



International Course on Wetland Management (Lelystad, The Netherlands, 20 May - 28 June 1996)

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Intervention at the Opening Session (20 May 1996)

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I am very grateful to the organizers of this Course for having invited me to address you today. Through these courses in Lelystad, the Wetland Advisory and Training Centre of the Ministry of Transport and Public Works of The Netherlands is making a significant contribution to advancing the cause of wetland conservation and wise use around the world. This is a concrete and positive way of fulfilling the obligations under Article 4.5 of the Convention of Wetlands, which specifically states that "The Contracting Parties shall promote the training of personnel competent in the fields of wetland research, management and wardening."

As you will be aware, the Convention on Wetlands was signed in the Iranian city of Ramsar, on the shores of the Caspian Sea, 25 years ago, on 2 February 1971. Today, 95 countries from all regions of the world have joined the Convention. Thus, the treaty has gathered a critical mass, as far as membership is concerned, that makes it a useful instrument for advancing the cause of wetland conservation on a global scale.

The Convention has already made an important contribution to an increasing awareness of the values of and benefits provided by wetland ecosystems and has also helped to reverse the worldwide trend of wetland loss and degradation which has characterized recent human history. But the battle is not yet completely won. In almost all countries, wetlands are still in danger, at least significant portions of them. It is very true that many wetlands are now protected or are at least have management plans that, if properly applied, would maintain these ecosystems in good health. Yet the assault on wetlands, to use them unwisely or to simply convert them to other uses, is still very much present, and we have to constantly renew the effort to make societies understand that wetland conservation is to everybody's benefit.

The Ramsar Convention contains a limited number of very simple but key concepts, around which the Conference of the Contracting Parties has elaborated a series of definitions, interpretations and guidelines for their practical application at the policy, legislation and field management level.

Let me briefly refer to some of these key concepts.

The overall aim of the Convention is to conserve wetlands. The Convention understands that in order to do so the Contracting Parties have to ensure that the "ecological character" of each wetland is maintained. The Conference of the Parties has defined "ecological character" as "the structure and inter-relationships between the biological, chemical, and physical components of the wetland". The definition goes on: "These derive from the interactions of individual processes, functions, attributes and values of the ecosystem(s)". The Conference has also adopted a definition of "change in ecological character" and Guidelines for describing and maintaining the ecological character of listed sites.

Contracting Parties are requested to include at least one wetland in their territories in the List of Wetlands of International Importance, on the basis of the Criteria established by the Conference to identify sites of international importance. The Conference has encouraged the Parties to include in the List as many wetlands that meet the criteria as possible. So, today, the 95 Contracting Parties have included in the List more than 800 sites, covering an area of more than 50 million hectares, the area of France or Kenya. But including a site in the List is only the starting point. Countries are expected to maintain the ecological character of the sites, and in order to do so, they are required to develop appropriate management plans for each site.

Thus the relevance of these courses here in Lelystad for the implementation of the Convention: Many listed sites do not have a proper management plan, and the Strategic Plan adopted by the Conference of the Parties two months ago in Brisbane, Australia, requests the Parties to ensure that by the year 2002 at least half of all Ramsar sites have management plans or other mechanisms in place, or in preparation. As you see, we have a long way to go, and ample opportunities for the participants in this Course to go back home and apply the knowledge acquired here!

But Contracting Parties are requested to do more than just include sites in the List of Wetlands of International Importance and maintain their ecological character. They are also expected to promote the "wise use" of wetlands in their territory--of all their wetlands. The Conference of the Parties has interpreted the meaning of "wise use" as "sustainable utilization for the benefit of mankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem". In other words, the Ramsar "wise use" concept is equivalent to the "sustainable use" concept that is at the base of Agenda 21 and the other modern international instruments dealing with environment and development issues.

The Conference of the Parties has also determined that the most appropriate way for Contracting Parties to fulfill the wise use requirement of the Convention would be through the development and implementation of National Wetland Policies. A number of Contracting Parties have already made considerable progress in this direction, but also in this respect, there is a long way to go. The Conference in March this year has requested the Ramsar Bureau to work with other partners in the preparation of a report on progress made in the area of national wetland policies and in the design of a framework for wetland policy development, to be considered by the next Conference of the Parties to be held in Costa Rica in 1999.

In the more specific area of wetland management, in 1993 the Conference of the Parties approved the Ramsar Guidelines on Management Planning, which provide a general framework for Contracting Parties to use. I will not dwell here on the content of the Guidelines because I understand that they will be analyzed in detail during this Course. Just let me say that this year the Conference of the Parties revisited the issue. One of the six Technical Sessions during the Conference was devoted to management planning and a new recommendation was adopted, calling once more on Contracting Parties to prepare and implement more management plans for Ramsar sites and other wetlands, requesting us at the Bureau to assist in this process, and urging the Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel to review the most recent advances in the total or integrated catchment approach to management planning, and to report its conclusions to the next Conference of the Parties.

As to training, the last Conference also re-emphasized the obligation of the Parties in this area, as specifically stated in the text of the Convention, and approved a recommendation urging Contracting Parties to establish wetland manager training courses; it also requested the Bureau to pursue with key donors the concept of a global network for wetland managers, which could encourage a wider sharing of the benefits of personnel exchange. The Bureau was also directed to obtain curricula and organizational details of training opportunities from around the world and to share this information with the Contracting Parties.

Finally, another significant recommendation approved by the last Conference relates to involving local and indigenous people in the management of Ramsar sites and other wetlands. The recommendation "calls upon Contracting Parties to make specific efforts to encourage active and informed participation of local and indigenous people, at Ramsar sites and other wetlands and their catchments, and their direct involvement, through appropriate mechanisms, in wetland management". There is more and more evidence that when local communities are involved from an early stage in management planning for sites that they are related to - and this applies to all countries, North and South, East and West - there are much greater guarantees that the plans will be more realistic and suitable, and that their application will be much more effective. I very much hope that this aspect, which in my view is as important as the other more technical aspects of management planning, will be fully discussed in this Course.

To conclude, let me say that in the next six years covered by the Strategic Plan adopted by the Conference of the Parties, all the components of the Convention on Wetlands - mainly its Contracting Parties, but also the other instruments of the Convention: the Bureau, the Standing Committee, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, and the NGO partners that work closely with us - will be paying significant attention to the issues that have brought you to Lelystad: wetland management, training, institutional capacity building, education and public awareness, and community participation. All of them are crucial issues for the future of the wetlands of our planet. Once more, I am very grateful to the Dutch Government for the contribution that it's making to the Convention on Wetlands through these International Courses on Wetland Management that have already become an important feature in wetland

training.

I wish you the participants a very happy and productive stay in Lelystad, and I look forward to being in contact with you on issues related to Ramsar implementation when you go back to your countries.

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