The third Turkish National Wetlands Congress addressed current challenges for wetland ecosystem management and maintenance in this largely arid country experiencing a rapidly increasing urban population and changing climatic conditions. This meeting was an opportunity to advance and widen the reflection at national level, further to the two previous Congresses that focused mainly on the 14 Turkish Ramsar Sites and their biodiversity.

The Congress was held at the “19 May” University of Samsun on the Black Sea coast of Turkey on 23-25 October 2013. It brought together nearly 300 wetland experts, site managers, ecologists, hydrological engineers, administrators, educators and NGO experts.

“Wetlands take care of water” is Ramsar’s message for the international year of water cooperation – here part of the congress display with the Purple Gallinule congress logo (a Afro-Mediterranean wetland species).

The representative of the General Directorate of Nature Conservation and National Parks of the Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs, the Ramsar administrative authority, opened the Congress by stating that “wetlands constitute the heart of water”, a spot-on image that illustrates the essential functions that wetland ecosystems play in the hydrological cycle. The conference demonstrated that wetland conservation and management are about to become mainstream political concern in Turkey, after having been underestimated for many years. During the visit to the nearby Kizilirmak delta Ramsar Site, participants, including nature and water managers, discussed the perspectives for sustainable development of this outstanding wetland ecosystem.

Turkey contributes to a variety of wetland research programmes co-funded by the European Union and this was reflected by the participation of foreign specialists in the Congress. Themes covered include: water quality management, measures to avoid and control water pollution, valuation of ecosystem functions and services, challenges for practical site management, socio-economic livelihoods and products derived from wetlands, outdoor education and nature photography. In his speech, Denis Landenbergue from WWF International compared wetland conservation to life insurance for nature and people. The Ramsar Secretariat representative highlighted the role of wetlands as fundamental regulators of water regimes.
Autumn light over the Kızılırmak saltflats.

The Congress provided the authorities with added scientific support for the development of a National Wetland Strategy for the sustainable use of water resources and nature conservation. The Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs identified 134 major wetland ecosystems in Turkey. Hopefully, many of them can join the list of Turkish Ramsar Sites and provide good example for sustainable local development. Turkey is located in a strategical position between Europe and Asia and is home of several wetlands and river basins shared with neighbouring countries. It can play an important role in regional cooperation, notably as a member of two Ramsar Regional Initiatives: MedWet and BlackSeaWet.

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Photos by Denis Landenbergue, WWF International