Wetlands and cultural heritage conservation

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Report on the 2nd General Assembly of the European Archaeological Council

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Deputy Secretary General, Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

The importance of people and their cultural heritage of wetlands has long been recognised by Ramsar. Recently, the Ramsar Bureau has been developing closer links with those involved in the cultural heritage management of wetlands, with whom there is much common ground on the objectives of wetland management, particularly in preparation for the discussion of cultural heritage of wetlands at Ramsar’s COP8 in November 2002. Here we report on recent developments.

European Archaeological Council

The Europae Archaeologiae Consilium (European Archaeological Council, EAC) is a network of representatives of national and subnational cultural heritage management organisations and agencies, established in 1999 and currently representing 21 European countries. Its primary mission is:

"to support the management of the archaeological heritage throughout Europe and to serve the needs of national archaeological heritage management agencies by providing a forum for organisations to establish closer and more structured co-operation and exchange of information."

The EAC held its 2nd Consilium and General Assembly in Strasbourg 22-23 March 2001, which was attended by Ramsar’s Deputy Secretary General, Nick Davidson.

Developing cooperation between Ramsar and EAC

Over the past six months, EAC has been in dialogue with the Ramsar Bureau with a view to establishing a programme of cooperation to increase recognition of the importance of the cultural management of wetlands, in order to ensure that, in particular, cultural heritage conservation is taken fully into account in wetland management planning and implementation. There is a great deal of common ground between the objectives of biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage conservation in wetlands, notably that for both of these interests the underlying objective is that the wetlands must remain wet and that appropriate hydrological management is essential to achieve this.

It has perhaps yet to be fully recognised by natural environment managers and those designating and managing Ramsar sites that wetlands, and in particular peatlands, are the most important natural ecosystem for archaeology in many parts of the world, and certainly in Europe. This is chiefly because the waterlogged and anoxic (airless and oxygen-free) conditions of wetlands preserve a remarkable range, wealth and quality of archaeological features and especially organic material (wood, pollen, insects, plants, animal and human bodies, etc.), materials that in drier conditions degrade rapidly.
In recognition of this key importance of wetlands for archaeology, EAC held a workshop on the cultural heritage management of wetlands at its 1st General Assembly in 2000. Following on from this meeting, EAC has now published an important book on *The Heritage Management of Wetlands in Europe (EAC Occasional Paper No. 1)*, launched during its 2nd General Assembly on 22 March 2001. This impressive and attractively-produced and well-illustrated 207-page book includes overviews, reviews of how the cultural heritage of wetlands is managed in different countries and regions of Europe, and case studies, many referring to Ramsar sites with examples of good practice co-management and lessons learnt. The Ramsar Bureau contributed the Foreword to the book (available here), and several contributions concern the Convention specifically, most notably "Archaeology and Ramsar in England" by David Bull and Bryony Coles. The book also includes a paper by María-José Viñales of SEHUMED (with Jorge Cruz of the Valencia Museum of Prehistory and Culture) on the cultural heritage of Mediterranean wetlands, highlighting the link with Ramsar’s MedWet Initiative and its interest in Mediterranean cultural heritage. A full review of this important book will appear on the Ramsar Web site shortly.

At the launch of the book during the EAC General Assembly, a copy was formally presented to the Ramsar Bureau, represented by Deputy Secretary General Nick Davidson, whose statement of appreciation in reply is attached here. This statement highlights the importance and mutual value of working together in enhancing the cultural heritage management of wetlands, and the role EAC can play in profiling this at Ramsar’s COP8.

The intention is that copies of the book will be made available gratis to European Ramsar focal points, and further copies will be available from EAC at the cost price of 15 Euros (plus postage and packing). We’re not yet sure from whom the book should be ordered but will supply an update on that soon.

**EAC’s Strategy for the Heritage Management of Wetlands**

The book also contains an EAC Strategy and Statement of Intent on the heritage management of wetlands (reprinted here), developed in discussion with the Ramsar Bureau. This Strategy was formally adopted by the EAC General Assembly on 22 March 2001.

The statement covers a range of activities linking to, or relevant to, the Ramsar Convention and these will be further developed through a Memorandum of Cooperation. Planned activities will focus on contributions to the Ramsar COP8 process, including participation, assisting in the preparation of guidelines and case studies on cultural heritage conservation as a tool for wetland wise use management, and the creation of a travelling exhibition on culture and wetlands. A substantial gap-filling research agenda is also proposed for further work on wetland archaeology and cultural heritage conservation. Development of these activities was further discussed with EAC members during the General Assembly, as was assistance in the preparation of factsheets on the cultural heritage of wetlands for World
Wetlands Day in February 2002.

EAC 2nd Symposium

On 23 March 2001 EAC held its second one-day symposium, on Cultural landscapes and Sustainable Development, which presented a number of overviews and case studies from different European countries.

The Symposium reported on the new European Landscape Convention (the Florence Convention) which was opened for signature in October 2000, and to date has 21 signatories. The objectives and coverage of this Convention has considerable significance for Ramsar, since it covers all landscapes in each country (including land, inland waters, and marine), and is based on the premise of sustainable development, delivered through the three main pillars of protection, management, and planning. The new Convention's General Measures (Article 5) stress the importance of public and other stakeholder participation and encourage cross-sectoral policy and planning integration to achieve landscape conservation.

From the Symposium's presentations and discussions it is clear that safeguarding the cultural landscape is as great, or even greater, a challenge as the safeguarding of major archaeological sites and wetlands. The thinking and approaches being developed by the cultural heritage community have considerable relevance to the implementation of actions for the wise use of all wetlands embodied in the Ramsar Convention, and notably in relation to the approaches of river basin-scale integrated management and decision-making. The symposium also debated the difficult issue of what individual people in local communities value in their cultural landscapes, including their "sense of place" arising from the long continuity of landscapes and their features, including wetlands. It is planned to publish a volume in 2002 based on this symposium as EAC Occasional Paper No. 2.

An interesting case in point

Perhaps the most intriguing paper in the symposium, and perhaps the most relevant to Ramsar, was presented by Robert Risch of the University of Barcelona and reported the findings of a ground-breaking EC-funded study of the catchment of the River Aguas in northeastern Spain, tracing the 10,000-year history of its agricultural and water resource exploitation, and over-exploitation, by successive peoples and cultures.

Using a wide range of techniques, a multidisciplinary and international team estimated human population sizes and distributions, and the distribution, type and intensity of agriculture. They revealed a cyclical pattern of periods of stable and sustainable exploitation of the resources, focused upon valley wetlands and the most productive agricultural lands. In each case, however, this was followed by a substantial increase in human population, generally from the migration and import of a non-native workforce, this occurring at least twice (including during Roman times) to exploit mineral resources in the upper catchment.

On each occasion this led to an extension of cultivation into more marginal areas and the upper catchment and increased population demands on the natural resources, which then exceeded the carrying capacity of the system and caused lowering of the water table, suggesting over-exploitation of water resources. This then led to a catastrophic collapse of the economic system, abandonment of the mineral exploitation, and depopulation. One lesson from this study was that it is policy decisions (to increase exploitation) rather than environmental conditions that created the conditions of over-exploitation and collapse.

The lessons from these historic cycles of boom and bust do not appear to have been learnt well. The speaker noted that a remarkably similar cycle now is under way in the area, with a new economic boom based on the major expansion of intensive strawberry cultivation (called the 'Plastic Age' by the authors owing to the prevalence of the use of plastic sheeting in the cultivation), with a major influx of a workforce chiefly from North Africa. This is leading to over-exploitation of the catchment’s water resources and lowering of the water table. The speaker predicted that economic and social collapse will occur through lack of sufficient water resources for irrigation. In cultural landscape terms, the widespread leveling of fields for intensive cultivation has also destroyed much of the cultural landscape and almost all its archeological features.