

**Report of the 2nd Meeting of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, Hungary,
September 1994**

**Minutes of the second meeting of the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel
(STRP), Hungary, 6-8 September 1994**

Participants:

Members

Dr Yaa NTIAMOA-BAIDU (Africa)

Mr Mihaly VEGH (Eastern Europe, Hungarian Host)

Dr Roberto SCHLATTER (Neotropical Region)

Mr Tom DAHL (North America - Chairman)

Dr Max FINLAYSON (Oceania)

M. Franyois LETOURNEUX (Western Europe)

Apologies were received from Dr Muhammed SHATANAWI (Asia)

Observers/invited experts

Ms Louise LAKOS (Hungary, Chairperson of the Standing Committee; 7/9/94 only)

Dr Makoto KOMODA (Japan, Observer)

Mr Michael ACREMAN (IUCN, Observer)

Mr Crawford PRENTICE (IWRB, Observer)

Mr Scott FRAZIER (IWRB, Observer)

Dr Michael BRUTON (South Africa, invited expert on fish ecology)

Apologies were received from Dr Ashish Kumar GHOSH (India, observer)

Dr Janos OLAH (Hungary, invited expert on fish ecology, 6/9/94 only)

Dr Karoly GYORE (Hungary, invited expert on fish ecology 6/9/94 only)

Mr Attila MOLNAR (Hortobagy National Park Authority, 7/9/94 only)

Mr Gábor SZILAGYI (Hortobagy National Park Authority, 7/9/94 only)

Ms Krisztina SZALAI (Hortobagy National Park Authority, 7/9/94 only)

Secretariat

Mr Tim Jones (Ramsar Bureau, Switzerland; rapporteur)

Dr Satoshi Kobayashi (Ramsar Bureau, Switzerland; rapporteur)

Ms Szilvia Gori (Hortobagy National Park Authority, Hungary)

Agenda items 1 and 2: Opening of the meeting and brief welcoming remarks; Announcements from the secretariat

The chairman opened the meeting by welcoming participants and thanked the Hungarian authorities for the excellent arrangements which had been made. Mr Vegh provided further information concerning these arrangements, especially the proposed schedule for the week. Mr Jones, on behalf of the Ramsar Bureau, thanked the Hungarian authorities and the United States Fish & Wildlife Service for their generous support for the meeting, recalling that the STRP, established at the Kushiro Conference, did not have its own budget. He then explained that the present meeting needed to get through two important items for submission to the Standing Committee which would be taking place in Hungary in October: 1) fish criteria; 2) definition of "ecological character" and "change in ecological character".

These were difficult tasks for the STRP and for the Convention as a whole. He then explained the schedule of the Convention activities within the next 18 months up to the next Conference in Brisbane in March 1996 and mentioned the deadline for draft Conference recommendations / resolutions was June 1995.

Agenda item 3: Adoption of Agenda

The draft agenda contained in the meeting documentation was adopted without discussion.

Agenda item 4: Review of Minutes of First STRP Meeting

The meeting reviewed the minutes of the first meeting of STRP held in Buenos Aires in January 1994 in conjunction with IUCN's General Assembly. It was pointed out that, although members of STRP had been selected to ensure appropriate geographical representation of the Ramsar regions, they did not necessarily have to represent their region and were in no way considered as representatives of individual Contracting Parties. It was suggested that it would be helpful to receive formal terms of reference from the Standing Committee. It was also asked whether STRP members were expected to report the results of the meeting to their respective regions. Mr Jones replied that although the Bureau was basically responsible for reporting, it would be helpful if Standing Committee members were briefed as fully as possible on the progress of the STRP prior to the Standing Committee meeting in October.

The Bureau explained the political necessity of presenting concrete draft resolutions / recommendations on ecological character to the Brisbane Conference, following the procedure followed in recent years for definition and characterization of wise use. Dr Bruton mentioned that the Ramsar Convention was considered to be a successful convention and that the wider scientific community would be positive towards becoming more fully involved in the Convention's work. It was also pointed out that IUCN could help with provision of technical expertise through its networks. Regional meetings could also be good opportunities to collect relevant scientific information. Finally, it was pointed out that it was important for the Bureau to keep STRP members informed on what was going on in their regions.

Agenda item 5: Review of materials distributed by Ramsar Bureau

The STRP reviewed the material distributed by the Ramsar Bureau. The Bureau explained that the new "Ramsar Convention Manual" was currently being printed (initially in English, with French and Spanish translations to follow) and would be distributed to STRP members, together with an example Monitoring Procedure report, the latter having been an action point from Buenos Aires that had been accidentally overlooked.

Agenda item 6: Discussion of support from Ramsar Bureau and day to day operation of the STRP

The Bureau then explained the support available from the Bureau to STRP members and day to day operation of the panel. It was decided that, for the moment, Mr Jones would act as an initial contact point for STRP matters and that he would ensure that all correspondence reached the appropriate Bureau staff member. The Bureau was always ready and able to receive materials from individual Panel members and observers for distribution to all STRP colleagues.

Agenda item 7: Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance for fish habitats/populations

At the request of the Chairman, Dr Michael Bruton presented a paper entitled 'Proposals for the definition of criteria for the designation of wetlands of international importance on the basis of fish and fisheries' (attached as Annex I). This paper summarized the background to the issue of fish criteria, examined the existing criteria for relevance to fish and fisheries, and proposed a series of new criteria as being the most effective means of addressing Kushiro Recommendation 5.9.

Discussion of the points raised by Dr Bruton led to wider consideration of the full set of existing criteria. It was noted that the present situation reflected the Convention's origins as an instrument to protect internationally important habitats for water birds and that it was now anomalous for water birds to be the only faunal group specified in the criteria.

Whilst it was clear that establishing a set of criteria for fish and fisheries would help to make the designation of wetlands under the Convention more explicitly relevant to the priorities of many developing countries, it was felt that a wide-ranging review of the criteria, taking the full range of wetland values into account, would be desirable. However, it was also recognized that such a review would not be possible in the period remaining before the Sixth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (Brisbane, Australia, March 1996). It was therefore decided to focus discussion at the present meeting on development of criteria and/or guidelines on fish and fisheries for Brisbane, but to recommend to the Standing Committee the STRP's view that comprehensive examination of the criteria be examined after the Brisbane Conference.

After further discussion over whether the fish issues could best be addressed through elaboration of a fourth group of criteria, or simply through adjusting the current guidelines, the former approach was agreed upon. A small drafting group was set up to incorporate the points arising from discussion into the draft criteria proposed by Dr Bruton, and to develop headings for a series of guidelines to be associated with the criteria.

The drafting group's report led to the Panel's adoption of the attached draft criteria and subjects for draft guidelines (Annex II) for forwarding to the Standing Committee. If the Panel's proposals were adopted by the Standing Committee, Dr Bruton would be asked to develop a full text for the draft guidelines by the end of 1994.

These would then be distributed to Panel members, via the Bureau, for comment, with all comments to be received by the Bureau by March 1995. A revised draft of the guidelines would then be prepared to accompany the criteria, by June 1995, the deadline for preparation of original language versions of Brisbane documentation. The Conference documents would be scrutinized by the Standing Committee in September 1995 prior to circulation to the Contracting Parties and (subject to approval at the forthcoming meeting of the Standing Committee) the fish criteria and guidelines would be the subject of a half-day Technical Session ("workshop") in Brisbane.

Day 2: Wednesday 7 September

Ms Lakos, Chairperson of Standing Committee, joined the meeting, welcomed participants and summarized the tasks of the STRP as set by the Standing Committee, emphasizing the importance placed on the Panel's work by the Standing Committee.

Agenda item 8: Verbal report from the Bureau on proposals received for additional modifications to the criteria

The Chairman then asked the Bureau to summarize proposals received on possible inclusion of (i) subterranean wetlands and (ii) the role of indigenous peoples, in the Ramsar definition/criteria. It was agreed that the STRP should wait for further instructions from the Standing Committee before widening its activities to address such issues.

Agenda item 9: Review of operation of implementation of the Monitoring Procedure and Montreux Record

The Bureau reported on the recent completion of an internal review of the Monitoring Procedure since its inception in 1988. The draft report was now ready and the final text would be distributed to STRP members in advance of the Standing Committee, where its broad findings would be discussed. It was proposed that a more formal framework for planning, execution and follow-up of Monitoring Procedure missions be established and implemented.

The Bureau then provided background information and updates on implementation of the Monitoring Procedure at the eight Ramsar sites on the Montreux Record selected by the first STRP Meeting as being top priorities for application of the Monitoring Procedure. The Bureau also noted that Croatia had requested that the Monitoring Procedure be applied at Kopacki Rit, but that the complex political and practical issues involved made it unlikely that a mission could go ahead in the foreseeable future.

The Bureau then summarized recent correspondence with Contracting Parties concerning sites on the Montreux Record. During discussion, it was recalled that the STRP should concentrate on technical priorities rather than political/administrative factors. However, whilst the STRP was able to set out general guidelines for prioritizing sites, it was not currently in a position to advise on the detailed status of individual sites. This was partly because the Panel was not equipped with detailed site-by-site information, but also because there needed to be clarification of the STRP's role in review of the Montreux Record.

It was noted that some STRP members were concerned over the following points: 1) the increasing number of Listed sites might be expected to lead to an increased number of sites on the Montreux Record and thence to significantly increased expectations of the Monitoring Procedure; 2) the very existence of the Montreux Record might discourage Contracting Parties to designate Listed sites.

The Panel emphasized the value and importance of following-up on existing Monitoring Procedure reports and recommendations - a view strongly supported by the Bureau's review of the Monitoring Procedure. The desirability of designating a Bureau staff member as having full-time responsibility for coordination of work linked with the Montreux Record and the Monitoring Procedure, was recognized.

It was suggested that every three years the Bureau should devote the majority of its Monitoring Procedure effort to following-up on completed reports rather than embarking on new missions. In the light of the heavy Bureau workload (technically as well as administratively) in the run-up to the Brisbane Conference, it was suggested that 1995 be a year devoted to follow-up activities and to implementation of the carry-over from 1994 Monitoring Procedure priorities.

The following factors were identified as important in prioritizing sites on the Montreux Record for application of the Monitoring Procedure:

- Degree of threat/urgency of situation
- Special features at risk
- Length of time on the Montreux Record
- Level of detail and accuracy of information available
- Technical feasibility of mission
- Economic feasibility of mission
- Human resources (e.g., expert consultant) available for mission - Feasibility of follow-up/implementation of recommendations
- Political factors; especially wishes of the Contracting Party - Bureau capacity to coordinate a specific Monitoring Procedure.

It was suggested that STRP members should work closely with the Bureau on developing the day-to-day practicalities of adding/removing sites to/from the Montreux Record and prioritizing application of the Monitoring Procedure. Dr Acreman, Dr Finlayson, and M Letourneux were asked by the Chairman to assist the Bureau in this process. The Chairman also noted that he would be asking the Standing Committee to clarify the roles of the Standing Committee, the STRP and the Bureau in prioritizing sites included in the Montreux Record for application of the Monitoring Procedure.

Agenda item 10/11: Development of Guidelines for Interpreting "Ecological Change" and "Change in Ecological Character"

At the request of the Chairman, Dr Max Finlayson presented a background paper covering this agenda item. The paper reviewed previous consideration of ecological change within the framework of the Convention; addressed apparent and underlying reasons for ecological change in wetlands; considered the extent of ecological changes; addressed assessment and monitoring approaches; and, finally, drew conclusions with regard to implications for the Ramsar Convention.

It was recognized that whilst the maintenance of ecological character of Listed sites was a clear obligation upon Contracting Parties, there had so far been no attempt to define, or provide guidance on, either of the terms "ecological character" or "change in ecological character". However,

maintenance of the Montreux Record and operation of the Monitoring Procedure would clearly be greatly strengthened by the establishment of such definitions and guidelines, since both drew extensively on use of Article 3.2 terminology. A paper presented at the 1992 meeting of the IWRB Board Meeting had suggested that almost two-thirds of Ramsar sites were undergoing some form of adverse ecological change and might therefore be considered as candidates for inclusion in the Montreux Record. However, there was a clear distinction to be made between 'ecological change' and 'change in ecological character'.

A working definition of ecological character was introduced, again based on a paper presented to the 1992 IWRB Board Meeting. This definition stated that 'Ecological character is the sum of the wetland's functions, products and attributes' and that it is 'the product of biological and physical components of the ecosystem and their interactions'.

It was suggested that within the framework of the Ramsar Convention, 'Change in ecological character' should be restricted to being used in relation to adverse changes. Positive changes should be considered within the context of wise use and wetland restoration and/or enhancement. The following working definition of change in ecological character was proposed: 'The alteration of the biological and/or physical components of the ecosystem and/or the interaction between them, in a manner which results in a reduction and an ongoing imbalance in the quality of some of those attributes which give the wetland value to society'. However, this raised the questions:

- what level of alteration?
- what components?
- what values to society?
- who decides/chooses?
- how do we monitor?

Monitoring required the regular measuring of selected parameters against a baseline, but, in general, terms should be as simple and inexpensive as possible in order to have worldwide applicability. It was emphasized that monitoring was an essential element of management plans, and that following the relevant Kushiro Recommendation, all Listed sites should already have management plans in existence (i.e. being implemented) or in preparation.

A scheme for evaluating the seriousness of ecological changes was presented, indicating that adverse changes should be predicted as far ahead as possible so that remedial measures might be taken in advance of any irreversible (or difficult to reverse) change(s) occurring.

Following considerable discussion it was decided that there should be a definition of "ecological character" and "change in ecological character" developed for submission to the Brisbane

Conference. It was also decided that there should be a concerted effort to improve the availability/access to baseline information on the status of Ramsar sites, so that appropriate management decisions could be made and that objective evaluations of ecological change could be made. At the present time, the site information held within the Ramsar Database was in need of substantial improvement. The positive use to which information submitted to the Database could be put, in the context of the Montreux Record and Monitoring Procedure, needed to be emphasized strongly. It also needed to be recognized that improving flow of information was all that was needed in the cases of certain Contracting Parties, but that in many developing countries, expensive baseline surveys might be required.

Day 3: Thursday 8 September

After further extensive discussion, it was decided that the following definitions be submitted to the Standing Committee as being the basis for further STRP work in advance of the Brisbane Conference:

Ecological Character

'The sum of the wetland's functions, products or attributes, which are the product of the biological, chemical and/or physical components of the ecosystem and/or the interactions between them'.

Change in Ecological Character

'The alteration of the biological, chemical and/or physical components of the ecosystem and/or the interactions between them, in a manner which results in a reduction in the quality of one or more of those functions, products and attributes which give the wetland value.'

It was decided that these basic definitions should remain as short as possible and avoid use of complex technical language. However, it was recognized that both definitions would require substantial interpretation through the establishment of guidelines and it was agreed that Dr Finlayson should continue to take the lead on this issue and work by correspondence with STRP members to draw up a draft of such guidelines which could be discussed at the next meeting (subject to approval by the Standing Committee).

Particular items requiring guidelines would be:

(a) The time from which any change should be measured; it was suggested and generally agreed, that this should be the date of Ramsar designation;

(b) The means for detecting change (it was emphasized that these should be as simple and inexpensive as possible if all Contracting Parties were going to be able to implement the methods proposed);

(c) Stipulation that 'change' means 'adverse change';

(d) Development of useful 'early warning' techniques (role of Environmental Impact Assessment - EIA);

(e) Assessing the significance of a change in ecological character;

(f) Relationship with the Montreux Record and Monitoring Procedure; Max Finlayson to continue work on ecological character

(g) Reversing changes in ecological character

It was agreed that the 'value' (see working definition of Change in Ecological Character) of a Ramsar wetland was clearly linked with the criteria under which it had been designated. This led to a very wide-ranging discussion, which returned to the adequacy of the existing criteria. Whilst recognizing the practical and political need for as much stability as possible in the criteria, the Panel members wished to record their view that post-Brisbane, a thorough review of the criteria should be established, for the following reasons:

(a) The main emphasis of the Convention has shifted away from waterfowl, yet that group retains a dominant role in the criteria (despite the proposed addition of fish);

(b) The criteria make no provision for wise use or value to indigenous people to be reasons for designating wetlands of international importance. The rights of indigenous peoples in conservation was a rapidly growing issue in many regions of the world and one that Ramsar could not afford to be seen as ignoring;

(c) The criteria formed the logical foundation for measuring ecological change within the framework of the Convention. Unfortunately, the present criteria did not lend themselves to this kind of application.

It was accepted that general amendments to the criteria were beyond the remit given to the STRP by the Standing Committee, and that in any case, no changes (beyond addition of a set of criteria for fish and fisheries) would be possible until the 7th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (i.e. the meeting after Brisbane, in 1999). However, the STRP wished to convey to the

Standing Committee its advice that a general revision of the criteria be carried out then and that the establishment of a new set of criteria on the threshold of a new century would show the Convention's willingness to adapt to changing circumstances in global conservation priorities.

In conclusion, the Chairman noted that excellent progress had been made through the adoption of working definitions, and through the identification of headings for guidelines to interpret the working definitions. He asked Dr Finlayson to continue acting as the Panel's focal point for work on the issue and requested M Letourneux, Dr Ntiamoa-Baidu, Mr Vegh and IWRB to assist Dr Finlayson with the issue of relating work on ecological character with that on the Montreux Record/Monitoring Procedure. He also volunteered himself and asked Dr Komoda, Dr Schlatter and IUCN to assist with work on monitoring change in ecological character. These sub-groups were asked to send their comments to Dr Finlayson by 15 January 1995, at the latest. Dr Finlayson would then present a further paper to the next STRP meeting, with proposals that could be taken forward to the Standing Committee and ultimately to the Contracting Parties at Brisbane.

Agenda item 12: Other Business

(a) Brisbane Technical Sessions:

The Panel reviewed the proposed programme for the Brisbane Conference, giving special attention to the six Technical Sessions (formerly known as workshops) scheduled for the middle of the meeting. The STRP was broadly supportive of the proposals made, but felt that Technical Session (E) should be restricted to consideration of the new fish criteria; there would not be time for the issue of amendments to the classification of wetland type.

More significantly, the panel felt that it would not be appropriate to hold a Technical Session on the 25th Anniversary; this could send the wrong message and, in any case, it was difficult to see what the content would be. It was proposed that, subject to discussion between the Bureau, Standing Committee and Host Government, the issue of indigenous peoples and wetlands should be substituted.

(b) Draft 1995 Bureau Workplan:

This document was introduced by the Bureau as an information point for STRP members.

(c) How much wetland is there in the world?

The Bureau briefly summarized the political and technical reasons for posing such a question, and a background paper prepared by Dr S. Kobayashi was circulated. Following discussion, it was clear that

there was no consensus amongst the Panel members as to the way forward, with some members expressing the view that providing an adequate answer would be unnecessarily costly both in terms of time and money. Other members, however, felt that the need for this type of information was great enough to justify the input of substantial resources. The Chairman determined that the Bureau be asked to bring forward a more extensive paper to the next STRP meeting, with a report on the work currently being carried out by organizations such as WCMC.

(d) Ramsar Database update

Mr Frazier presented a report on the current status of the Database, stating that much of the year had, at the request of the Bureau, been devoted to reviewing the information held and identifying major gaps to be filled. During the year, the Database had also been in the course of restructuring into several smaller databases, as the first step towards establishment of a truly relational database. This would result in significant time-saving, coupled with enhanced utility. A report written by Mr Frazier and entitled 'Initial Assessment of Ramsar Sites Map Resource' had been distributed to all participants. This demonstrated clearly the shortcomings in the number and quality of official maps for many Ramsar wetlands.

Mr Frazier also reported that approximately 25% of Listed sites have no Ramsar Information Sheet (or close approximation) available, and that the data for the c. 75% of sites with sheets was extremely patchy.

Panel members recalled earlier discussions concerning questions of ecological character, maintenance of the Montreux Record and application of the Monitoring Procedure. They emphasized the very great importance to be attached to ensuring that Contracting Parties met their obligations under Montreux and Kushiro Conference decisions to accompany their site designations with adequate data. The Convention could not function adequately without such information, since the major technical/conservation tools established in recent years relied on the existence of such data.

The Chairman asked STRP members to do whatever they could individually to help fill in some of the gaps in the database and determined that the Standing Committee should be asked to address the issue generally in the run-up to the Brisbane Conference.

Agenda item 13: Consideration of STRP Report to October 1994 Standing Committee

The Chairman reported that it was unlikely he would be able to attend the Standing Committee in person. However, he would draw up a report in consultation with Panel members and with the Bureau, and suggested that this report should be presented to the Standing Committee by Mr

Mihaly Vegh, STRP representative for the Eastern European region, who would be present in Budapest in October.

Agenda item 14: Date and venue of next STRP Meeting

The Panel accepted with gratitude the offer of M Letourneux, on behalf of the French Conservatoire du Littoral, to host the next STRP Meeting. Following discussion, it was decided that the week beginning 3 April 1995 would offer the best opportunity for everyone to be present, whilst still enabling the results of the meeting to be incorporated into draft Brisbane Conference documentation for review by the Standing Committee in September 1995.

Agenda item 15: Closure of Meeting

On behalf of all Panel members, observers and invited experts, the Chairman renewed his thanks to the Nature Conservation Authority of the Hungarian Ministry of Environment for hosting the meeting.

Special thanks were offered to Mihaly Vegh for his exceptional efforts to ensure that the meeting was successful, both in and outside of formal sessions. He also thanked all participants for their input to open and constructive discussions which had resulted in positive progress on all of the main issues with which the STRP had been charged. The Bureau thanked The US Fish & Wildlife Service for its support to the meeting and conveyed thanks to Tom Dahl for chairing the meeting. The Chairman then declared the meeting closed.