



*"People and Wetlands: The Vital Link"*  
**7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties  
to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971),  
San José, Costa Rica, 10-18 May 1999**

Agenda item VIII

## Report of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP)

*See also the following COP7 Documents related to and incorporating input from the STRP's work:  
13.3; 15.2; 15.3; 15.4; 15.5, 15.6; 15.7; 15.10; 15.11; 15.12, 15.21; 17.1; 17.4; 19.1; 19.2; 19.3;*

### §I. Background

1. The 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of Contracting Parties (Brisbane, 1996) appointed a seven member Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) to serve for the triennium 1996-99. The composition of the STRP was as follows:

Dr. Yaa Ntiamoah-Baidu (Ghana, Africa, Chairperson)  
Dr. Makoto Komoda (Japan, Asia)  
Mr. Mihály Végh (Hungary, Eastern Europe)  
Dr. Roberto Schlatter (Chile, Neotropics)  
Mr. Allan Smith (Canada, North America)  
Dr. Keith Thompson (New Zealand, Oceania)  
Mr. François Letourneux (France, Western Europe)

2. In the second year of the STRP's term of office, Mr. Allan Smith (North America), resigned and was replaced by Dr. Cervantes Abrego (Mexico). The STRP worked closely with representatives of the Convention's Partner Organizations, namely:

BirdLife International: Mr. John O'Sullivan, Mr. David Pritchard  
IUCN: Mr. Jean-Yves Pirot  
Wetlands International: Mr. Scott Frazier, Dr. Nick Davidson  
WWF: Mr. Chris Tydeman, Ms. Elizabeth Salter, the late Ms. Barbara Rutherford

3. The STRP also drew on the expertise of Dr. Max Finlayson (Australia, Alternate member for Oceania), who attended all the STRP's meetings and played a lead role in the deliberations on Ecological Character and Change in Ecological Character.
4. The STRP was assigned a number of tasks arising from the Ramsar Convention's Strategic Plan 1997-2002 and the Resolutions and Recommendations adopted at the Brisbane COP. The Panel held three meetings (5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, & 7<sup>th</sup> STRP Meetings), the first in Hungary and the other two in Gland, Switzerland. At its first meeting, the Panel prioritised the assignments and

defined a work plan. This was approved by the 19<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee. The top priority tasks (arranged in order of priority, Category 1 = highest to Category 3 = lower priority) that the Standing Committee agreed the Panel should focus on were:

- Category 1      Review of Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance  
Ecological Character and Changes in Ecological Character
  
- Category 2      Restoration / rehabilitation of wetlands  
Guidelines for management planning
  
- Category 3      Economic valuation of wetlands  
Global review of wetland resources  
Strengthening links with other conventions and agencies  
Ramsar sites database

5. The full details of the STRP's deliberations during the triennium are provided in the minutes of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> STRP meetings. The minutes of the STRP meetings are sent to all Contracting Parties under Diplomatic Note and are also available on the Ramsar Web site. This report therefore presents only the conclusions and recommendations on the issues that the STRP made significant progress with during the 1996-99 triennium.

## §II. Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance (Operational Objective 6.3; Resolution VI.2, VI.3)

6. **Action requested by COP 6:** *To keep under review the Ramsar Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance and continue refining the guidelines on the application of the criteria based on fish, take into account cultural values and/ or benefits derived from wetlands; and consider the feasibility of designating Ramsar sites on the basis of important natural hydrological functions, such as groundwater recharge or water quality improvement.*

*Related COP 7 Documents for this topic: Doc. 15.11, 17.1.*

7. The STRP had extensive and in-depth discussion on the criteria issue at all three meetings held. At the first meeting (STRP5), there was general agreement that the existing criteria could be reorganised into two clusters: one in which the criteria dealing with plants and animals would be combined into a "Biodiversity criteria" group and a second dealing with "Representativeness and uniqueness" incorporating hydrological functions. The possibility of establishing a third cluster of criteria dealing with significance of wetlands for humans was debated at length without reaching any consensus. The STRP members were either clearly against developing human-use related criteria or expressed concerns about such criteria because of the possibility of misuse, dilution of the concept of "International Importance" and the fact that the human-related issues were adequately catered for by the Convention's Wise Use Guidelines. At the insistence of the Secretary General, however, the Panel agreed to establish a two-member subcommittee, comprising Dr. Max Finlayson (Australia) and Mr.

Allan Smith (Canada), to work with the Bureau to examine the possibility of drafting such criteria.

8. At the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the STRP, the report of the subcommittee set up to examine the criteria based on significance for humans was discussed, and the whole issue was again debated at length. The conclusions were similar to those reached at the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting: that is, criteria based on significance for humans were considered inappropriate, and the issues related to socio-economics and cultural concerns were best handled under the wise use concept. At this meeting the STRP concluded that:
  - the Criteria had been reviewed and were found to be basically sound;
  - there was a need to reorganise them into two main general categories: i) Representativeness and Uniqueness; and ii) Biodiversity (to give adequate weight to plants and animals with special sections on waterbirds and fish);
  - there was also a need to make the guidelines more user-friendly, paying special attention to hydrological factors, socio-economic benefits as well as flora, with the possibility of establishing sub-criteria for other taxonomic groups as more data became available.
9. A preliminary report on the STRP's deliberations was presented to the 20<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee. The Committee instructed the STRP to revisit the issue of establishing a criterion based on "significance for humans", drawing on the expertise of social scientists, since this particular expertise was considered inadequately represented on the STRP. Thus, at the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the STRP, two social scientists, Dr. Antonio Diegues (Brazil) and Ms. Bronwen Golder (New Zealand), were invited by the Bureau to assist the STRP in its deliberations. The conclusion from the debate was no different from the conclusions arrived at in the first two meetings (STRP5 and STRP6), i.e. that **development of a criterion based on human use is not considered appropriate, and that issues related to significance for humans are best addressed in the revised guidelines on the Convention's wise use concept** (delegates are referred to Appendix 1 of the STRP7 minutes, which presents an analysis provided to the STRP by Ms. Golder that offers a concise summary of the issues at stake; [http://ramsar.org/strp7\\_minutes\\_app1.htm](http://ramsar.org/strp7_minutes_app1.htm)).
10. On the criteria themselves, the STRP agreed on regrouping as decided in the earlier meetings, modifying the language to remove ambiguity and making the guidelines more comprehensive. The revised Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance proposed by the STRP for consideration by the Standing Committee are presented as an Appendix of this report. The proposal recommended two main Criteria, with three sub-criteria under Criterion 2, as follows:
  - 1 **Criteria based on representativeness, rare or unique wetland types**
  - 2 **Criteria based on biological diversity**
    - 2.1 **Criteria based on species and ecological communities**
    - 2.2 **Specific criteria based on waterbirds**

### 2.3 Specific criteria based on fish.

11. The STRP's revised criteria, as well as the proposal for improving the guidelines, were endorsed by the 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee in October 1998, for transmission to and consideration at COP7. Alongside the STRP's work on the Criteria, the Bureau, together with STRP members, experts from Ramsar Administrative Authorities and Partner Organizations, developed a "vision" for the Ramsar List and prepared revised guidelines to complement the revised Criteria, as well as a comprehensive glossary of terms. In doing this, no alterations were made to the revised wording recommended by the STRP; changes were made, however, to the numbering system for the Criteria. The outcome of the work of the STRP and the Bureau's work (as endorsed by the Standing Committee) on the Criteria, strategic framework and guidelines for the List of Wetlands of International Importance, are presented in COP 7 DOCS. 15.11 & 17.1 for the consideration of COP7.

### §III. Ecological Character and Changes in Ecological Character (Operational Objective 5.1; Resolution VI.1, Recommendation 6.14)

12. **Action requested by COP 6:** *To review the working definitions of ecological character and change in ecological character adopted at COP 6; review and regularly update the Montreux Record; and identify the potential impact of global threats on ecological character of Ramsar sites.*

***Related COP 7 Documents for this topic: Doc. 15.10 and 19.2***

13. The STRP assessed the working definitions of *ecological character* and *change in ecological character* that were adopted at COP6. In conjunction with this, the STRP also assessed the adequacy of the Ramsar Information Sheet to provide baseline data for describing ecological character and detecting change in ecological character. The STRP also reviewed and continued the work on developing an Early Warning System for monitoring ecological character that had been started in the previous triennium and was reported to COP6 (Resolution VI.I). The focus of the review was to develop a framework that Contracting Parties could use to predict and assess change in ecological character. In addition to the discussions during the regular STRP meetings, a technical workshop was organised to precede the 7<sup>th</sup> STRP meeting at the Ramsar Bureau in April 1998, to examine the issues related to wetland risk assessment and thresholds for acceptable change. Dr. Max Finlayson (Australia) led this work, and 15 experts, including STRP members, attended this workshop. The conclusions from the workshop were presented and discussed at the 7<sup>th</sup> STRP meeting.
14. Following the extensive discussions on the working definitions of *ecological character* and *change in ecological character*, the STRP recommends the following definitions for consideration by COP7 (see COP7 DOC. 19.2):

#### ECOLOGICAL CHARACTER

Working definition adopted at COP6: *Ecological character is the structure and inter-relationships between the biological, chemical and physical components of the wetland. These derive from the interactions of individual processes, functions, attributes and values.*

Definition recommended by STRP for adoption at COP 7: **Ecological character is the sum of biological, physical, and chemical components of the wetland ecosystem and their interactions which maintain the wetland and its products, functions and attributes.**

#### CHANGE IN ECOLOGICAL CHARACTER

Working definition adopted at COP6: *Change in ecological character is the impairment or imbalance in any of those processes and functions which maintain the wetland and its products, attributes and values.*

Definition recommended by STRP for adoption at COP 7: **Change in ecological character is the impairment or imbalance in any biological, physical, or chemical components of the wetland ecosystem, or in their interactions which maintain the wetland and its products, functions and attributes.**

15. The output from the STRP's deliberation on Wetland Risk Assessment and the framework recommended for guidance of the Contracting Parties are presented for consideration by COP7 in COP7 DOCS. 15.10 and 19.2.
16. In discussing the results of the assessment of the adequacy of the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for providing baseline data to describe and monitor change in ecological character, the STRP considered the implications of any changes in data requirements on the reporting expected from Contracting Parties. The conclusions from the assessment and discussions were that:
  - i) The RIS is inadequate for recording change in ecological character, and rather than revising the RIS to be more inclusive, a new instrument should be designed.
  - ii) The idea of using the RIS to gather baseline data for monitoring should be abandoned and the evolution of ecological character should be seen as part of the management planning process rather attempting to relate it to the existing database.

#### §IV. Restoration / rehabilitation of wetlands (Recommendation 6.15)

17. **Action requested by COP 6:** *To define guidelines on principles for wetland restoration and monitoring procedures and to produce a list based on information from contracting parties of key wetland sites in need of restoration.*

***Related COP 7 Documents for this topic: DOC. 15.7; 17.4***

18. Mr. Mihály Végh (Hungary), STRP member for Eastern Europe, and Dr. Palle Uhd Jepsen (Denmark) took the lead role in the STRP's work on restoration and rehabilitation of

wetlands. In tackling this task, the STRP recognised the considerable volume of literature that exists on the subject and the variety of methods used in different situations, and concluded that there was no point in re-inventing the wheel. The work therefore focused on evaluating what has already been done and recommending ways of handling wetland restoration and rehabilitation. At its 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, the STRP discussed a draft paper on the issue which describes four considerations (ecological, technical, ethical and socio-economic) and five possible outputs (preservation, conservation, rehabilitation, reconstruction and nature development) that need to be considered in wetland restoration and rehabilitation. The output from this work has been incorporated into the background paper for Technical Session II, COP7 DOC. 17.4, and the associated draft decision DOC. 15.7.

#### §V. Management Planning Guidelines (Operational Objective 5.2, Recommendation 6.13)

19. **Action requested by COP 6:** *To monitor the Kusiro Guidelines on management planning, including a review of recent advances in the total or integrated management approach to management planning; and publish ten best practice case studies of management planning for Ramsar sites.*

*Related COP 7 Documents for this topic: DOC. 13.3 Annex 5*

20. Drs. Komoda (Japan) and Schlatter (Chile) took the lead on the STRP's work on the Management Planning Guidelines. With the assistance of the Bureau, two sets of questionnaires were developed and distributed to Contracting Parties. The first questionnaire sought responses on the relevance, application, training assistance and viability of the Management Planning Guidelines. The second questionnaire was a follow-up on issues identified from the findings of the first survey, for which a need was felt to develop further guidance for the Contracting Parties. The specific issues addressed by the second questionnaire were:
- process applied in developing and updating management plans;
  - management principles taken into consideration in those processes;
  - implementation of the plan including evaluation practices; and
  - major constraints that had been experienced with implementation.
21. The survey also identified a need for supplementary guidance to Contracting Parties on the following aspects of management planning:
- Impact assessment;
  - Zonation and multiple use issues;
  - Design and maintenance of buffer zones;
  - Application of precautionary principle in management planning; and
  - Cost-benefit analysis in management planning and decision making.
22. The analysis and conclusions from the first survey and follow-up questionnaire were presented and discussed by the STRP. The full details of the results of the two surveys, conclusions and

recommendations are presented in COP7 DOC. 13.3 Annex 5 and reflected in draft Resolution 15.12.

23. On the question of *publishing best practice case studies*, the STRP agreed with the Bureau that this is best incorporated in the other projects in preparation for the COP, specifically those developing Guidelines for involving local and indigenous people in wetlands management and Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise-use into river basin management.

**§VI. Strengthening Links with other Conventions and Agencies (Operational Objective 7.2; Resolution VI.7; VI.9)**

24. **Action requested by COP 6:** *To strengthen and formalise links between Ramsar and other international and/or regional environmental conventions and agencies, so as to advance the achievement of shared goals and objectives relating to wetland species or issues; establish close working relations with Subsidiary Body on Scientific Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) of the Convention on Biological Diversity and other similar bodies which advise environment-related conventions.*

***Related COP 7 Documents for this topic: DOCS. 15.3 and 15.4***

25. To address this issue, the STRP identified a number of international bodies that the Ramsar Convention could link up with in promoting the objectives of the Convention. These included:

- The Convention on Biological Diversity's Subsidiary Body on Scientific Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA)
- The Global Environment Facility's Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP);
- The Scientific Council of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)
- World Heritage Convention
- World Water Council
- Global Water Partnership
- International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI)
- International Association of Ecology (INTECOL)
- International Biosphere-Geosphere Program (IGBP)
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
- Man and Biosphere Program (MAB)
- Society for International Limnologists (SIL)
- The Society of Wetland Scientists

26. Members of the STRP who were involved in the activities of the above groups kept the STRP and the Bureau informed of the groups' activities. Representatives of SBSTTA and the STRP participated in each other's meetings wherever possible, and the Bureau prepared and entered into a formal Memorandum of Cooperation between Ramsar and CBD. The STRP also assisted the Bureau to define the areas for Ramsar's input into the CBD's biodiversity of

inland water ecosystems program and commented on terms of the CBD/Ramsar Joint Work Plan.

#### §VII. On the Ramsar Database (Operational Objective 5.4; Resolution VI.13)

27. **Action requested by COP 6:** *To keep under review the content and structure, as well as the hardware and software, of the Ramsar Database, in order to ensure that it retains relevance in the light of evolving information and communication technology.*

***Related COP 7 Documents for this topic: DOC. 15.12***

28. The STRP received detailed reports on the status of the Ramsar Database at each of the Panel's meetings from Mr. Frazier (Wetlands International), discussed these, and provided comments for improvement. The STRP also carried out extensive review and discussions on the Ramsar Information Sheet. The results of the STRP's deliberations on these issues were as follows:

**The STRP agreed on the revised Information Sheet for Ramsar Sites and concluded that the RIS is adequate for the purpose for which it was established.**

**The STRP also recommended that the updating of the Ramsar Information Sheets mandated by Resolution VI.13 should be applied to all Ramsar sites designated before 31<sup>st</sup> December 1990 in order to maintain synchronisation with the 3-year cycle of COPs.**

#### **Acknowledgement**

29. The STRP wishes to acknowledge the financial support of the Canadian Government to the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Panel, and expresses its thanks to the Government of Hungary for hosting that meeting. The Panel also acknowledges the support and keen interest of the Chair of the Standing Committee, Ms. Louise Lakos, in the work of the STRP. The STRP expresses its appreciation of the support of the Bureau to the work of the Panel, in particular, for the preparation of excellent documentation and logistical arrangements for all the meetings of the STRP.



## Appendix to the minutes of the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the STRP

### Final version of Criteria to be proposed to Standing Committee

#### 1. Criteria based on representative, rare or unique wetland types

*A wetland should be considered internationally important if:*

- (a) it is a representative, rare, or unique example of natural or near natural wetland types found within the appropriate biogeographic region;

#### 2. Criteria based on biological diversity

##### 2.1 Criteria based on species and ecological communities

*A wetland should be considered internationally important if:*

- (a) it supports rare, vulnerable, or endangered species or ecological communities;
- or (b) it supports populations of plant and/or animal species important for maintaining the genetic and ecological diversity of a particular biogeographic region;
- or (c) it supports plant and/or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions;

##### 2.2 Specific criteria based on waterbirds

*A wetland should be considered internationally important if:*

- (a) it regularly supports 20,000 waterbirds;
- or (b) it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbird.

##### 2.3 Specific criteria based on fish

*A wetland should be considered internationally important if:*

- (a) it supports a significant proportion of indigenous fish subspecies, species or families, life-history stages, species interactions and/or populations that are representative of wetland benefits and/or values and thereby contributes to global biological diversity;
- or (b) it is an important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery and/or migration path on which fish stocks, either within the wetland or elsewhere, depend.

**Note on Cluster 2:** Criteria based on biological diversity: the sub-group does not believe that sub-criteria for other taxonomic groups can be adequately elaborated prior to COP7.