

## Report of the Secretary General

### Action requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to note the present report of the Secretary General.

### Introduction

1. This report outlines the Secretariat's activities from 1 March to 21 October 2024, providing both an overview and key highlights of the work accomplished during this period.
2. The Secretary General has reaffirmed her commitment to enhancing the Secretariat's work to effectively fulfil its mandate as outlined in Article 8 of the Convention, and to carrying out the instructions set by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee, to better support Contracting Parties in implementing the Convention's Strategic Plan. This report is structured around the following key areas:
  - Ensuring operational excellence in support of Contracting Parties;
  - Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes;
  - Collaborating to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism; and
  - Mobilizing resources to support the implementation of the Convention.

### Ensuring operational excellence in support of Contracting Parties

3. The delivery of the Secretariat's core role in supporting Contracting Parties includes the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies, and the implementation of the decisions and instructions of Contracting Parties. This area of work has been prioritized in the triennial work plan approved by the Standing Committee at its 62nd meeting (SC62), and in the 2024 annual work plan which was approved by the Standing Committee at SC63.
4. A core function of the Secretariat is organizing meetings for the Convention's governing and subsidiary bodies, including the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), the Standing Committee (SC) and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). During this reporting period, the Secretariat has overseen logistical arrangements, prepared meeting documents and facilitated the convening of SC63 and SC64.
5. SC63 was held from 3 to 7 June 2024 at the Secretariat headquarters in Gland, Switzerland, drawing robust participation from 126 delegates representing 48 Contracting Parties, 23 observer organizations, and up to 112 additional online participants daily. The introduction of the feature displaying the agenda item under discussion and the name of the intervening

Contracting Party or observer on screen proved to be an enhancement, streamlining the intervention process. Furthermore, a new nameplate format featuring the Convention's logo was implemented. The results of the meeting survey indicated strong engagement and positive responses from the participating Parties.

6. The Secretariat has undertaken preparations including preparation of documents and the coordination of logistical arrangements for SC64 in Gland. Plenary sessions of SC64 will take place from Tuesday 21 to Friday 24 January, preceded by meetings of the Committee's Subgroups and Working Groups on Monday 20 January. The primary focus of the meeting will be consideration of draft resolutions set to be submitted to COP15.
7. The 27th meeting of the STRP is scheduled to take place from 2 to 6 December 2024 in Gland. STRP27 will focus on finalizing nearly completed outputs in line with the 2023-2025 work plan, further reinforcing the Secretariat's commitment to delivering timely and actionable scientific products to Contracting Parties. Building on the positive feedback from STRP26, particularly regarding logistical support and intersessional communication, STRP27 will continue to prioritize strong coordination with Contracting Parties. Additionally, the meeting will feature a dedicated day for consultation with the Earth observation community, in line with Decision SC63-30 of the Standing Committee.
8. The Secretariat continues to support Working Groups and Subgroups of the Standing Committee, including the Management Working Group, the Strategic Plan Working Group, the Subgroup on Finance, the CEPA (communication, capacity building, education, participation and awareness) Oversight Panel, the Working Group on Institutional Strengthening and the Youth Working Group (YWG). The Secretariat also facilitated the organization of virtual meetings to support the newly established Working Group on RIS Updating and the group of Parties interested in strengthening the process to include a Site on the List of Wetlands of International Importance, as directed by Decisions SC63-33 and SC63-34, respectively.
9. During this period, the Secretariat supported the preparation of reports for two Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs). The first was a joint mission with the World Heritage Centre (UNESCO) to the Fertő/Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape, a transboundary Ramsar and World Heritage Site located in Austria and Hungary. The second mission was to the Sierra Leone River Estuary in Sierra Leone. Additionally, the Secretariat provided support to five Contracting Parties on the procedures for conducting RAMs.
10. The Secretary General continues to champion the efforts of Ramsar Regional Initiatives. On 14 May 2024, during her mission to the Republic of Korea, she participated in World Wetland Day celebrations, attending the "Wetland Day" baseball match organized by the Ramsar Regional Center – East Asia (RRC-EA) and the Kia Tigers, a local team. She had the honour of throwing the first pitch of the game. On 28 June, the Secretary General joined MedWet in celebrating the 70th anniversary of Tour du Valat in Arles, France. Founded in 1954 by naturalist and philanthropist Luc Hoffmann in the Camargue, Tour du Valat has been instrumental in wetland conservation over the past seven decades.
11. With the support of the Secretariat, the 3rd intersessional online meeting for members of the STRP was held on 3 and 4 September 2024. The Secretariat facilitated this meeting, ensuring smooth coordination and communication between the STRP Chair, STRP Members, and Thematic Work Area (TWA) leads. The meeting provided an opportunity for updates from the STRP Chair and the Secretariat, as well as progress reports from TWA leads on the implementation of the STRP workplan. The meeting furthermore served as a platform for

discussing the development of draft resolutions for submission to SC64. Additionally, with the Secretariat's support, on 15 May 2024, the STRP successfully launched its Technical Report: *Scaling up wetland conservation and restoration to deliver the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework: Guidance on including wetlands in NBSAPs*<sup>1</sup>. This launch was followed by a joint webinar organized in collaboration with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) on 19 June. Furthermore, the STRP Chair, with assistance from the Secretariat, has established a process for sharing regular updates with the International Organization Partners (IOPs) of the Convention, observers, and STRP focal points. The first communiqué was disseminated on 18 July 2024.

12. Additionally, the Secretariat continued to support the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) of the Wetland City Accreditation, in planning for the accreditation of new Wetland Cities and the renewal of existing ones.
13. The Secretariat is actively enhancing IT platforms to ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness. The Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS) is currently undergoing a renewal of its core components to maintain security and reliable functioning. Navigation on the Convention's website has been simplified to enhance accessibility of core information. The constituent relations management (CRM) system is consistently monitored and adapted to ensure that its essential operations of contact management, mailing, meeting registration and nomination processes are efficient and align with current security standards. The Secretariat is working on the development of a national report data management system to enable compilation, visualization, analysis and export of national report data for several applications, including reports to governing bodies.
14. In 2024, the Secretariat maintained solid financial stability, attributed to ongoing effective financial management and rigorous oversight, and in alignment with established governing financial practices. Throughout the year, the Secretariat executed activities in line with the projected budget allocations. Final financial statements and results for 2024 will be presented to SC65 in July 2025, following the completion of the audit.
15. Over the reporting period, the Secretariat successfully completed four staff recruitments, including the appointments of the Senior Advisor – Americas, two new Junior Professionals – Technical Support, for Asia and Oceania and the Americas, and the Wetland Finance Support Officer. This new role, funded through a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Environment of Korea, focuses on increasing wetland finance and managing small-grant programmes of the Secretariat.
16. During the reporting period the Secretariat completed a salary review exercise to determine equity between Secretariat staff compensation and IUCN staff. The findings indicated that Secretariat compensation is not in parity with compensation for IUCN staff in comparable positions. Within existing budget constraints, salary adjustments were made for several staff members in an effort to reduce these inequities.
17. The Secretariat organized a retreat for all staff members aimed at improving team dynamics by enhancing understanding of individual profiles and working styles, using the MBTI methodology. The retreat focused on fostering collaboration and identifying efficient ways of working together.

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/scaling-wetland-conservation-restoration-deliver-kunming-montreal-global-biodiversity>.

## **Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes**

18. Raising visibility and awareness about the vital role of wetlands in global processes is essential for addressing the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Hence, promoting the importance of protecting, conserving and restoring wetlands is crucial to driving the urgent actions required to address these challenges.
19. Launched in July 2023, the updated Convention website has garnered consistently positive feedback from Contracting Parties. The Secretariat has further improved the site by expanding the news section with dedicated feature articles on diverse wetland-related themes. Each week, a news story or feature article is published, providing regular updates and in-depth insights on key topics.
20. Throughout the reporting period, the Convention has maintained an active and engaged presence across various social media platforms, with engagement levels steadily increasing. By the end of September 2024, the Convention's X account had nearly 35,000 followers, Instagram had 11,347 followers, and the Facebook page had a substantial 155,000 followers. The official LinkedIn account had 15,000 followers, while the YouTube channel reached 4,313 subscribers. Notably, the Secretary General is particularly active on X, LinkedIn and Facebook, where she engages with 12,450 followers, regularly sharing updates on meetings and insights on wetlands in the global agenda.
21. World Wetlands Day on 2 February remains the most significant communication and awareness-raising event for the Convention. In this regard, World Wetlands Day 2025 will be celebrated using the theme "Protecting wetlands for our common future", emphasizing the importance of conserving these ecosystems for the benefit of all. This is also the theme of COP15.
22. The World Wetlands Day 2025 campaign will highlight the benefits of wetlands, to raise awareness of the importance of conserving wetlands for our common future. Ensuring the health and conservation of these vital ecosystems will allow future generations to enjoy their ecological, economic and cultural benefits, fostering a sustainable and prosperous future for all.
23. The Secretariat continues to effectively utilize international days to highlight the critical importance of wetlands for both the planet and its people. On international days such as International Women's Day (8 March), World Water Day (22 March), International Day for Biological Diversity (22 May), World Environment Day (5 June), World Ocean Day (8 June) and World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought (17 June), the Secretariat shared video and print statements from the Secretary General and developed event specific social media content. Additionally, the Secretary General was invited to various sessions, where she had the honour of opening the celebrations as a guest speaker. Notably, the Secretary General actively seeks opportunities to engage with international media to raise awareness of wetlands. During the reporting period, she was featured in an interview with the Hindu Times.
24. In June 2024, the Secretariat launched the call for nominations for the ninth edition of the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards, including the Evian Special Prize, provided by Danone. Each recipient will be awarded a USD 10,000 cash prize. This edition of the Awards, to be decided by the Standing Committee at SC64, will recognize outstanding contributions in three key categories: the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award for Innovation, the Award for Young Wetland Champions, and the Indigenous Peoples Conservation and Wise Use Award. To maximize awareness and participation, the Secretariat actively promoted the call for

nominations through its primary communication platforms, including social media and through the distribution of a diplomatic note to encourage nominations of qualified candidates.

25. Youth engagement remains a key priority in the Secretary General's missions and initiatives. While at the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-6) in Nairobi, Kenya, in late February to early March, the Secretary General met the Africa Youth for Wetlands Coalition led by its Chair, Mr Mulindwa Guy. During her May 2024 mission to East Asia, while in Japan, she held consultations with youth activists in Fujiame-higata and also met Team Spoon, a youth group based in Tokyo. While at the 10th World Water Forum in Bali, Indonesia, she engaged with the World Water Council Youth Delegates and participated as a panelist in their "Interactive Session Built on Youth Satellite Event: Discussions on Key Water Topics by Youth for All". The Secretary General also attended a workshop bringing together global participants hosted by the Youth Working Group (YWG) of the Convention, which focused on advancing the YWG work plan. In her opening remarks, she commended Contracting Parties for appointing Youth Focal Points to support the goals of Resolution XIV.12.
26. The Secretariat actively engages in the online meetings of the "Communications Flotilla" organized by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This initiative aims to coordinate communications and create synergies among various biodiversity-related Conventions and organizations. The group will be instrumental in supporting and advancing the World Wetlands Day and COP15 outreach efforts. Furthermore, the Secretariat has established a communications engagement group in collaboration with the IOPs.
27. Through the implementation of its communications strategy, the Secretariat produces informative, current and relevant content that partners and stakeholders can effectively disseminate. Central to this approach is the creation of compelling narratives, such as showcasing "wetland champions" to foster understanding and inspire action for wetland conservation. Furthering this commitment, the Secretariat has collaborated with the Africa Renewal Magazine in sharing the stories of the campaign on "Women Changemakers in the World of Wetlands". Africa Renewal is a United Nations digital magazine that covers Africa's economic, social and political developments. This collaboration led to the stories being republished in two major African media outlets, The Zimbabwe Herald and AllAfrica.com.

#### **Collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism**

28. Contracting Parties have expressed their desire for the Secretariat, on behalf of the Convention, to be active on the wider global policy agenda. This aligns with the implementation of Resolution XIV.6, which focuses on enhancing the Convention's visibility and strengthening synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements and international institutions. To this aim, the Secretariat continues to prioritize its work in supporting international cooperation and raising the profile of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework are driving national and international planning and funding efforts. The increased attention ensures that wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks.
29. In March 2024, the Secretary General led a delegation to the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-6) of which the overall theme was "Effective, Inclusive, and Sustainable Multilateral Actions to Tackle Climate Change, Biodiversity Loss and Pollution". In

line with Resolution XIV.6, the Secretariat showcased its collaborative efforts with other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) through various events at the Assembly.

30. In May 2024, at the invitation of the Parties concerned, the Secretary General embarked on a mission to East Asia. In the Republic of Korea, she engaged with RRC-EA and held high-level meetings with senior government officials to strengthen collaboration. In Japan, she visited two key wetland centres and met government leaders to advance wetland conservation efforts. Concluding her mission in Indonesia, the Secretary General attended the 10th World Water Forum, at which she championed the vital role of water and emphasized the importance of the Convention in shaping the global water agenda.
31. The Secretariat, led by the Secretary General, participated in the Third Dushanbe Water Action Decade Conference, held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, from 10 to 13 June 2024. Throughout the various forums, the Secretary General emphasized the Convention's role in advancing the global water agenda. Their efforts contributed to the inclusion of key points in the conference's outcome documents.<sup>2</sup>
32. In June 2024, the Secretary General visited the European Union headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, to advocate for stronger collaboration between the Convention on Wetlands and EU institutions. She highlighted the need for coordinated actions on wetlands to address global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and to support achievement of the SDGs, while also supporting regional targets set by EU directives and strategies.
33. In September, at the invitation of the Chair of the African Ministers of Environment, the Secretary General attended discussions at the tenth special session of the Africa Ministerial Conference on Environment (AMCEN) in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, aimed at shaping Africa's common position on multilateral agreements addressing desertification, land degradation and drought. During the forum's plenary session, she called for the inclusion of wetlands in these discussions and renewed her appeal for active participation at the Convention's upcoming COP15 in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

### **Mobilizing resources to support implementation of the Convention**

34. Availability of sufficient and predictable funding is essential for effective implementation of the Convention. The Secretariat has taken actions to encourage timely payment of contributions to the core budget by Contracting Parties and to raise funds for the non-core fundraising priorities identified in Annex 4 of Resolution XIV.1 on *Financial and budgetary matters*.
35. The resource mobilization work plan<sup>3</sup>, approved by the Standing Committee at SC62 in September 2023, outlines the Secretariat's strategy for securing funding for non-core priorities for this triennium. The Secretariat is grateful for the voluntary contributions received during this reporting period, from the governments of Canada, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, the United States of America, Danone and the Nagao Natural Environment Foundation.
36. In response to a request from the Government of Morocco, the Secretariat undertook fundraising efforts to support delegate travel to Marrakesh, Morocco, to participate in the pre-SC64 African regional meeting. Contributions for delegate travel were received from the government of Switzerland and the government of France through the French Biodiversity

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<sup>2</sup>See <https://conf2024.dushanbewaterprocess.org/outcome-docs/>.

<sup>3</sup>See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/sc62-doc18-resource-mobilization-work-plan-2023-2025>.

Agency (OFB) as well as NatureXpairs along with in-kind support from the government of Morocco.

37. Looking ahead to COP15 in Zimbabwe, the Secretariat is actively seeking CHF 584,040 in voluntary contributions to cover flights, accommodation and daily subsistence allowances for 124 delegates from developing countries, economies in transition, and Small Island Developing States. There is no core-budget funding for delegates to participate in the COP, making voluntary contributions essential for ensuring full participation. This is important to enable consensus-based decisions and necessary as at least one-third of the Contracting Parties must be present to hold the meeting, and two-thirds present to make decisions. The Secretariat extends its gratitude to the Government of Switzerland for its contribution and encourages more donors to support this critical fundraising initiative.
38. Currently, the funding for non-core priorities relies on a limited pool of consistent donors, with over 70% from government sources. The Secretariat has observed that administrative priorities, such as facilitating delegate travel, tend to attract low donor interest compared to more substantive areas such as capacity-building and awareness-raising or the activities of the STRP. In response to these challenges, the Secretariat is exploring approaches aimed at diversifying the donor base and increasing funding for non-core priorities.
39. In conclusion, the Secretariat has made significant strides between March and October 2024 in supporting Contracting Parties, enhancing operational excellence and raising the visibility of wetlands on the global stage. As the Secretariat continues to collaborate with international partners and drive towards the achievement of the SDGs and other global goals, it remains committed to fulfilling its mandate, fostering multilateralism, and ensuring the conservation and sustainable management of wetlands for future generations.