



"People and Wetlands: The Vital Link"
**7th 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 IX

Report of the Secretary General

Action requested: This item will be considered in Plenary Session on the afternoon of Monday, 10 May 1999. The plenary is requested to note the report and to comment on it, as appropriate.

1. The Report of the Secretary General covers the three-year period from the close of Ramsar COP6 on 23 March 1996 to 22 March 1999. It follows the structure of the Convention's Strategic Plan 1997-2002.
2. This report has been prepared with the intention of providing a picture of the current status of the implementation of the Convention. This is based largely on the analysis of the 106 National Reports (NRs) received from Contracting Parties (CPs) and the work accomplished by the Ramsar Bureau. The report also highlights what are, in the opinion of the Convention secretariat, the major challenges for the next triennium in the different areas.
3. The central message of this report is that the Convention has made good progress in this three-year period – in some respects very good progress - mainly in five areas:
 - a) in the implementation of the Convention in a considerable number of Contracting Parties. This is reflected in the Regional Overviews prepared for COP7 (Ramsar COP7 DOCS. 6 to 12);
 - b) in the effective functioning of the Convention's mechanisms, such as the Standing Committee, including its Subcommittee on Finance, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, and the Ramsar Bureau;
 - c) in broadening the scope of the Convention's approach to wetland issues, by embracing increasingly an integrated approach that takes into consideration all aspects of wetland conservation and sustainable use within the framework of sustainable development;
 - d) in achieving a more mature and effective cooperation with the Convention's international NGO partners, IUCN-The World Conservation Union, BirdLife International, Wetlands International, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), as well as with other important national and international non-governmental institutions or groupings;

- e) in the considerable improvement of the Convention's visibility and standing at the international level, including its working relations with other key environment and development-related treaties and institutions.
4. But there is no room for complacency. In spite of good progress made in many aspects of the implementation of the Convention in a large number of countries, it would seem that only a limited number of them have purposely used the Strategic Plan 1997-2002 as a planning tool and/or as a reference to advance their action related to wetland conservation and sustainable use. The United Kingdom is the only Contracting Party that reported having elaborated a document like its "UK targets for the Ramsar Strategic Plan, 1997-2002", setting out specific national targets to implement each of the eight General Objectives of the Plan.
 5. The documents submitted to this 7th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties bring an honest evaluation of the progress made in most areas and contain challenging proposals for the immediate, medium and long-term future. In this sense, Ramsar COP7 may represent another milestone meeting, as for example was COP3 in Regina, Canada, in 1987, when the "wise use" concept acquired its full citizenship status under the Convention and important amendments to the treaty text were adopted.

Operational Objective 1 of the Strategic Plan: Universal Membership

6. Twenty-two countries have joined the Convention since COP6, bringing the current membership to 114 countries. At least 14 others are working on their accession: Belarus, Burundi, Cuba, Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Lao P.D.R, Lebanon, Mauritius, Moldova, Nigeria, Palau, Tanzania, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe.
7. The Bureau has given first priority to this issue and has used all possible means and opportunities to encourage accession. As reflected in the Regional Overviews, a number of Contracting Parties have provided important support towards this end, but a much more proactive approach could be taken by CPs, especially in working with their immediate neighbours which have not yet joined. This should be seen as an action in the self interest of each nation, since in most cases there are shared wetland or catchment areas or wetland species whose effective management could be facilitated if the neighbouring country(ies) were also a Ramsar CP. This more proactive approach should also be taken by those CPs that share migratory bird flyways and migratory species using coastal wetlands.
8. The Strategic Plan 1997-2002 established a target of 120 CPs for the year 2002. COP7 should augment this target to 150 and could receive concrete commitments from CPs to work towards the adhesion of particular non-CPs in their regions. The priority regions are still Africa, West and Central Asia, and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Operational Objective 2 of the Strategic Plan: Wise Use

9. The National Reports indicate that a large number of CPs have gone through processes of revision of environment-related legislation and institutions, particularly in Africa (14 CPs) and

the Neotropics (9 CPs), and to a lesser extent in Europe (10 CPs) and in Asia (7 CPs). While it is clear that in many cases the reported changes in legislation and institutional arrangements would have had a positive influence on wetland conservation and wise use issues, it would seem that in most countries a wetland-focused analysis of legislation and institutions is still warranted. Hopefully, COP7 will adopt the proposed *Guidelines for reviewing laws and institutions to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.7) and would urge CPs to give to this activity their highest priority.

10. In the area of the development and implementation of national wetlands policies (NWP) or equivalent instruments, there are encouraging signs but still further efforts are needed. 22 CPs indicated that they had a National Wetland Policy/Strategy or Action Plan in place, a further 31 said these were being developed, and 24 more advised that such instruments were planned for the near future. A more detailed analysis of this information is provided in Ramsar COP7 DOC 15.6 Addendum, which will be tabled at the Conference. There are few NWPs in place in Africa (2) and the Neotropics (1), but many are being planned for the near future (8 in Africa and 10 in the Neotropics). It is encouraging that 14 CPs with federal systems of government are working to see policies developed at provincial/state levels.
11. Some CPs have indicated that they do not see the need to develop a NWP because wetland issues are taken care of in a number of other policy and legislative instruments. Yet, in these cases, a NWP might be warranted in order to bring together all the wetland-related issues now scattered across those instruments, to ensure that all the necessary aspects are actually covered and that there is coherence and effective implementation of the agreed measures.
12. On integrated management approaches, 74 CPs indicated that they are promoting this type of approach but it is difficult to determine from the NRs how effectively this is being done. This continues to represent a high priority area; hopefully the proposed *Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.19) will be adopted by COP7 and CPs will be urged to report more in detail on this area in their NRs for COP8.
13. Economic valuation of wetland resources and functions is one area on which not enough progress has been made. The Ramsar Bureau book on *Economic Valuation of Wetlands*¹ and an attractive brochure summarising the content of the book² were very well received. Nevertheless, the Bureau has been unable to further the work in this area that is being perceived by many countries and institutions as a key area to help decisions-makers and legislators in the discharge of their responsibilities. Only 34 CPs have indicated in their NRs some activity in this area, and this is mostly isolated one-off cases, not a systematic approach.

¹ *Economic Valuation of Wetlands - A Guide for Policy Makers and Planners*, by Edward B. Barbier, Mike Acreman and Duncan Knowler. Ramsar Convention Bureau, University of York, Institute of Hydrology and IUCN-The World Conservation Union, 1997. Produced and published in English and French with funding provided by the UK Department of the Environment and Swedish SIDA. The Spanish version was published with financial support from Caixa Catalunya (Barcelona, Spain).

² Published in the three official languages with financial support from the Government of Japan.

14. To some extent the issue of economic valuation is further considered in the proposed decision on *Incentives to encourage the application of the principle of wise use of wetlands* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.15), but CPs may want to consider giving more attention to this issue during COP7. A Contact Group could be established for deliberating on this issue during the Conference and bringing to the plenary a more concrete and substantive proposal for action in this area during the next triennium. The Secretary General will be pleased to assist if one or more CPs is prepared to lead on this.
15. On environmental impact assessment (EIA), 92 CPs reported that EIAs are required under national law. Nevertheless, most of these NRs do not indicate how effectively this requirement is being applied when it comes to projects, programmes and activities affecting wetlands. It is proposed that COP7 looks at more comprehensive approaches to EIA, including social impact and strategic environmental assessment, so as to take into account the impact of policies, programmes and plans and not just isolated projects that are impacting on wetlands. This is important in order to ensure that the full range of wetlands functions and benefits are taken into consideration. (See Ramsar COP7 DOC. 19.1 and Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.16).
16. 76 CPs have indicated that wetland restoration or rehabilitation is being undertaken within their territories. While there are some major projects happening, it would seem that in most countries this is at the small, or even pilot project, scale. Only a handful of CPs have undertaken inventories of their wetlands requiring restoration or rehabilitation.
17. There is no doubt that protecting natural wetlands is still the best option, but where wetlands have been lost or degraded, the reinstallation of wetlands in water systems can be a major part of rehabilitating aquatic environments. It should also be noted that restoration can be very expensive, as demonstrated by the billions of dollars being devoted to the restoration of the Everglades in Florida, USA, but it also can be done by local people using low-cost technology to reap local benefits.
18. It is hoped that COP7 will adopt the draft decision on *Restoration as an element of national planning for wetland conservation and wise use* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.17), which will represent a boost in the work of the Convention in this important area.
19. In the area of stakeholder involvement in wetland management, there are very clear signs that local people are taking the lead in many countries. In the optional section at the end of the NRs, 63 CPs indicated that there are international NGOs active in their country in this area, 36 indicated that there are regional NGOs active, and 80 that they have national NGOs involved in this issue. 19 CPs reported that they include NGOs on their COP delegations to Ramsar COPs.
20. The proposed *Guidelines for establishing participatory processes to involve local communities and indigenous people in the management of wetlands* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.8), and *The Ramsar Convention's Outreach Programme, 1999-2002* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.9), if adopted by COP7, should constitute important tools for furthering the action by CPs in this area.

21. The Bureau wishes to express its sincere gratitude to the NGOs and other agencies that took responsibility for and/or contributed to the preparation of the COP7 documents on stakeholder participation and on laws and institutions, as indicated in the respective conference papers. Funding was provided for the processes involved in these preparations by the Governments of Australia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, and by the Kushiro International Wetlands Center (Japan).
22. There seems to exist a growing interest from the private sector to be involved in wetland issues, but judging from the information contained in the NRs, this is still not a strong area of the Convention's work. NGOs would seem to be better at it than governments.
23. As CPs will be aware, at the initiative of the Conservatoire du Littoral (the French Government agency devoted to buying land in the coastal zone and lake shores for conservation purposes), the Convention entered into a three-year project agreement with the food and mineral waters multinational company Danone Group, with additional funding also provided for the project by the French Global Environment Facility. This may be the first time that a private sector company is providing funding for the implementation of an environment-related treaty.
24. The Bureau is exploring the possibility of establishing other sponsoring or partnership agreements with other private sector companies.

Operational Objective 3 of the Strategic Plan: Awareness of Wetland Values and Functions at All Levels

25. 62 CPs reported that they have implemented education and public awareness (EPA) programmes and activities which included wetland elements, and 66 CPs reported NGO action in this area. This includes the celebration of World Wetlands Day, which, in the three years since its inception on 2 February 1997, has been celebrated in a remarkable large number of countries. In the three years the Bureau distributed promotional materials and a poster, financed by the Government of Japan.
26. Relatively few CPs (43) have reported to have wetlands included as part of formal education curricula, and in some regions the effort here seems very poor: in Africa 16 CPs reported to have done this, 7 in Asia, 3 in Eastern Europe, 6 in Western Europe, 7 in the Neotropics, 3 in North America and 2 in Oceania.
27. It would seem that General Objective 3 of the Strategic Plan is the one in which the least progress has been made. Based on the NRs and the Bureau and NGO partners' work in this area, a large number of the 16 actions envisaged under the three Operational Objectives were not implemented, with only a little progress made in some of them.
28. There is, though, one area in which the Bureau was able to make significant progress, that of electronic communications. The Ramsar Web site is increasingly becoming the Bureau's primary communications tool. During August 1998 the site received nearly 6,500 visitors from 87 countries who examined nearly 23,000 documents. The site is updated almost daily with

news of Convention activities, background information on the Convention, and a full range of the Convention's official documentation, including the National Reports and conference documents for COP7.

29. The Ramsar Web site has received considerable praise for the way it is organized, and mostly for the fact that it is updated daily. In addition, the Bureau maintains the following email mailing lists:
 - a) the Ramsar Forum, devoted to a wide range of news, announcements, queries and replies, and statements of opinion concerning wetlands issues. It is a non-moderated list, with at present some 560 participants. Bureau staff use the Forum to post Convention news and announcements from the Partner and related organizations, and monitor its activities in order to stimulate discussion and advise inexperienced users;
 - b) the Ramsar Exchange, with three separate versions functioning in English, French and Spanish, for official communications with the Administrative Authorities in the CPs;
 - c) the Standing Committee mailing list, for exchanges among the Bureau and the SC and vice versa;
 - d) the Scientific and Technical Review Panel mailing list, for exchanges between the Bureau and the STRP and vice versa.
30. The Bureau undertook a survey of the e-mail and Web access of Administrative Authorities of the Convention, and on the basis of its results financial support was offered to CPs that did not have access to electronic communications and could benefit from this assistance. The funding was provided under the Danone Group/French GEF project mentioned above. CPs that received assistance included Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Romania and Togo, and the Duria International Protected Area in the Russia/Mongolia/China border.
31. It should be noted that such significant progress in the work of the Bureau in this area has been achieved thanks to the strong sense of commitment and dedication of the Executive Assistant for Communications, Dr. Dwight Peck, who has been devoting to this work a considerable amount of overtime without pay. In the long run, this is not a situation that can be sustained. The Secretary General is looking into the possibility of obtaining private sector sponsorship for this area of work, so as to be able to maintain, and even increase, the Bureau quality of work in this area without resorting to unbearable demands on the current Bureau staff.
32. Concerning publications, during this period the Ramsar Bulletin was redesigned in terms of content and lay out. It constitutes now a short newsletter carrying mostly a transcription of the main news posted in the Web site, and addressed to those who have no access to the Internet or no time to access the Ramsar Web site regularly. Possibly, in the medium-term, the Bulletin should be phased out.
33. The Bureau also undertook a complete redesign, in content and lay-out, of the basic information material in use to promote the Convention. The basic tool for this purpose has been the so-called "info pack", of which thousands of copies have been distributed at national

and international meetings and by post. It was formally sent to all Administrative Authorities, offering them additional copies if desired and inviting them to consider producing the info pack in their main national language(s). Funding for this was offered.

34. In addition to the three official languages, the info pack was produced in Russian, and the Arabic and Chinese versions are almost ready. Funding was provided to the Islamic Republic of Iran to produce it in Farsi.
35. The Ramsar Sites List was also redesigned in presentation and an updated version is produced as soon as any new site is designated. Hopefully, by the time of COP7 the Bureau will distribute a new “annotated List” carrying a brief description of all sites, in order to make the document still more informative.
36. Concerning technical publications, the Bureau was not able to produce much during this period. The only significant exceptions were the book on economic valuation mentioned above, the book on *Wetlands, Biodiversity and the Ramsar Convention*³, and the book published as part of a project under the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative entitled *Mediterranean Wetlands - Socio-economic Aspects*⁴.
37. The Bureau also produced and published the 2nd edition of the Ramsar Convention Manual in the three official languages, with funding for the French and Spanish versions provided by the Governments of Switzerland and Spain, respectively. It will soon be necessary to produce and publish a 3rd edition to incorporate the decisions of COP7. Probably, the printed version could be replaced now by a guide to the Ramsar Web site, where all Ramsar publications and documents are available in the three languages.
38. The Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award established by Resolution VI.18 was implemented for the first time in anticipation of COP7. As part of the project with the Danone Group, on this occasion the Ramsar Award is supplemented by the “Evian Special Prize” consisting of US\$ 10,000 for each of the three awards. (For details see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 13.2 and the COP7 Media Kit.)
39. As decided by the Standing Committee at its 1998 meeting, the Convention has adopted a new logo as from 1st January 1999. As indicated in the Report of the Chairperson of the Standing Committee, “while the old logo has served the Convention very well indeed, it was agreed that the time had come for a fresh, more modern image for Ramsar – one that would reflect the growing appreciation of wetlands for the broad range of functions they perform and services they provide” (see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 4, paragraph 50).

³ *Wetlands, Biodiversity and the Ramsar Convention*. Edited by A.J. Hails, Ramsar Convention Bureau and Ministry of Environment and Forests, India, 1996, (the book actually appeared in 1997). It was produced with funding provided by the Ministry of the Walloon Region, Belgium; the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Forest and Nature Agency, Denmark; and Swedish SIDA. The book was printed in India by the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

⁴ *Mediterranean Wetlands Socioeconomic Aspects*, directed by Nejib Benessaiah, Ramsar Convention Bureau, 1998. Published with the financial support of the European Commission, General Directorate XI. Available in Arabic, English and French.

40. The Ramsar Convention's Outreach Programme proposed for consideration of COP7 (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.9) constitutes an important attempt to redress the balance of the Convention's achievements in the area of communications, education and public awareness (CEPA). It should be noted that the Programme recognizes that this area goes well beyond information leaflets and World Wetlands Day events, important as they are, to embrace a host of target audiences that should be reached in order to make the difference in the way that wetlands are perceived and treated in national economic and social planning.
41. This area of work of the Convention will require significant additional resources devoted to it, including at the Ramsar Bureau level, as recognized under Action 8.2.4 of the Strategic Plan 1997-2002. Private sector involvement could assist in this, but CPs may want also to consider establishing a voluntary fund under the Convention to receive contributions from governments and other sources for the implementation of the Outreach Programme, provided that it is approved by COP7.

Operational Objective 4 of the Strategic Plan: Capacity Building

42. 87 CPs have reported that they have inter-agency coordination mechanisms in place, but in most cases no details are provided on how these mechanisms function in favor of wetland conservation. In addition, 52 CPs indicated that they have a National Ramsar/Wetland Committee in operation. This is a significant progress since Ramsar COP6, when only 21 National Committees were reported. Of these 52 National Committees, eight are composed of government agencies only, the large majority also include NGOs, and a small number are NGO committees, with the government participating in an observer capacity.
43. Effective National Ramsar/Wetland Committees can be one of the most effective mechanisms for mainstreaming wetland issues into the national agenda. It would be interesting and useful if the Bureau were to make a detailed study of the functioning and effectiveness of National Ramsar/Wetlands Committees, so as to distil the best experiences for the benefit of all CPs.
44. The NRs indicate that major gaps continue to exist in assessing training needs. Only 22 CPs have reported having done this, while 23 CPs indicated that action has been taken to identify training opportunities. The big gap here is in Europe with just 4 CPs from East and West combined that reported having undertaken these actions.
45. The Bureau's 'Directory of Wetland Management Training Opportunities' is a start but much more is needed. In addition, the Bureau has been implementing jointly with the US Department of State and the US Fish and Wildlife Service the so-called Wetlands for the Future Initiative. Through this the US Government has been providing US\$ 250,000 per year for small projects proposed by governments and NGOs in the Neotropics, with a focus on training and capacity building. 60 projects have been supported to date in 14 countries. (See the Wetland for the Future poster at the Conference Centre in San José.) Through the draft recommendation contained in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.32, if adopted, COP7 would be urging other CPs to support similar initiatives in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

46. In terms of gaining training, 74 CPs reported that some of their nationals have had access to training outside their own countries. Of particular significance here is the International Course on Wetland Management. This course, organized annually for the past five years in Lelystad, the Netherlands, by the Institute for Inland Water Management and Waste Water Treatment (RIZA), of the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, is under the guidance of a Board chaired by the Secretary General of the Convention. The course, based on the Ramsar Guidelines for Management Planning, has gained a high reputation, but the number of trainees is limited - 20 per year - and at times applicants have encountered difficulties in finding sponsorship to pay the cost of the course, beyond the grants offered by different Dutch Government agencies.
47. The initiative of the Government of Panama to establish a Western Hemisphere Ramsar Regional Center for Training and Research (see draft resolution in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.30) would represent a very encouraging development, that in time could be emulated in other regions.

Operational Objective 5 of the Strategic Plan: Effective Conservation of sites included in the Ramsar List

48. The NRs indicate good progress in some aspects of the effective management of sites in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar List). NRs have noted that there are management plans in place or being prepared for 44% of Ramsar sites, and that there is some form of monitoring going on at 38% of them. It has been suggested that the target for COP8 for Ramsar sites with management plans in place, or being prepared be increased to three-quarters of them within each country (the target established by the Strategic Plan was half of each Party's sites).
49. It is also encouraging that since COP6, six Ramsar sites were removed from the Montreux Record of Ramsar sites for which changes in their ecological character had occurred, were occurring or may occur, after the concerned governments have successfully addressed the problems that were affecting those sites. Moreover, the Greek Government should be able to remove from the Record at any time now three of its 10 sites placed on the Record (see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.31). In addition, a number of CPs have indicated in their NRs the intention of removing sites from the Montreux Record in the near future.
50. The fact that only four Ramsar sites have been added to the Montreux Record since COP6 should constitute a clear indication that governments continue to perceive the Record as a "black mark", rather than considering it as what it is: a mechanism to promote priority action when serious problems have been detected at a particular site.
51. 33 CPs have indicated in their NRs that they have a total of 115 sites where change in ecological character has occurred or may occur. While this can be a worrisome situation, it is most encouraging that CPs are respecting the requirement under Article 3.2 of the Convention that stipulates that those changes should be reported without delay. It will be very important that measures are now taken to deal with the situation at each of those sites, including their inclusion if necessary in the Montreux Record.

52. Since COP6, the Bureau organized, at the request of the concerned governments, nine Management Guidance Procedure missions to Ramsar sites in the Montreux Record. It should be noted that the costs of these missions have been covered with voluntary contributions from a number of governments and NGOs (see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 26, Project 7002). It should also be noted that experience has shown that some of the problems affecting Ramsar sites are so complex, that it is beyond the Bureau's human resource and technical capacity to take responsibility for organizing appropriate missions to them. It would be more advisable in such cases if the Bureau worked with other agencies with the required expertise and resources to do so.
53. It is a cause for concern that some sites where the Management Guidance Procedure was applied some time ago are still on the Montreux Record, without clear indications that effective action is being taken for their removal from the Record.
54. The Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) has reviewed the definitions of ecological character and change in ecological character adopted by Resolution VI.1 of Ramsar COP6, and has also reviewed the Ramsar Management Planning Guidelines. On the basis of these reviews, COP7 has in front of it a proposed Wetland Risk Assessment Framework (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.10) and considerations for future action in relation to the Management Planning Guidelines (see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 13.3).
55. Important progress has been made since COP6 in improving the data on Ramsar sites stored in the Ramsar Database managed under contract with the Bureau by Wetlands International - Europe, Africa and Middle East, at its offices in Wageningen, the Netherlands. At the time of COP6 the very significant gaps that existed in the Database were quite embarrassing. Thanks to the efforts of the Regional Coordinators at the Ramsar Bureau, the Wetland International staff working on the Database, and the Administrative Authorities concerned, considerable progress has been made.
56. Nevertheless, there remain sites for which adequate descriptions or maps have not yet been submitted. Hopefully COP7 will adopt the draft resolution contained in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.12, calling on the concerned CPs to rectify this situation without delay, since continuing to have gaps in the Ramsar Database reflects on the credibility of the Convention as a whole.
57. It should be noted that since COP6, the Bureau has applied very strictly the resolution by which no new Ramsar sites should be included in the public versions of the Ramsar List if no satisfactory Ramsar Information Sheets and maps have been provided. The inclusion of new sites has been delayed in several occasions during the triennium, but fortunately in all cases the missing data was provided, making it possible to include the sites in the List.
58. Lack of sufficient resources has prevented more progress in the implementation of the Operational Objective 5.4 of the Strategic Plan, aimed at ensuring that the Ramsar Database "retains its relevance in light of evolving information and communication technology". There are plans to upgrade the Database and to post it on the Web, with the capacity for simple

queries on line. This action could be accelerated if a sponsor could be identified from the government, NGO, or private sectors.

59. On the occasion of COP7, Wetland International, in cooperation with the Bureau, is producing a CD-ROM version, in English only, of the Directory of Ramsar Sites, and a second edition of *An Overview of the World's Ramsar Sites* (initiated at COP6) in the three official languages, with funding provided by the Institute for Inland Water Management and Waste Water Treatment (RIZA), of the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management.

Operational Objective 6 of the Strategic Plan: Designation of New Ramsar Sites

60. The NRs indicate that there are few CPs with a comprehensive inventory that provides detailed knowledge of all their wetlands, even though 41 CPs reported that they are taking steps to rectify this situation. The Wetlands International report prepared for COP7, entitled *Global review of wetland resources, and priorities for wetland inventory in the future*, developed under contract with the Bureau with funding from the UK Department of the Environment (see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 19.3), provides a somehow bleak picture on the status of knowledge about wetland resources around the world. The draft resolution on inventories contained in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.21 “urges all Contracting Parties yet to complete comprehensive national inventories of their wetland resources to give this action their highest priority in the next triennium, in order for related actions such as policy development and Ramsar site designations to be carried out with the best information possible”.
61. Since COP6, only 151 new sites from 43 CPs have been added to the Ramsar List: there are now 970 listed sites in 114 CPs, covering 70,655,449 hectares. Of the new sites, 28 are those designated by the new 22 CPs that have acceded since COP6. It should be noted that between COP5 and COP6 there were 202 new sites designated by 43 CPs.
62. As many as 30 Contracting Parties that were Parties before COP6 still remain with only one or two sites in the List. 16 of these CPs have joined the Convention more than 10 years ago, and four of them more than 20 years ago. Four other CPs with a larger number of sites in the List have not made new designations for more than 20 years.
63. This is disappointing, as has been the response to the call for listing under-represented wetland types. Just 55 of the new sites designated since COP6 contain the under-represented wetland types identified by Recommendation 6.7 and in Action 6.2.3 of the Strategic Plan, namely coral reefs, mangroves, sea-grass beds and peatlands.
64. The proposed *Strategic framework and guidelines for application of the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.11) is intended to help in Ramsar site listing by proposing a more systematic approach. It urges Parties to consider for listing under Ramsar not only those wetlands that are already protected (while in terms of representative types in the global network this should also be done), but to seek to secure through listing the future of those sites under threat, primarily because of intensive human use and/or the potential of being subjected to environmentally unsound development schemes.

65. The framework constitutes a new "Vision for the Ramsar List" and sets the ambitious target of 2000 sites by the time of COP9. If this strategic framework were adopted and implemented, the List of Ramsar sites would become a "Global Network of Wetlands of International Importance". It might be appropriate in the future to switch to this new name.
66. It should be noted that the Strategic Framework for the List includes the results of the STRP work in response to Resolution VI.3 and Operational Objective 6.3 of the Strategic Plan, which requested a review of the Ramsar Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance. The STRP concluded that the criteria that emerged from COP6 (after the inclusion of the criteria based on fish) were basically sound, and that the addition of criteria that would take "into account cultural values and/or benefits derived from wetlands", as invited in Resolution VI.3, was not advisable. (For more details see the Report of the Chairperson of the STRP, Ramsar COP7 DOC. 4 Annex 1). Resolution VI.3's instruction to the STRP "to consider the feasibility of designating Ramsar sites on the basis of important natural hydrological functions, such as groundwater recharge or water quality improvement" was responded to by incorporating this issue in the guidelines for the application of Criterion 1 (See Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.11, Annex I, paragraphs 56 and 57).
67. As a result of the STRP work, and with further input from CPs and NGO partners that actively participated in the preparation of the Strategic Framework document, the proposal is that for the time being no new elements should be added to the Ramsar Criteria, while they should be rearranged, reworded, and renumbered, and the guidelines for the application of each criterion should be expanded and clarified. All of this has been incorporated in the proposed Strategic Framework document.

Operational Objective 7 of the Strategic Plan: International Cooperation

68. The twinning of Ramsar sites has been reported by only 25 CPs. This is an area with considerable potential for development without requiring huge investments, with the possibility of considerable benefits for all the sites involved. The Bureau has been promoting this tool, mainly through the Danone/French GEF project, which contemplates actions involving Ramsar sites in four regions: the East Atlantic migratory birds flyway, and the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Caspian Sea deltas.
69. The Bureau has championed the concept of synergies among the environment-related conventions and is persuaded that this should continue to constitute a priority in the next triennium. As the result of this approach, four major developments took place:
 - a) the approval by COP4 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (May 1998) of the Ramsar/CBD Joint Work Plan submitted by the Ramsar Bureau;
 - b) the production by the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), with support from five conventions, including Ramsar, of the report entitled *Feasibility study for a harmonised information management infrastructure for the biodiversity-related treaties*;

- c) the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Convention on Migratory Species (the Bonn Convention); and
 - d) the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD).
70. The priorities for the Bureau are now to effectively implement these agreements and to develop more active working relations with Climate Change, CITES and World Heritage. A joint Web site of the five conventions that participated in the WCMC study was launched recently: <http://www.biodiv.org/rioconv/websites.html>.
71. Of course, harmonising efforts internationally is only part of the issue - the main challenge is to see harmonised implementation at the national level. And while many CPs (87) reported that they have mechanisms in place for coordinating implementation, many of them indicated that this "mechanism" was that the same Ministry was responsible for implementing all (or most) of these treaties. It would seem that there is a need in most CPs to establish "inter-Convention committees" involving all of the Ministries from related sectors - not just the focal point Ministry - in order to ensure that harmonisation is taking place on the ground.
72. All these matters are considered in more detail in the draft resolution on *Partnership and cooperation with other conventions* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.4).
73. In the area of development assistance related to wetland issues, the Bureau has continued its efforts to establish working relations with bilateral and multilateral development assistance agencies, but with limited results. Contacts have been maintained in particular with the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility and the Asian Development Bank. In the case of the bilateral assistance agencies, only sporadic contacts have been maintained with several of them, with the exception of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), which have been providing considerable funding to the Ramsar Bureau for different activities.
74. At COP6, CPs were invited to consider providing funding for the creation of the post of Development Assistance Officer at the Bureau, but this was not supported. This need was retained in Action 8.2.3 of the Strategic Plan 1997-2002 as a COP responsibility. The Bureau has been unable to identify other sources of funding for this post. In the view of the Secretary General, this staff position continues to be a priority, since the current professional staff at the Bureau have neither the time, nor the training, to work with the development assistance community on a regular basis with the aim of generating more funding for wetland-related projects in developing countries and countries in transition.
75. In preparation for COP7, the Bureau commissioned a consultant to prepare the paper on *Mobilizing financial support from bilateral and multilateral donors for the implementation of the Ramsar Convention* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 20.4). The paper confirms the disturbing downward trend of official development assistance (ODA), with some notable exceptions. Despite this, there are

clear signs that many bilateral and the multilateral development assistance agencies are mainstreaming wetlands, and this needs to be encouraged with all of them.

76. It should be noted that the Ramsar/CBD Joint Work Plan constitutes a further opening to the Global Environment Facility for wetland-related projects in eligible countries. The GEF Operational Programs include the area of Coastal, Marine, and Freshwater Ecosystems, which embraces activities “on the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the coastal, wetland, mangrove, estuarine, marine, and freshwater ecosystems”.
77. 73 CPs reported that they are receiving or have received donor funds for wetland projects, and 14 CPs advised that they have bilateral agencies with funds earmarked for wetlands-related projects. Unfortunately, only 7 of these claim to have a mechanism for dialogue between the bilateral assistance agency and the Ramsar Administrative Authority. This would seem contrary to the intent of Article 5 of the Convention.
78. A particular success story of regional cooperation under Ramsar is the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), which includes a series of projects in this region and a Mediterranean Wetlands Committee established by a decision of the Ramsar Standing Committee. The activities of the Initiative are animated by a MedWet Coordinator (appointed by the Secretary General with funding through voluntary contributions), who in turn is supported by secretariat units in France, Greece and Spain. (See draft resolution on MedWet in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.23, the publication that will be distributed at COP7, and the poster on MedWet at the Conference Centre in San José).
79. The Bureau has established a Web site-based Wise Use Resource Centre designed to provide a place where wetland managers can come to seek advice, assistance, and guidance on wetland management issues. The term “wetland managers” is meant here in the broadest sense, ranging from hands-on practitioners to planners, policy makers and legislators, within government at all levels and in local communities.
80. In addition, the Bureau has assembled a Wetlands Experts Database of nearly 300 experts in different fields of wetland management from around the world. Based on advice from Ramsar NGO Partners and other expert bodies, this database is designed to allow users to locate consultants with the expertise to solve problems. Funding for the database was provided by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.
81. In response to Action 7.3.4 of the Strategic Plan, to “develop for consideration at a technical session of the 7th COP (1999), guidelines for Contracting Parties on how to carry out their obligations in the field of international cooperation”, the Bureau prepared draft guidelines that were further developed in consultation with a Drafting Group established by the Standing Committee at its 1998 meeting. The Guidelines are included in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.20. If approved by COP7, their implementation will represent a significant development for the Convention in the years ahead.

Operational Objective 8 of the Strategic Plan: Institutional Mechanisms and Resources of the Convention

82. In response to Operational Objective 8.1 of the Strategic Plan, which called for “evaluating and, if necessary, modifying the Convention’s institutions and management structures”, the Standing Committee adopted a new approach to the technical sessions included in the programme of COP7, and has submitted to COP7:
- a) draft new Rules of Procedures for the COP (Ramsar COP7 DOC.2);
 - b) a draft resolution on *Regional categorization of countries under the Convention, and composition, roles and responsibilities of the Standing Committee, including tasks of Standing Committee members* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.1);
 - c) a draft resolution on the *Composition and modus operandi of the Convention’s Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP)* (Ramsar COP7 DOC, 15.2); and
 - d) a draft resolution on *Partnerships with international organizations* (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.3).
83. All of these draft resolutions bring innovation and proposals for a more effective operation of the Convention’s mechanisms. Particularly noticeable are the proposals to establish a “proportional representation” system in the Standing Committee, mirrored in the STRP composition, and the invitation to CPs to designate national focal points for STRP matters.
84. Action 8.1.5 of the Strategic Plan calls for reviewing “requirements for the Bureau’s staff structure and size in line with decisions on program”. During the triennium the Bureau staff has been reorganized to achieve more efficiency from the limited staff resources available. The current staff chart can be seen in Annex 3 to Ramsar COP7 DOC. 14, on Work Plan and Budget.
85. The position of Deputy Secretary General was established with the arrival of Dr. Bill Phillips in September 1997. The DSG has direct supervisory responsibilities in relation to the work of the Regional Coordinators and also assists the Secretary General in the supervision of the Communications and Administration Teams.
86. One significant development in the staff structure has been the initiation of an “Interns Program” with funds liberated by the abolition of a secretarial position and an additional voluntary contribution from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Through this scheme, each Regional Coordinator now has a young graduate as a full-time assistant, from a country in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Neotropics, respectively (previously the Regional Coordinators shared one secretary among the four of them). The program is proving to be excellent value for money, not only in facilitating the work of the Regional Coordinators, but also as a training opportunity for the interns.
87. Action 8.1.9 of the Strategic Plan on the establishment of National Ramsar Committees has been reviewed under General Objective 4. The implementation of the related Action 8.1.10, which requested CPs to “review the designated national focal point in each Contracting Party, with a view to increasing involvement in the work of the Convention from all agencies concerned with the conservation and wise use of wetlands”, has not been specifically reported

on in the National Reports. COP7 may wish to invite CPs to report on this matter on the occasion of COP8.

88. Concerning Action 8.1.11 and Resolution VI.21 of COP6 related *inter alia* to National Reports to the COP, the Standing Committee adopted a new format for National Reports, in line with the structure of the Strategic Plan 1997-2002. The Bureau's conclusion after analysing the NRs is that the new format has allowed for a much more factual and statistical evaluation of the implementation of the Convention in each region and globally.
89. Nevertheless, the analysis also revealed that in many cases the way that the questions were asked led to responses that do not allow establishing a complete and clear picture of the situation, especially when no details have been volunteered to complete the response. This means that the statistics included with the regional overviews might present a picture that is more optimistic than the actual developments.
90. In many cases, the National Reports only reflect what the agency acting as the Administrative Authority of the Convention has done to implement the treaty, but they do not reflect the full spectrum of wetland-related action, positive and negative, that is occurring in the country. Thus, some National Reports could be considered more "agency reports" than "national reports". In some of these cases, while the Bureau is aware of significant developments in wetland-related issues in a particular country, this has not been reflected in the regional overviews, because the official National Report has made no reference to these issues.
91. COP7 may wish to urge Contracting Parties that starting with COP8 the National Reports be prepared with the active involvement of National Ramsar Committees, so as to ensure that they provide a nationwide picture of wetland issues.
92. In relation to Operational Objective 8.2, "to provide financial resources to carry out Ramsar activities", the general picture is positive. Most Contracting Parties have paid their dues, even if in most cases with some delay (theoretically they should be paid on 1st January each year). Ramsar COP7 DOC. 28 provides the details on dues payments for each CP.
93. In addition, during the triennium a number of agencies in Contracting Parties, intergovernmental institutions, NGOs, and one private sector company (see paragraph 23 above) have generously provided non-earmarked voluntary contributions and/or funding for specific projects, amounting to more than seven millions Swiss francs. All contributions are detailed in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 26.
94. The Bureau wishes to express its sincere gratitude to the U.S. NGO Ramsar Committee chaired by WWF-US for its invaluable support in securing the American Congress' allocation to the account from which the US Government pays its voluntary contribution to the Convention, which normally includes 25% of the Ramsar core budget plus project funds to the amount of one million US dollars in 1999.
95. The Secretary General invited the Standing Committee to recommend to COP7 that, as is the case in some other international institutions, CPs with two or more years of arrears in dues

payment should lose their rights to be members of the Standing Committee and to vote, but this proposal was not approved by the Committee.

96. The Standing Committee agreed to recommend to COP7 that the minimum dues for CPs should be established at SFR 1000 per year (see Ramsar COP7 DOC. 14, paragraphs 17 to 22).
97. The overall financial picture of the Convention is healthy. Fiscal Years 1995 to 1998 inclusive were closed with small surpluses which have been used to resource the Reserve Fund established by Resolution VI.17 of COP6. The resources in the Fund are now at level determined by this Resolution: one twelfth of the current fiscal year budget. An excess of SFR 150,000 in the Reserve Fund was transferred in 1998 by the Standing Committee to the project covering costs of preparations of COP7.
98. The Secretary General has expressed to the Standing Committee his concern about the fact that the core budget of the Convention does not include the Bureau's costs related to the preparation of the regular meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, calculated at SFR 500,000. The practice has been so far that the host country will cover these costs. Costa Rica is the first developing country that has offered to host the Conference, and it has proven extremely difficult for Costa Rica and the Bureau to raise the funds to cover the Bureau's costs in Switzerland. It seems that if COP7 does not take a decision to change this practice, in line with the practice in all other conventions, Ramsar COPs will have to return to being held in developed countries only. (See also Ramsar COP7 DOC. 22: Date and venue of the next ordinary meeting of the Conference of the Parties.)
99. The Standing Committee has recommended that the budget for the next triennium should be increased by 5% in relation to the 1999 budget, and 2% in the following two years. Concern has been repeatedly expressed for the fact that the Ramsar Convention budget was increased 100% at COP5 in 1993 and 25% at COP6 in 1996. While these were indeed very steep increases, relatively, and CPs have to be recognized for having agreed to them, the fact remains that the Ramsar budget continues to be one of the lowest among the conventions, with a concomitant small staff. The implication of the latter is that as the Convention grows in membership, each Bureau staff member has proportionally less time to offer assistance to each individual CP.
100. Concerning Operational Objective 8.3 aimed at maximizing the benefits of working with partner organizations, the draft resolution on 'Partnerships with international organizations' (Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.3) proposes to formally recognize the role of the current four international NGO partners and open the door for a similar type of partnership with other international organizations, governmental and non-governmental.
101. The Bureau wishes to put on record, once more, its deep appreciation for the support provided by the four international NGO partners: IUCN - The World Conservation Union, BirdLife International, Wetlands International and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). They have constantly responded positively to the Bureau's requests for assistance in many areas, in all parts of the world.

102. Operational Objective 8.4 relates to the resources that should be available for the Ramsar Small Grants Fund for Wetlands Conservation and Wise Use (SGF). The functioning of the Fund since its inception, including the triennium under review, is analysed in detail, with specific recommendations, in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.5 dealing with a critical evaluation of the SGF and its future operations. In synthesis, the message in that document is that the SGF has proved to be a very useful mechanism, but that its irregular and unpredictable level of funding constitute a very serious impediment to the continuing effectiveness of the Fund in future years.
103. Five regional meetings were organized in preparation for COP7: a Pan-European Meeting in Latvia in June 1998, a Pan-American Meeting in Costa Rica in June 1998, a Pan-African Meeting in Uganda in July 1998, an Oceania Meeting in New Zealand in December 1998, and a Pan-Asian Meeting in February 1999.
104. In addition, a subregional Ramsar meeting was held in Senegal in May 1997, and the South Africa Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism organized a Ramsar meeting for the countries of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) in February 1998. Finally, within the scope of the Danone/French GEF project (see paragraph 23), a Round Table for High Level Officials in Ramsar Contracting Parties in the Neotropics was organized in Evian, France, in October 1998. Similar Round Tables for French-speaking African countries and Asian countries are planned for 1999 and 2000, respectively. The Bureau is most grateful to the Contracting Parties that provided the venue or hosted these meetings, and to those governments and institutions that provided funding for them.
105. In the next triennium, it will be useful to make a careful evaluation of the timing and content of future Ramsar meetings, and of the advisability of regional versus subregional meetings.

Conclusions

106. All indications are that wetlands as an issue are entering rapidly the national and international agenda. The Convention should take full advantage of this development and position itself to make the contributions that it should be capable of making after more than 20 years of experience.
107. The analysis of the National Reports indicates that some Contracting Parties are moving towards mainstreaming wetlands issue, in a process that should lead to considering wetlands as an important natural resource sector, possibly as a distinctive subset of the water sector, with the same status and the same level of attention as forests or agriculture land or mines. In most of these countries this has been reflected by the establishment of a cross-sectoral National Ramsar/Wetlands Committee and in the preparation and implementation of a national wetland policy, or similar instrument, either as a separate document or as an integral part of wider policy or action plan initiatives. In all these cases, both the conservation aspects of wetlands and issues of their sustainable use are fully contemplated.

108. The National Reports of a number of other Contracting Parties indicate that wetlands are still being considered mostly, or even exclusively, from the perspective of protected areas, with apparently no significant initiatives taken in relation to Article 3.1 of the Convention, which requires Contracting Parties to “formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List, **and as far as possible the wise use of wetlands in their territory**” (emphasis added).
109. The establishment and effective functioning of widely-based National Ramsar/Wetlands Committees continues to be a challenge for mainstreaming wetland issues. The experience of Ramsar Bureau visits to CPs would also indicate that the Convention remains largely unknown outside the circles that have traditionally dealt with Ramsar. The Bureau has been suggesting that organization of national seminars on wetland/Ramsar issues could be one way to overcome this situation.
110. The National Reports reflect that there are a considerable number of initiatives in line with the requirements of Article 5 of the Convention, which calls for consultation and cooperation among Contracting Parties. Nevertheless, this continues to be a weak area under Ramsar. Hopefully, the *Guidelines for international cooperation under the Convention*, contained in document Ramsar COP7 DOC. 15.20, will be adopted by COP7, so as to start a new era of much more substantial cooperation and assistance related to wetlands, in all areas and in all directions. In particular, it is hoped that the Guidelines will serve to increase the assistance on wetland issues from OECD countries, all of whom are Contracting Parties to Ramsar, to developing countries and countries in transition.
111. Wetland conservation and wise use cannot be divorced from the larger picture of socio-economic development; thus, the Ramsar Convention, as affirmed in the Mission Statement included in the Strategic Plan 1997-2002, should truly become an instrument at the service of sustainable development worldwide.
112. COP7 has the potential to be a milestone meeting of the Conference of the Parties by bringing Ramsar's other two pillars: wise use and international cooperation, up to the same level as the Ramsar List, or, as proposed by the “Vision for the List”, the future Global Network of Wetlands of International Importance.
113. The proposed *Ramsar Convention Work Plan 2000-2002* contained in Ramsar COP7 DOC. 14, Annex 1, constitutes a proposal for further implementation of the Strategic Plan in the next triennium. It is hoped that Contracting Parties will be able to use the Work Plan as a planning tool, or at least as a reference, for their actions on wetland conservation and wise use.
114. As called for in Action 8.1.6 of the current Strategic Plan, a new Strategic Plan 2003-2008 should be prepared for consideration by COP8, on the basis of the results of the implementation of the Convention during the 1997-2002 period. To do that on a sound basis, COP7 may wish to request the Bureau to prepare for consideration by the Standing Committee a revised format for National Reports for COP8, so that the weaknesses identified in the NRs submitted for COP7 could be rectified. If an improved format is adopted, it could be advisable to distribute it to Contracting Parties as soon as early next year, so that the

Administrative Authorities can have it at hand and keep entering information as actions and events take place during the triennium. This would also allow CPs to produce, if wished, yearly reviews of implementation for use in national planning.

Acknowledgment

115. The Secretary General, on behalf of the entire Bureau, wishes to record the most sincere gratitude to the outgoing Chairperson of the Standing Committee, Ms Louise Lakos, for the strong sense of responsibility that she has shown in the discharge of the duties of her post, and for having always been ready to devote time and energy to Ramsar issues.