



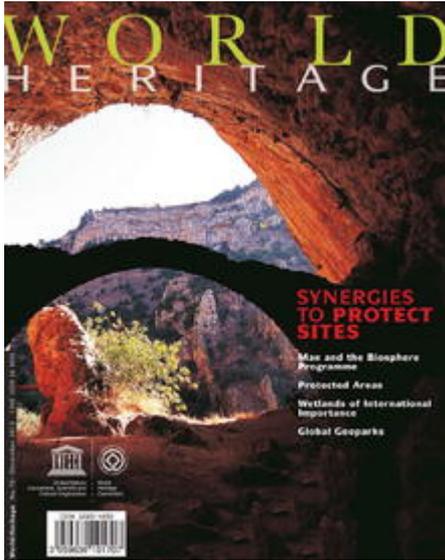
# The Ramsar and World Heritage conventions and Slovenia's Škocjan Caves

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Slovenia

By Christopher Briggs, Secretary General, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

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The [Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#), signed in 1971, is the world's first global

multilateral environmental treaty, and its central principle of 'wise use', or sustainable use of natural resources, was pioneering in its time and has since become a key foundation for the modern environmental and sustainable development movements.

As I start in my new post as the fifth Secretary General of the Convention, I am struck by the many ways in which Ramsar's Contracting Parties have led the way in trying out new institutional and conceptual arrangements that have been taken up productively by the other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). One of the most notable of these has been the construction of synergistic and collaborative arrangements with other MEAs and their secretariats, and also between Ramsar and the leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the same fields.

It was back in January 1996 that the Secretaries General of the Ramsar Convention and the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) signed the first memorandum of cooperation between two global MEAs. Shortly thereafter, a first Joint Work Plan between the two conventions was agreed and we are now collaborating under a fifth plan. Over the years, the secretariats have built a broad record of partnership on many fronts. Since those days, ground-breaking relationships of this sort have been widely emulated throughout the world of environmental and development institutions, and Ramsar itself has constructed a formidable edifice of agreements with many other MEAs and NGOs with overlapping missions and expertise.

The Ramsar Parties have been reaffirming the benefits of such synergies at every one of their triennial Conference of Parties (COPs) since 1999 - but one thing is particularly worth noting here: increasingly over the years, the Parties have expressed their concerns about the fact that these institutional synergies between secretariats and subsidiary scientific Advisory Bodies are not easily translated to the on-the-ground work carried out in the name of the MEAs in the regions and countries, and site-based work.

Another example of cooperation can be found in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the Ramsar Secretariat and the [World Heritage Centre](#) in May 1999. This was a very natural linkage since the World Heritage Convention, which is almost as old as the Convention on Wetlands, is one of the very few MEAs that, like Ramsar and the [UNESCO Man and the Biosphere \(MAB\) programme](#), are based upon a list of sites that qualify as protected areas. That first MOU, which still remains in force, was established with a view to promoting the nominations of wetland sites under the two conventions and sharing expertise about them, coordinating the reporting about sites listed under both conventions, and in some cases collaborating on advisory missions to those sites to help them solve management problems.

There are currently sixty Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites) that are also inscribed within forty-seven World Heritage sites. Over the years, the two conventions have sent joint [advisory missions](#) of Ramsar and World Heritage experts to investigate and make recommendations on a number of joint sites, such as Ichkeul in Tunisia, Djoudj and Diawling in Senegal and Mauritania respectively, and Lake Srebarna in Bulgaria, and these have proved very productive in finding not only solutions but also the financial resources needed to implement those recommendations.

Perhaps the most exciting new initiative to benefit from this close relationship has been the recent and rapid development of the [Ramsar Culture Network \(RCN\)](#), which is presently elaborating an extensive programme of activities increasing cooperation with World Heritage as well as other parts of UNESCO. As the programme develops it will be led to focus as much as possible on the site level, by means of case studies for example, and the exchange of lessons learnt and knowledge among site managers. At a planning meeting at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in May 2013, it was agreed that activities undertaken within the proposed RCN programme of work for 2013–2016 should be very pragmatic and results-oriented, with a bottom-up approach and good engagement with local communities.

The five-person Ramsar Culture Network Steering Group is co-led by Dave Pritchard and Thymio Papayannis and includes a representative from the World Heritage Centre and another from the Ramsar Secretariat. Ramsar and World Heritage have made joint presentations on the potential cultural importance of wetlands at a number of important meetings over the past eighteen months, and Dave Pritchard believes that a number of attributes of World Heritage cultural as well as natural properties offer exciting opportunities for further development, such as the traditional uses of wetland products, the evolution and functioning of rice terraces, *qanat* and *fouggara* irrigation systems, traditional water supply systems, networks of inland waterways for navigation, salinas (salt lakes), cities developed in deltas and around arterial rivers, and so on.

Clearly, even within the framework of such high-level collaborative ventures, there are obvious benefits that can be filtered down to site level, such as lessons learnt, case studies, guidelines and awareness-raising material. But we need to ask ourselves how widely such synergies can be experienced and shared directly by site managers themselves. We would like to know what benefits the sites themselves can derive from being inscribed under either of the two conventions and also what synergies can result from having been inscribed under both of them.

Independent experts have conducted surveys of Ramsar site managers in the United States, Canada and Africa, and they have agreed on the benefits that site managers perceive as the results of having acquired the Ramsar status of ‘international importance’.

Generally, the most important benefits the managers cited drew upon the increased prestige that resulted from this designation; they confirmed that Ramsar recognition has helped to maintain the conservation status of those wetlands, largely by increased public awareness; increased participation by local stakeholders; greater support for the protection of the site; increased access to conservation funding opportunities; and enhanced opportunities for research and, most importantly, for tourism and ecotourism. Let us look at that concept in a specific case in Slovenia.

### Škocjanske Jame

Slovenia’s Škocjanske Jame (Škocjan Caves) have been a World Heritage natural property since 1986, a Ramsar site since 1999, and a MAB Biosphere Reserve since 2004. The site includes one of the largest known underground cave systems in the world, as part of the broader system which extends from the ponor of the Reka River to the Gulf of Trieste in Italy within the karst plateau. The caves and surrounding landscape are examples of extraordinary natural beauty, and they now form the protected area of the Škocjan Caves Regional Park, covering more than 400 ha.

The natural attributes of the park are remarkable. After heavy rains, the Reka River floods and may rise more than 100 m within the cave system, with all attendant risks and impacts. The site supports numerous endemic (crustaceans, cave beetles) and endangered animal species (such as *Miniopterus schreibersi*, one of the rarer bat species), and it was the first underground wetland in the world to have received Ramsar status. In addition, archaeological excavations have shown that the site has been occupied for more than 10,000 years, with continuous settlement from the middle Stone Age to the Iron Age.

Dr Gordana Beltram is Director of the Regional Park. She is also Slovenia's national focal point for the Ramsar Convention and Chairperson of the Ramsar Standing Committee for the triennium 2003–2005.

She and her colleague Rosana Cerkvenik indicate that the benefits of World Heritage status are very similar to those revealed by the surveys of Ramsar site managers. Tourism is the most important economic activity in the area, they say, and Škocjanske Jame park plays a key role in the local economy. In cooperation with local stakeholders and the local tourist association, the area has been actively publicized, and the park works closely in cooperation with other protected areas in Slovenia and internationally, including other World Heritage and Ramsar sites, in promoting the conservation of nature and cultural heritage as well as sustainable development. The site now receives some 100,000 visitors annually, three-quarters of whom are international tourists, and the numbers continue to increase.

Dr Beltram believes that the fact that the caves have been recognized internationally as a World Heritage and a Ramsar site helps to increase interest in the caves and their importance in the sight of visitors, while the impression formed when visiting the area also helps people to understand the meaning of World Heritage and the value of internationally important wetlands. The park has become better known in Slovenia and abroad and new opportunities have been identified for expanding and enriching sustainable tourist activities, and increasing local employment as well – all of which help to fulfil the park's goals in supporting the economic, social and cultural development of the local communities – by working with local tourist associations to improve tourism products, for example, and by encouraging traditional agriculture and ecologically oriented food production for tourists.

The income generated from entrance fees and the sale of souvenirs accounts for nearly two-thirds of the park's annual budget. Since it was established, the park has also increasingly been able to provide financial resources for the improvement of infrastructure in the three villages within the protected area. In addition to improving tourist facilities and services on site, part of the income is distributed to local inhabitants for the maintenance of typical karst architecture and of the cultural landscape. Thus, in addition to its own developments, between 1999 and 2011 the park has invested over €430,000 of its own resources into the buildings, appearance and infrastructure of the three villages. As Dr Beltram sums up, 'Škocjanske Jame is among the few areas with the three international nominations. Over the years the World Heritage Convention, the Ramsar Convention, and the MAB programme have been working hand in hand in this area assisting the park in enhancing recognition of the area and its importance locally, nationally and internationally. With local people, schoolchildren and professionals, the park has managed to effectively conserve and protect the karst area and its larger hinterland.'

#### Future collaboration

We have seen how the MEAs can fruitfully collaborate at the global and secretariat levels to achieve synergies in the pursuit of their missions, in supporting one another's objectives, in supplementing one another's knowledge and experience, in avoiding the duplication of efforts, and sometimes in combining their resources to address the problems of their listed sites. And we have seen how participation in these conventions can increase the prestige of sites that enjoy national protected area status and multiply the benefits they receive as their international status becomes better known, especially through designation under more than one such MEA.

But I wonder if we cannot go further and suggest that, drawing upon the experience of the Škocjan Caves and the new Ramsar Culture Network, we can expand prospects for more synergies between the MEAs at the site level itself. Perhaps we can find further ways to encourage a greater exchange of scientific knowledge and expertise, management experience and responses to funding opportunities, between jointly listed sites in one or several countries.

