

Report of the 3rd Meeting of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, France, April 1995

Minutes of the Third meeting of the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). Arles, France 10-12 April 1995

Participants:

Members

M. François LETOURNEUX (Western Europe - French Host)

Dr Yaa NTIAMOA-BAIDU (Africa)

Dr Muhammed SHATANAWI (Asia)

Mr Mihaly VEGH (Eastern Europe - Chairman of meeting)

Apologies were received from Mr Tom DAHL (North America - Chairman of STRP), Dr Max FINLAYSON (Oceania) , Dr Roberto SCHLATTER (Neotropical Region)

Observers/invited experts

Dr Michael ACREMAN (IUCN, Observer)

Mme. Martine BIGAN (France, Observer)

Prof. Mike BRUTON (South Africa, invited expert on fish)

Dr Alain CRIVELLI (France, Observer)

Mr Scott FRAZIER .(IWRB , Observer)

Dr Ashish Kumar GHOSH (India, Observer)

Ms Szilvia Göri (Hungary, Observer)

Dr Christian LEVEQUE (France, invited expert on fish)

Apologies were received from Dr Makoto KOMODA (Japan - Observer).

Secretariat

Mr Tim JONES (Ramsar Bureau, Rapporteur)

Mr Michael SMART (Ramsar Bureau)

Agenda item 1: Opening of the meeting

The secretariat reported that, owing to illness, Mr Tom Dahl, the Chairman of the STRP had been unable to attend. On behalf of the host country, M. Letourneux welcomed participants and proposed that Mr Mihaly Vegh (STRP member for Eastern Europe and host of the previous meeting) be appointed to chair the present meeting. This proposal was warmly endorsed by other Panel members. Taking up his role as chairman, Mr Vegh expressed the Panel's gratitude to the Government of France, and especially to the Ministry of Environment and Conservatoire du Littoral, for hosting the meeting.

The secretariat conveyed the apologies of other Panel members and observers as indicated above.

Agenda item 2: Adoption of the agenda

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

Agenda item 3: Review and adoption of Minutes of the 2nd STRP meeting

The meeting reviewed the minutes of the second meeting of the STRP held in Hortobagy, Hungary in September 1994. The minutes were adopted without amendment.

Agenda item 4: Report on STRP matters discussed by the Standing Committee in Hungary, October 1994

At the request of the Chairman, the secretariat summarized the discussions which had taken place at the October 1994 meeting of the Standing Committee. The STRP Chairman, Mr Dahl, had submitted a written report, which had been presented by Mr Vegh. The secretariat had also made available copies of the minutes of the 2nd STRP meeting.

The Standing Committee had expressed general satisfaction, congratulating the Panel on the quantity and quality of the work which it had undertaken in a relatively short period of time. The Standing Committee had instructed the STRP to continue developing its work on the three key issues of fish criteria, change in ecological character, and Montreux Record / Monitoring Procedure mechanisms. The Standing Committee had not approved the STRP's suggestion that more detailed terms of reference for the Panel be developed. It was the Committee's view that the Kushiro Resolution establishing the STRP provided all the guidance necessary.

Agenda item 5: Information from the Ramsar Bureau

The secretariat presented general information concerning the current status of the Convention and current/forthcoming Bureau activities. Particular attention was drawn to:

- the resignation of Mr D. Navid as Secretary General and the procedure to be followed for recruiting a successor;
- development of the Convention's mid-term Strategic Plan, draft copies of which had been distributed to participants. It was noted that the Plan, developed by a subgroup of the Standing Committee, envisaged extending the STRP's work into several new areas of activity. Participants were invited to submit written comments to the Bureau by the end of the June 1995. With reference to the goal of achieving global membership of the Convention, Prof. Bruton recalled that the development of fish criteria should be an important step towards increasing the importance of Ramsar for developing countries.
- the current status of Wetland Conservation Fund project applications and financial contributions. During discussion, participants emphasized the potential contribution which the Panel might make towards project evaluation (as foreseen by the Kushiro Resolution establishing STRP), though some participants felt that the low level of funding currently available would not justify using the Panel's time in this way.

Agenda item 6: Information from the Ramsar Database

Mr Frazier presented a paper entitled 'Ramsar Database - Update for the Third Meeting of the STRP' incorporating detailed information in graphical form. During discussion of the report the following points were made by participants:

- the database plays an essential role in providing information about implementation of the Convention and thereby in helping to support improved implementation.
- effective operation of the Montreux Record mechanism depends on the effective gathering and processing of information received from Contracting Parties and others.
- efforts should be made to increase the resources available to the database, so that the development plans outlined by Mr Frazier could be implemented. Development work was currently 'on hold' to a large extent because of Mr Frazier's time being taken up entirely by routine database maintenance and processing of day-to-day enquiries.
- the Bureau should make even greater efforts to ensure that the significant gaps in key data (i.e. site maps and Ramsar Information Sheets) identified by Mr Frazier be filled as soon as possible. Bureau Technical Officers should be responsible for working with Mr Frazier to approach individual Contracting Parties, using diplomatic channels where necessary.

- national Ramsar/wetland committees, where they exist, should be contacted to help in the process of filling the main gaps.

- the Bureau should be strict in its treatment of new site designations, accepting only those accompanied by a good quality map and completed Ramsar Information Sheet.

In response to the last point, the secretariat noted that the Bureau was not in a position to reject any site designation, provided that the Contracting Party concerned had fulfilled the basic requirements of the Convention (Article 2.1) by naming the site and submitting a map delimiting its boundaries. Montreux Resolution C.4.5 had even tended to liberalize these basic requirements by recommending that, providing at least one site was named upon accession, a new Contracting Party could submit the site map at a later stage ("as early as possible thereafter"). However, Kushiro Resolution C. 5.3 requested all Contracting Parties to provide upon designation of a site, in addition to a map, a completed Ramsar Information Sheet.

Agenda item 7: Review of operation of the Montreux Record and implementation of the Monitoring Procedure

The secretariat introduced a series of papers prepared by the Bureau's Technical Officers in which the status of each site on the Montreux Record was summarized.

During the ensuing discussion, participants expressed the view that the Bureau should not hesitate to press Contracting Parties to provide adequate information on the steps being taken to maintain the ecological character at sites listed on the Montreux Record. Ramsar Information Sheets provided only a 'snap-shot' of a site, usually at the time of designation, whilst National Reports were only received every three years. It was essential that more regular updates be provided in the case of Montreux Record sites.

It was also suggested and agreed that a special form be developed to facilitate the work of Contracting Parties and Bureau alike in adding/removing sites to/from the Montreux Record. The Bureau was asked to prepare a paper on this for the next STRP meeting.

Prof. Bruton emphasized that change is a natural phenomenon in wetlands and that in developing the work on change in ecological character, which was fundamental to future implementation of the Montreux Record mechanism, the Panel might consider the amplitude of change as being a key criterion.

Dr Vegh emphasized the important role of national committees in coordinating information on Montreux Record sites and suggested that the Bureau should try to promote this role with Contracting Parties.

Dr Ntiamoa Baidu considered that NGOs also had a responsibility for ensuring that their perspective on Montreux Record sites (and potential MR sites) was drawn to the attention of the Bureau.

The secretariat reported a written comment received from Dr Finlayson suggesting that the Monitoring Procedure should be re-named 'Management Guidance Procedure' to reflect more accurately its actual aim and content. This view was generally supported by participants who agreed that the present title was potentially confusing, since it implied the taking of regular scientific measurements.

There was some discussion of the role of the Bureau in operation of the Monitoring Procedure. It was generally agreed that Bureau personnel had to be responsible for maintaining contacts with the Contracting Party concerned and that the Bureau should be represented on Monitoring Procedure missions. Both these were essential to maintaining the international and independent nature of the mechanism. However, it was also agreed that, in the case of longer, more complex cases which might require more than one mission, and or highly specialized scientific expertise, it would not always be necessary for a Bureau representative to present throughout. The Bureau's role was very much one of ensuring that the Monitoring Procedure was conducted according to the guidance set out by the Conference of the Parties and in conformity with the norms of international diplomacy. It was also pointed out that STRP members might be more closely involved with Monitoring Procedures and that the participation of relevant regional representatives could contribute to the international 'legitimization' of missions.

Agenda item 8: Development of Guidelines for interpreting "ecological character" and "change in ecological character"

In the absence of Dr Finlayson, it was agreed that discussion of this agenda item be deferred to a July 1995 meeting of the STRP, at which ecological character would be the principal subject. All participants were reminded of the requirement to forward any outstanding comments arising from the STRP meeting in Hungary to Dr Finlayson as soon as possible. A detailed paper, including full draft definitions, guidelines and Conference Resolution(s) would have to be available for the Standing Committee in September, requiring submission to the Bureau by early August 1995.

Prof. Bruton emphasized the need for including human interactions and values (cultural, anthropogenic) in the definition and guidelines for ecological character.

Agenda item 9: Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance

At the request of the Chairman, Prof. Bruton introduced a revised paper on "Definition of criteria for the designation of wetlands of international importance on the basis of fish and fisheries". The paper had been updated to take into account discussion at the 2nd STRP meeting and subsequent consultations with relevant experts.

During discussion, the following points were raised:

- reference to "traditional fisheries" should be replaced by use of the term "subsistence fisheries" and the guidelines should emphasize that the criteria do not aim to 'museumize' any particular way of life. Proposed criterion 4 (b) should become 4(c) and should be substantially reworded;
- the conflicts between intensive fishery management and bird conservation which occur in certain countries were not relevant since the proposed criteria addressed harvesting of wild stock, rather than aquaculture. Hence, there was no dichotomy between the Ramsar bird criteria and the proposed fish criteria;
- the concept of sustainable yield raised practical difficulties and there was a risk that if too much emphasis was placed on this aspect, commercial exploitation might be justified at the expense of other important aspects of a particular wetland's ecological character. It was agreed that the guidelines must emphasize the need to maintain wetland productivity and diversity and that the term "sustainable yield" must be set in this context;
- site-based (or otherwise specific) examples might be included in the guidelines to illustrate particular points. Special emphasis could be given to the role of floodplains, mangroves and shallow coastal waters and the importance of maintaining nutrient flows from land to water. The dangers of dam-building should be mentioned in this context;
- consideration should be given to including an introductory rationale for each criterion, so that any general misunderstandings might be forestalled before readers had to refer to the detailed guidelines for interpretation.

Participants were invited to send written comments to Prof. Bruton, as soon as possible, for incorporation into a new draft for final consideration by the STRP in July, prior to forwarding for the Standing Committee.

Prof. Bruton was thanked warmly for his continuing efforts to develop draft fish/fisheries criteria.

There followed some discussion about the scope of the Brisbane Technical Session concerning criteria. It was agreed that, whilst fish/fisheries had to be the central issue, there should be a paper to open discussion on possible post-Brisbane work on criteria. It was recognized that further expansion of the criteria might involve some sensitive political issues, so a recommendation would be forwarded to the Standing Committee as part of the STRP Chairman's report.

Agenda item 10: Input of STRP to 1995 Standing Committee meeting and 1996 Brisbane Conference, including future structure and role of STRP

It was agreed that the STRP Chairman should again provide a report to the Standing Committee which would be meeting in Brisbane, Australia, from 11-14 September. The report would refer to three separate papers concerning fish criteria, ecological character and Montreux Record/Monitoring Procedure. Each of these papers would include draft Resolutions for possible consideration by the Sixth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, also in Brisbane, from 19-27 March 1996.

It was agreed that the STRP report to Standing Committee should also include recommendations on the future structure and role of STRP. The following points should be included:

- the size of the STRP should not be increased
- geographical balance should be maintained
- using the same principle applied to the Standing Committee, continuity should be ensured by appointing some members for a second term
- IUCN and IWRB should continue in their role as observers
- invited experts and observers have a crucial role to play but the number of observers should be limited to ensure maximum efficiency
- subgroups, working primarily by correspondence, have a vital role to play.

The secretariat noted that, in accordance with the wishes of the Kushiro Conference, a diplomatic notification seeking nominations to the STRP would have to be sent to all Contracting Parties in the near future. Nominations would have to be submitted to the Standing Committee who would then make a recommendation for consideration by the Brisbane Conference.

Agenda item 11: Future meetings of STRP

It was decided that the next meeting of the STRP would be held in Gland, Switzerland, from Thursday 27th to Saturday 29th July 1995.

Looking further ahead, it was decided that as many STRP members as possible should aim to meet informally before and during the Brisbane Conference, to ensure thorough preparation of items relevant to the Panel.

Agenda item 12: Any other business and closure of meeting

Prof. Bruton drew the Panel's attention to the text of a new Wetlands Conservation Bill to be laid before the South African Parliament, which gave strong emphasis to the Ramsar Convention. It was agreed that a presentation on the bill might be considered for inclusion in the Brisbane Technical Session on National Wetland Policies and other policies affecting wetlands. The Bureau undertook to liaise with the South African authorities in due course.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed after renewing thanks on behalf of all participants to the French authorities for hosting the meeting. Particular thanks were addressed to the Conservatoire du Littoral and la Station biologique de la Tour du Valat, which had arranged field visits to sites within the Camargue to exemplify many of the concepts discussed.