



Summary of the Thirteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

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A Brief Analysis of COP13

The world's wetlands are in peril. "Since 1970, 35% of wetlands have been lost, three times the rate of forest loss, and 81% of inland wetland species populations and 36% of coastal and marine species have declined." These stark reminders from the Global Wetland Outlook (GWO), noted by both Ramsar Secretary General Martha Rojas Urrego and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) Chair Royal Gardner, leave little space for misinterpretation. In addition, as delegates repeatedly recalled throughout the week, wetlands provide important services as a source and purifier of water, a protective barrier from floods and droughts, a provider of food, fiber, and fuel, a hotspot for biodiversity, a natural carbon storage facility, and a regulator of climate and hydrological regimes. The "wake-up call" of the GWO shaped the way delegates approached their work at COP13.

The urgency of addressing the immense pressures that wetlands face was repeatedly highlighted during COP13, which focused on finding ways to increase the Convention's reach, effectiveness, and efficiency by addressing its internal structure, its outward activities, and ways to mainstream wetland conservation and wise use in other domains. This was particularly evident in a series of resolutions addressing the Convention's governance, and its implementation, visibility, and synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), and providing clear links with climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This brief analysis will address the main outcomes of COP13 together with the primary challenges that the Convention faces in a changing international environment.

What's Old is New. What's New is New.

Ramsar, the oldest of the modern global intergovernmental environmental agreements, finds itself in a changing international environment. Since COP12 in Uruguay three years ago, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs and the Paris Agreement on climate change were adopted. The momentum these instruments provide gives Ramsar the challenge and opportunity to raise the profile of wetlands and, by linking to the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and other MEAs, to expand the tools at its disposal to achieve its core mission: conservation and wise use of wetlands.

Heading into COP13, some expressed concern about the Convention and its Secretariat. The organizational problems at the previous COP, coupled with issues about previous management, made many wonder whether a major restructuring is necessary to refocus and rejuvenate. However, the radical reshuffling of the Secretariat, with new staff in top positions, including the Secretary General, left most delegates more hopeful about the future. During the closing plenary, many praised the fresh composition of the Secretariat, with comments on "restoring parties' confidence," "providing leadership in challenging times," and "increased cohesion and sets of skills." While criticism was not absent, especially on the Secretariat's relative lack of experience, or on forfeiting valuable institutional knowledge and memory, the overall feeling was optimistic and the proceedings at COP13, compared to COP12, were productive and forward-looking.

Making a Splash – COP13’s Major Outcomes

The sheer amount of work done over the last triennium, especially by the STRP, but also by the Standing Committee, the Secretariat, and under the Convention’s programme on communication, capacity building, education, participation, and awareness (CEPA) left many participants impressed. When prompted to identify the single most important outcome of the meeting, delegates almost unanimously pointed to the publication of the GWO.

The GWO is the first-ever comprehensive report on the state of the world’s wetlands and their services to people. It provides a snapshot of wetland status, trends, and pressures. The GWO undoubtedly paints a grim picture of the world’s wetlands, solidifying our increasingly accurate knowledge of global wetland area data. The report highlights that wetlands, although still covering a global area almost as large as Greenland, are declining fast. It underscores that the quality of remaining wetlands is also suffering and that many wetland-dependent species face high levels of extinction threats. The GWO also stresses the negative trends in water quality and emphasizes that wetland ecosystem services are enormous, far outweighing those of terrestrial ecosystems.

Still, as STRP Chair Gardner repeatedly noted, these facts don’t tell the entire story. The GWO further articulates a broad range of effective wetland conservation options available at the national, international, catchment, and site levels, underscoring the need for good governance, knowledge generation, management, investment, and public participation. Regarding immediate, tangible results, the GWO has already raised public awareness, as evidenced by the impressive response on social media, elevating the Convention’s profile and making links with other MEAs, especially the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Addressing the linkages between climate change and wetlands is, as one long-time observer pointed out, a sign that the Convention is changing with the times. As repeatedly heard in plenary, wetlands not only play a crucial role in climate change adaptation and mitigation, but are particularly vulnerable to climate impacts. Still, the question of how to enhance interlinkages without overstepping the Ramsar Convention’s mandate proved difficult. For example, a proposal that parties to the Ramsar Convention should be encouraged to include wetland-related information in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement faced resistance, with opponents highlighting that NDCs should focus on greenhouse gas emissions reductions only, and cautioning against prejudging the outcome of current negotiations on the Paris Agreement Work Programme. In the end, language relating to NDCs was considerably softened. Some questioned whether this was a missed opportunity, while one seasoned delegate saw this step, albeit small, as “opening the door” to further enhancing synergies in the future.

Many highlighted as an important achievement for supporting climate change mitigation the adoption of revised guidelines for identifying and designating peatlands to the Ramsar List. Unlike the resolution on NDCs, the proposal was not considered to overlap with the Paris Agreement because it focuses specifically on the Ramsar List. The resolution provides guidance on using the importance of peatlands for climate change mitigation as an additional argument to support the designation of peatlands as “Wetlands of International Importance.” These guidelines were adopted with relatively little discussion. In contrast, the resolution on blue carbon proposed by Australia proved “extremely politically sensitive,” in the words of one delegate. It encountered protracted opposition, with delegates working into the final hours to reach agreement. The resolution was adopted with a footnote that not all parties to the Convention accept the concept of blue carbon. Although this may be another small step forward to integrate climate change-related matters in wetland conservation, some delegates observed Ramsar still has some way to go.

Delegates also highlighted the interlinkages between Ramsar and the SDGs. As many noted, not only is the Convention a co-custodian with UNEP of SDG indicator 6.6.1 (water-related ecosystems), but wetlands contribute directly or indirectly to 75 SDG indicators. This places Ramsar in a privileged position, providing a unique platform to foster collaboration and generate co-benefits. It simultaneously offers a great opportunity to raise its profile and gain momentum in the battle against time to save one of the most biologically productive ecosystems on Earth.

In Deep Water – Main Challenges for the Convention

Many expected the discussions on governance to be controversial in the lead up to COP13. Most delegates seemed to agree on the need to restructure the Convention’s work, including retiring a number of outdated working groups. Still, different views emerged on how to formalize a process that will produce the desired outcome of greater efficiency, including for some delegates, more focus on substance over administration. Some suggested drastic institutional changes, which others compared to “open heart surgery, before a diagnosis on whether the patient is sick.” Yet others taking a more moderate position emphasized that “we have known for a long time that the patient is sick,” stressing,

however, the need for “proper stocktaking before surgery.”

Following deliberations, COP13 decided to retire the Transition Committee and the working groups on the CEPA programme, facilitation, the language strategy, resource mobilization, and staffing. The COP further established an Effectiveness Working Group to review the governance structure of the Convention with the assistance of an independent consultant, recommend revisions that further enhance the Convention’s effectiveness, including cost-effectiveness and efficiency, and propose a process for implementation. A final decision on these governance issues will be taken at COP14.

An even lengthier discussion surfaced during deliberations on the resolution addressing the responsibilities of the Standing Committee, especially on the role of the Executive Team, comprised of the President, Vice-President, and Chair of the Finance Committee. Two distinct perspectives emerged. Some noted that the Executive Team has no mandate, suggesting it be replaced by a body with regional representation to increase transparency. Others opposed, underscoring the team’s importance as a supporting and oversight role for the Secretariat. The final decision, a compromise eloquently proposed in plenary by the UK, retains the Executive Team and requests it to define its terms of reference for approval by the Standing Committee.

Other problems the Convention faces are more long-standing. The lack of a specific funding mechanism has long been highlighted as an obstacle, creating challenges for knowledge generation and implementation. Many delegates underscored that all of STRP’s work is done on a voluntary basis by 18 individuals. One veteran delegate noted that, while STRP has done a tremendous amount of work, “we cannot, in the long-run, think that a dozen and a half high-caliber scientists can cover the scientific needs associated with wetland conservation.” Indeed, as indicated by the unfinished high- and low-priority tasks from the 2016-2018 work plan, and a very long list of requests for 2019-2021, the STRP needs to be strengthened to continue providing its invaluable input and deliver on a growing list of requests. According to some delegates, even a small allocation from the core budget “may go a long way,” given STRP’s efficiency.

Implementation of the Convention has also been a perennial concern. Certain delegates lamented that some of their colleagues meet at COPs every three years and “then go home and forget all about it.” In that respect, the need to produce, disseminate, and promote wetland type-sensitive guidelines that support implementation was highlighted by a number of participants. Others disagreed, noting the Convention has not been short of theoretical guidance, but rather of pragmatic institutional, technical, and socio-economic interventions that actually work on the ground.

Turning 50 –Steps Forward

COP13 marked the first Ramsar COP to be hosted in the Arab world, and COP14 in 2021 will be another landmark for the Convention as it becomes a half century old.

Because Ramsar is outside the UN system, the development of synergies is especially important. The momentum that the SDGs and the Paris Agreement provide has been observed by Ramsar aficionados, and efforts to link with these processes were evident during COP13. The degree to which these endeavors are successful will define to a great extent the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and its increased relevance.

In addition, finding innovative ways to attract additional funds, agreeing on an effective and efficient governance structure, promoting on the ground implementation, keeping up with knowledge generation, and balancing conservation and wise use of wetlands will all be crucial and determine its relative success. As the Convention approaches its 50th birthday, will it reach a new level of maturity, or fall into decline? The decisions, passion, and endurance of those engaged in the management and implementation of the Convention will ultimately decide whether the negative trends on wetlands can be reversed.

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