.

The five IOPs are BirdLife International, IUCN – the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IWMI, Wetlands International, and WWF International.

The IOPs provide enormous support for the work of the Convention at global, regional, national, and local levels, chiefly by providing expert technical advice, field-level implementation assistance, and financial

support, both from their headquarters units and national and regional affiliates and from their expert networks. In addition, they themselves embody the philosophy of the Ramsar Convention and its wise use concept and support the use of the Ramsar guidelines in their own work around the world.

The IOPs also participate regularly in meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the Standing Committee, and the STRP. In addition, IUCN provides facilities for the Ramsar Secretariat and Wetlands International maintains the Ramsar Sites Information Service, both under contract with the Convention.

A large number of other NGOs have also signed memoranda of cooperation with the Ramsar Secretariat, and their collaboration has frequently proved invaluable.

The Convention also recognizes the tireless efforts of many, many other international, national and local NGOs working in support of wetlands.





40 years of service

Working together with the private sector

The Convention has welcomed opportunities to expand its resource base and activities by developing mutually beneficial relationships with the business sector. Most notably, the Danone Group has provided generous financial support for the Convention's efforts to raise awareness of the importance of water resources amongst decision-makers and the public.

The *Danone-Evian Fund for Water* was created in 1998 and has been providing corporate support for a broad portfolio of educational products and seminars. The most visible outcomes of the Danone collaboration, though, have been the posters, leaflets, films, and children's games that the Secretariat has been able to create to help people celebrate World Wetlands Day, 2 February of every year.

Similarly, the Danone Group has supplied the "Evian Special Prize" of US\$ 10,000 for each of three winners of the triennial Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards that have been bestowed at the meetings of the Conference of the Parties since 1999.

The *Evian Water Protection Institutes* was launched in 2008 to help local people manage water in a sustainable way and improve their living conditions. Presently, three sites selected by Ramsar are hosting the programme – in Argentina, Nepal, and Thailand.

Also since 2008, in the *Danone Fund for Nature*, IUCN and Ramsar have been developing a methodology to combat global warming through wetland restoration. This has so far been focusing on mangroves, which are particularly rich in carbon sequestration potential and play a key role in biodiversity.

The Star Alliance Network of airlines has established "*Biosphere Connections*", a partnership with the Ramsar Convention, the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, and IUCN under which the Convention benefits by subsidized travel for those traveling to Ramsar-related workshops and meetings.



40 years of service

Working together in the regions

With the example of the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), which was founded in 1993 and placed under the Ramsar Convention in 1996, the Convention has long recognized the value of regional collaboration in working towards the conservation and wise use of wetlands. Governments and stakeholders can thus capitalize upon their

geographical commonalities, shared wetland systems, and common social and cultural links.

In 2002 the Convention established a programme whereby groups of Parties with a common geographical focus and in some cases with a common thematic goal could apply for endorsement as “operating within the framework of the Ramsar Convention”. There are presently about twenty approved or nearly-approved Regional Initiatives, some of which are receiving Ramsar financial assistance for start-up periods of up to three years.

Ramsar Regional Initiatives come in two categories: networks and centres. Amongst the networks there are some dedicated to particular river and lake basins like Lake Chad and the Niger Basin, to mountain areas like the Andes and Carpathians, coastal areas like the Black Sea, migratory flyways, and other groupings of common purpose, like the Nordic and Baltic states.



Fish market
at Lake Mburo
Ramsar Site,
Uganda

© David Stroud



In addition, there are presently four Ramsar Regional Centres for Training and Research on Wetlands – in the City of Knowledge, Panama, for the Western hemisphere; in Ramsar, Iran, for Central and West Asia; in Kampala, Uganda, for Eastern Africa; and in Changwon, Republic of Korea, serving East Asia.

All of the Regional Initiatives are independently governed and are not authorized to speak or act on the Convention's behalf – rather, they operate along the lines of Ramsar principles, on the basis of strict reporting requirements and close contacts with the Secretariat.

A meeting of the High Andean
Regional Initiative, 29 September 2010



Measures of success

The 40th anniversary year of 2011 is the occasion for taking stock and assessing the complex question of how successful the Convention has been in achieving its mission.

Studies have shown that the status of a nation's wetlands is affected positively in countries that have established a National Wetland Policy (or equivalent) and an active multi-sectoral National Ramsar or Wetland Committee and that have undertaken other recommended activities at national and local levels. Having an active multi-sectoral National Ramsar or Wetland Committee is also a strong tool to support in-country implementation.



© Dwight Peck

Designation by countries of the Convention's flagship of Ramsar Sites continues to progress. The more than 1,900 wetlands covering nearly 186 million hectares (August 2010) makes the Ramsar List by far the world's largest network of protected areas.

Recent surveys by independent environmental legal experts have found that Ramsar Site managers in Africa and North America reported that designation has helped maintain the conservation status of these wetlands, with a common view that "the designation of a site as a Wetland of International Importance was more than a mere honor; the status offered tangible benefits." Such benefits of designation often include:

- increased public awareness;
- increased participation by local stakeholders;
- greater support for protection of the site;
- increased access to conservation funding; and
- enhanced opportunities for research and ecotourism.



The international legal framework of the Convention has also helped countries safeguard Ramsar Sites through their own domestic legal processes. For example, in 2006 the Governor-General of the Netherlands Antilles overturned a permit for resort development adjacent to the Ramsar Site “Het Lac” on the island of Bonaire on the grounds that the required EIA did not meet the standards outlined in the Ramsar guidance. Following an appeal, in July 2007 the Council of State in the Netherlands sustained that decision, observing that “resolutions, decisions and guidelines accepted unanimously by the Conference of Parties to the Convention... should be considered part of [the Netherlands’] obligations under the Convention”.

From the Ramsar web site |



Headline story. Annulment of decisions for building near Ramsar site on Bonaire was justified.

On 11 September 2007 Her Majesty Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands signed a royal decree rejecting the appeal by the Government of Bonaire against the annulment by the Governor-General of the Netherlands Antilles of the decisions by the Government of Bonaire to approve a resort to be built immediately adjacent to the mangroves of "Het Lac", a Ramsar Site since 1980 (nr 199).

Eric C. Newton of the Ministry of Public Health and Social Development describes the case and notes that "one interesting position of the [Netherlands] Council of State was

that resolutions, decisions and guidelines accepted unanimously by the Conference of Parties to the Convention, a body established by the Convention and which includes representation by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, should be considered part of the obligations under the Convention." **[Read his brief report here.](#)** [12/11/07]



Where are we going?



Challenges for the future

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, published in 2005, found that inland and coastal wetlands were still being lost at a rate faster than that of any other ecosystem. 2010 reports show that pressures are increasing, the state of biodiversity continues to decline, and, most alarmingly, our responses to this have slowed since the 20th century. Focusing on wetland and biodiversity conservation alone has not worked sufficiently.

The problem remains that, with a growing human population, intense pressures for economic growth, poverty eradication, and improving people's livelihoods continue to override maintaining our wetlands and a healthy wetland biodiversity. So our present and future challenge remains the same as it was over 40 years ago in the development of the Ramsar Convention.

Wetlands have to be recognized by all sectors of society as our natural infrastructure essential for the sustainable provision of water and other ecosystem services, on which everyone's livelihood ultimately depends. Decision-makers need a better understanding of the value of wetland services when they face difficult decisions on trade-offs between maintaining wetlands and changing land and water uses. They must also understand the risks of not acting decisively to maintain their wetlands, as well as the economic and social costs of ignoring those risks. Continuing "business as usual" is not an option.

We must address the direct drivers of wetland loss – urban and industrial development, conversion for agriculture, ever-increasing demands for water – even as we respond to the spread of invasive plants and animals and the impacts of a warming and increasingly unpredictable climate.

The world is already talking of a "global water crisis" – just not enough water to go round. The fact that it is wetlands that provide us with water, purify our drinking water at low cost, and humidify the climate in drought-affected areas must be understood by everyone. Ramsar has a central role to play in helping to bring that about.



© Stockphoto

A key role for the Ramsar Convention

The Convention on Wetlands is well-placed to provide significant help to meeting these worldwide challenges – as the only global treaty focused exclusively on the ecosystem type that is at the heart of nearly all of the required responses, Ramsar has long experience in directly addressing all of the issues in the water debates.

With a small and flexible Secretariat of dedicated and experienced personnel and its STRP science advisory body made up of leading independent experts in wetland issues, including where these intersect

with climate change, health, biodiversity, and agricultural issues, the Ramsar Convention is able to move quickly and decisively in response to emerging information and events.

And Ramsar benefits from a forward-thinking Conference of the Parties that has a long track record of facing up to emerging challenges, able to adopt new policies and guidance for officials and managers in a short time, as well as a “Ramsar family” or constituency around the world of government officials, NGOs, journalists, academics, and citizens who have long experience in working together as part of a global team, for common objectives.

Thus, policymaking, planning, and management action by all of the influential sectors at all levels will benefit from the global consensus that the Convention provides.

This includes helping to identify the relevance of wetlands to global challenges, demonstrating the importance of their conservation and wise use, and safeguarding the benefits that wetlands offer. It also includes technical know-how, guidance, models and support networks to help in putting this knowledge to practical use in preserving our wetlands for our children and grandchildren.



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How did we get here?

What are we doing?



Where are we going?



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Ramsar Convention Secretariat,
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The mission of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands:

“The conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

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