



"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**

**Technical Session IV:
Tools for assessing and recognizing wetlands values
Paper 2**

Wetland Risk Assessment Framework¹

Background

1. Resolution VI.1 at COP6 adopted working definitions of *ecological character* and *change in ecological character*, which the STRP was asked to further assess during the 1997-99 triennium.²
2. In conjunction with assessing these working definitions, the STRP also undertook to test the usefulness of the new format for the Ramsar Information Sheet for providing baseline data for detecting changes in ecological character. Based on an analysis of completed Ramsar Information Sheets by Ms Yvette Pedretti (Murdoch University and Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist - ERISS, Australia), the STRP concluded that the new RIS was not suitable for this use, although adequate for its intended purpose.
3. As a further element of their work on ecological character, the STRP reviewed and continued the work reported in Resolution VI.1 on Early Warning Systems. This new work focused on providing the Contracting Parties with a framework and methods for predicting and assessing change in ecological character. In particular, the project, under the leadership of Dr Max Finlayson (Australia), has examined the latest developments in wetland risk assessment and thresholds of acceptable change in developing this framework. A technical workshop on these topics was held at the Ramsar Bureau in April 1998 immediately preceding the 7th STRP meeting. It was attended by 15 experts in this field from around the world, including several STRP members, and the conclusions of the workshop were reported to the STRP.
4. In brief, the STRP recommended to the Standing Committee some improved wording of the definitions for *ecological character* and *change in ecological character* (see below) and also presented a framework for predicting and assessing change in ecological character (the Wetland Risk Assessment Framework). The Standing Committee approved the presentation of the Wetland Risk Assessment Framework for consideration in Technical Session IV - *Tools for assessing and recognising wetland values* at COP7. The Standing Committee also endorsed the text of a draft

¹ See also the related proposed Resolution Ramsar COP7 DOC 15.10.

² Refer also to Ramsar COP7 DOC. 4, which includes the Report of the Chairperson of the STRP.

Resolution which seeks to adopt final definitions for *ecological character* and *change in ecological character*, as well as the guidance for Contracting Parties contained in the Wetland Risk Assessment Framework.

5. The Bureau wishes to express its appreciation to the participants in the technical workshop held in April 1998 and especially to the authors of this framework, Max Finlayson, Rick van Dam, and Chris Humphrey of the Environmental Research Institute of the Supervising Scientist in Australia. This work has been supported in large part by this organization and the National Wetlands Programme of Environment Australia.

6. **Working definitions adopted at COP6 with the proposed final definitions shown:**

Working Definition adopted in Resolution VI.1 - *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.*

STRP's recommended final form - Ecological character is the sum of the biological, physical, and chemical components of the wetland ecosystem, and their interactions which maintain the wetland and its products, functions, and attributes.

Working Definition adopted in Resolution VI.1 - *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.*

STRP's recommended final form - Change in ecological character is the impairment or imbalance in any biological, physical, or chemical components of the ecosystem, or in their interactions which maintain the wetland and its products, functions, and attributes.