Ramsar focuses on Arctic wetlands

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Arctic peatlands, glacier forelands, rivers, lakes, wet tundras, seashores and shallow bays make up the largest part of the Arctic (at least 60% of the surface) and constitute a significant part of the world’s wetlands and freshwater resources. Arctic wetlands store enormous amounts of carbon in frozen peat and soil, as long as the insulation by an undisturbed peat layer is preventing the underlying permafrost from melting.

Accelerated climate change in the Arctic provokes rapid environmental change, easier access to oil and gas, minerals and fisheries, This threatens ecosystems through the retreat of sea ice, permafrost thawing, atmospheric warming, habitat fragmentation, de-synchronisation of predator-prey life cycles, overharvesting of wildlife and of globally migratory bird and mammal populations, and ocean acidification (factors highlighted in UNEP’s “view from the top” in 2013).

The best available scientific and traditional ecological knowledge on Arctic ecosystems was recently compiled by over 260 experts in the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment (ABA) and published by the working group on the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) of the Arctic Council (the high-level intergovernmental forum of eight Arctic countries and six indigenous peoples’ organisations). On 2-4 December 2014, CAFF and the Norwegian Environment Agency hosted the Arctic Biodiversity Congress in Trondheim as an important follow-up to the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment. More than 400 scientists, civil servants, administrators, business partners, and environmentalists gathered to discuss and advise how best to implement the ABA recommendations at national and international levels, as part of the CAFF implementation plan 2013-2021. An illustrated report on the congress was published by the IISD reporting services.

The link between changes in the Arctic and the rest of our planet is easily illustrated by birds that depend on the Arctic
tundra to breed, but spend the rest of the year on migration across the globe. CAFF has started a project, the Arctic Migratory Birds Initiative (AMBI), to address urgent conservation needs of declining migratory bird populations in the Arctic, and beyond along their migration routes, e.g. by conserving the tidal flats of the Yellow Sea, important refuelling sites for the critically endangered spoon-billed sandpiper and other Arctic migrating shorebirds. With the help of the Arctic Council’s diplomacy, CAFF aims to provide an international forum to convince the countries at lower latitudes to find sustainable solutions to these problems.

For Ramsar Parties, the Arctic Biodiversity Congress was a timely opportunity to promote a draft resolution for COP12 taking place in June 2015 in Uruguay. Finland is submitting the draft, with support from Wetlands International, WWF International and other Arctic countries, on “undertaking an inventory of polar and subpolar wetlands”. The resolution highlights the global importance of the biodiversity and freshwater resources supported by these wetlands and calls for Ramsar Parties, together with CAFF, biodiversity-related conventions, IPBES and other organisations, to undertake an inventory and assessment of polar and subpolar wetlands, some of them already designated as Ramsar Sites in the Arctic and Sub-Antarctic regions.

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