Wetlands and cultural heritage conservation

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Foreword (page i)

Much of Europe’s wealth of archaeological and cultural heritage is closely associated with the great natural richness of the region’s wetlands. Our ancient civilisations developed on major rivers and their associated wetlands, and many peoples continue to depend on their resources of water, food and other materials and their many vital functions for safeguarding human health. So wetlands worldwide have a wealth of a cultural heritage which takes many forms, from human-made physical structures and artefacts, palaeontological records in sediments and peat, and traditional water and land-use management practices, to places of religious significance to indigenous peoples and the almost intangible “sense of place” felt by many for these wild and often mysterious places and their wildlife.

Despite the great significance of wetlands for wildlife and people, loss and damage continues. The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) owes its origins in the 1960s to the urgent need to safeguard wetland habitats and the species that depend upon both inland and coastal and nearshore marine systems. Parties to the Convention (123 countries by December 2000) commit to the wise (i.e. sustainable) use of all their wetland resources, to paying particular attention to designating and sustainably managing their internationally important sites, and to cooperating internationally.

There is much common ground in the biodiversity and heritage management of wetlands. Both depend on maintaining these places, since their destruction destroys both its natural and cultural heritage. Even though some wetlands can be created or rehabilitated to restore, at least in part, their ecological values and features, once one is destroyed its cultural and historical features are lost forever. Decision-makers and managers of the natural and the cultural features of wetlands are, however, not always fully aware of the benefits of working together to jointly strengthen the safeguarding of this heritage.
The Ramsar Convention has long recognised the vital importance of people and their wetland heritage in achieving its goal. Indeed, the theme of its most recent Conference of Parties to the Convention, in Costa Rica in 1999, was "People and Wetlands: the Vital Link". Furthermore, the importance of people and the cultural significance of wetlands will receive an even higher profile at our next Conference of Parties (COP8 in Valencia, Spain in November 2002) when the theme will be "Wetlands: water, life and culture". COP8 will include a technical session on cultural aspects of wetlands as a tool for their conservation and sustainable use, and the Conference will consider adoption of guidelines for incorporating cultural heritage in the assessment, valuation and management of wetlands.

The initiative by the European Archaeological Council to focus on wetlands and to publish this volume on *The Heritage Management of Wetlands in Europe* is, therefore, both most welcome and most timely. *The Heritage Management of Wetlands* will do much to raise awareness of the importance of managing wetlands so as to safeguard their cultural and archaeological richness alongside their natural values and functions - and to demonstrate to those implementing the Ramsar Convention how this can be best achieved on the ground.

The Ramsar Convention looks forward to working closely with the European Archaeological Council, and welcomes the EAC’s Statement of Intent published in this important volume as the sound basis for developing collaboration in the coming years to the benefit of all those seeking to maintain this vital part of our global heritage.

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