MedWetCoast technical seminar on "National Strategies and Policies for Wetlands"

Beirut, Lebanon, 16-18 February 2004

"National Strategies and Policies for Wetlands" was the theme of a regional technical seminar organised by the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Lebanon in Beirut from 16-18 February 2004 in the framework of the UNDP-GEF "MedWetCoast" project (www.medwetcoast.com). [The MedWetCoast project has ended but the Web site can be found at http://vinc.s.free.fr/ (2007).] It attracted more than 60 participants from ten countries plus representatives from UNDP, IUCN, WWF, Tour du Valat, the MedWet Coordination Unit and the Ramsar Secretariat. The seminar was opened by the Ministry’s director-general Berj Hadjian, calling for more investment in the environment from the private sector. UNDP Resident Representative Yves de San called for international partnership and the effective use of natural resources as the main conditions for achieving sustained development. Their opening statements were taken up by the capital’s press, hopefully putting wetlands on the map.

The seminar provides a very good example how the Ramsar Convention can provide an adequate framework and operational tools for international cooperation and transfer of know-how and expertise. Beneficiary countries of the MedWetCoast project are Albania, Egypt, Lebanon (supported financially through the French GEF "FFEM"), Morocco, Tunisia and the Palestinian Authority. Project staff and experts from these countries were therefore the target participants of the seminar, representing ministries of environment, agriculture, irrigation, related services, and NGOs. Additionally, the Ramsar focal point from Algeria was invited, another country in the region that is actively developing a national wetland strategy.

To launch the debate and work of the seminar, three countries that have already elaborated and adopted National Wetland Policies presented their experiences: France, Spain and Turkey. This provided the opportunity to reflect on lessons learnt during the processes of elaborating a national policy document, and the experiences made so far during the period of implementation. Spain elaborated a Strategic Plan for the Conservation and Wise Use of Wetlands in 2000 as a follow up to its Biodiversity Strategy. The responsibility for implementation of this strategy and attached work plan is essentially delegated to the autonomous regions making up the country. France elaborated a National Action Plan for Wetlands, based upon an initial analysis on the influence of sectoral policies on the state of France's wetlands in the early nineties. After a first phase of implementing the Plan, the main coordinating responsibilities lie now with six thematic resource centres established throughout the country. They provide efficient relays to all relevant partners, focusing respectively on Atlantic marshes, Mediterranean lagoons, peatlands, interior wetlands, river floodplains, and small and temporary ponds. Turkey acted rapidly by adapting Ramsar's Strategic Plan 2003-2008 soon after its publication to respond to the priority requirements at national level and starting its implementation locally.

Much emphasis was put on the processes necessary to prepare national wetland policies, based on Ramsar's Handbook 2 on "Developing and Implementing National Wetland Policies", which was also distributed to the participants. Each of the beneficiary countries explained in detail progress with the different steps of preparing such strategies or policies, providing an impressive array of important activities already undertaken. In the discussions in plenary and single-country groups important further steps that are still required to be accomplished were identified. Repeatedly, stress was placed upon the need for an active and participatory involvement of all relevant stakeholders, from the early stages of the process. The task of involving the water managers and convincing them about the environmental concerns to be taken into account to achieve integrated water resource management was underlined.
Experiences with the initial implementation of the European Union Water Framework Directive at national level were evoked.

The seminar was very productive in providing up-to-date overviews and information on the state of the elaboration of National Wetland Policies in the participating countries. This was also addressed in the wider context of national wise use policies, as advocated by Ramsar (cf. Handbook 1). The participants adopted detailed conclusions on the procedural steps to be undertaken, the analyses to make, and the objectives, actors and responsibilities to identify. The final seminar conclusions will soon be available at the MedWetCoast website. This and detailed seminar documentation can also be obtained from the MedWetCoast regional coordinator, Ms Sylvie Goyet (sgoyet@medwetcoast.com). She and her team, supported by the Lebanese Ministry of Environment and Tour du Valat's Pere Tomas, have to be congratulated for the organisation of a very constructive and successful meeting.

-- reported by Tobias Salathé, Ramsar

Along the Nar el Kalb river, where the participants visited briefly the Jeïta caves, a tourism hot-spot not far from Beirut metropolis situated in the enchanting gorge of Nar el Kalb river,
with high water levels given the abundant rains falling during the seminar days

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