

Report of the 4th Meeting of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, Switzerland, July 1995

Minutes of the Fourth meeting of the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). Switzerland. 27-29 July 1995

Participants:

Members

Dr Max FINLAYSON (Oceania)

M. François LETOURNEUX (Western Europe)

Dr Roberto SCHLATTER (Neotropical Region)

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 Yaa NTIAMOA-BAIDU (Africa)

Observers/invited experts

Dr Michael ACREMAN (IUCN, Observer)

Prof. Mike BRUTON (South Africa, invited expert on fish) Mr Scott FRAZIER (IWRB, Observer)

Dr Makoto KOMODA (Japan - Observer)

Apologies were received from Dr A.K. GHOSH (India - Observer)

Secretariat

Dr Montserrat CARBONELL (Technical Officer - Neotropics)

Mr Tim JONES (Technical Officer - Europe, Rapporteur)

Mr Tom KABII (Technical Officer - Africa - part of meeting)

Ms Mireille KATZ (Communications Officer - part of meeting)

Dr Satoshi KOBAYASHI (Technical Officer - Asia)

Ms Clarita MARTINET (Senior Secretary - administrative support)

Mr Michael SMART (Senior Policy Adviser)

Agenda items 1 & 2: Opening of the meeting/Announcements from secretariat

The secretariat reported that, as a result of urgent business, Mr Tom Dahl, the Chairman of the STRP, had been unable to attend and that he had asked for his sincere regrets to be passed on to Panel members.

The meeting determined that Mr Mihaly Vegh (STRP member for Eastern Europe and acting chairman for the previous meeting) should again be appointed as acting Chairman.

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

Agenda item 3: Adoption of Agenda

The secretariat reported that a draft agenda had been circulated to participants prior to the meeting. Following receipt of comments from panel members, several changes had been introduced and the agenda had been expanded to form an annotated meeting programme.

The annotated programme was adopted unanimously.

Agenda item 4: Review of Minutes of Third Meeting (Arles, April 1995)

The meeting reviewed the minutes of the third meeting of the STRP held in Arles, France, in April 1995. The minutes were adopted subject to the inclusion of one amendment to reflect that the Panel had recommended that Dr Max Finlayson be invited to attend the September 1995 meeting of the Standing Committee in his capacity as STRP member for Oceania.

Agenda item 5: Review of materials distributed by Ramsar Bureau

The secretariat introduced a number of papers which had been distributed to participants. These included the most recent draft of the proposed new criterion and guidelines on fish and fisheries; written comments from Contracting Parties and fish experts on the previous version of the draft criterion; background papers on ecological change and Environmental Impact Assessment; the latest version of the Convention's Strategic Plan (see below), and a report from the Ramsar Database.

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

- the appointment of Mr Delmar BLASCO (Argentina) as the new Secretary General of the Convention;

- further development of the Convention's Strategic Plan, draft copies of which had been distributed to participants. Participants were reminded that the plan assigned a number of proposed actions to the STRP, and were asked to submit comments to the Bureau before the end of the present meeting.

Prof. Bruton considered that the Mission Statement of the Strategic Plan understated the importance of Ramsar. He also felt that whilst it could not be assumed that the proposed criterion and guidelines for fish and fisheries would be adopted, the Strategic Plan nevertheless gave too much emphasis to water birds.

In the context of the Strategic Plan, the secretariat reported the recent development of links with the International Coral Seas Initiative. It was recalled that the Ramsar definition of "wetland" had, for many years, been interpreted as applying to coral reefs, but that very few coral reef sites had yet been designated. During discussion of this point, it was acknowledged that significant involvement with coral reef conservation would mark a new departure for Ramsar, with associated implications for workload and technical input to the Convention.

However, it was also recognized that it could significantly increase the relevance of Ramsar for small island developing states and would be an especially appropriate development ahead of the Brisbane Conference.

Agenda item 6: Development of definition and guidelines for interpreting "Ecological Character" and "Change in Ecological Character"

Dr Finlayson made a presentation summarizing the work carried out to date by the Panel, including the development of the draft definitions and guideline headings agreed upon by the 2nd STRP meeting (Hungary, September 1994). Dr Finlayson's presentation demonstrated how "ecological character" of wetlands was inextricably linked with the fundamental application of the Convention, both in terms of Wise Use (wise use should be the result of maintaining ecological character) and Listed Sites (especially operation of the Montreux Record, wetland restoration). It was also apparent that assessment and monitoring of wetlands (whether Listed Sites or not) were prerequisites for determining ecological character and any change which might take place.

During discussion, several amendments to the draft definitions were proposed and a draft framework for implementation of a wetland monitoring programme was agreed upon. It was emphasized that, like the Ramsar Wetland Management Planning Guidelines, the proposed monitoring framework would be available to provide guidance, as and when required by Contracting Parties.

It was agreed that, ideally, the criteria for Ramsar Site designation should identify the functions and values for which the wetland had been designated as being of international importance. They would thus provide critical 'benchmark' indicators for identifying unacceptable degrees of ecological change.

Unfortunately, this approach could not be applied for the time being, partly because the criteria (and, in turn, the Ramsar Information Sheets) do not reflect the full range of wetland functions and values, but also because of the very incomplete site data provided by Contracting Parties (see agenda item 10).

Dr Finlayson was asked to produce a written version of his presentation and to update it in the light of the discussion. The revised paper is attached as Annex I to these minutes.

Agenda item 7: Wetland Conservation Fund (WCF)

The secretariat presented a brief report indicating that some 30 projects had been received by the deadline for 1995 applications, and that these projects had been forwarded to IUCN and IWRB for technical evaluation. All except one project (which had been funded directly using sources outside the WCF) would be considered by the Standing Committee at its September 1995 meeting.

Several Panel members expressed their ongoing concern that the STRP was not directly involved with the technical evaluation of WCF project proposals. The secretariat recalled the background to this, noting that when setting annual STRP priorities for 1994 and 1995 (in accordance with Kushiro Resolution C.5.5), the Standing Committee had indicated that the STRP should not spend time on WCF matters. Nevertheless, Wetland Conservation Fund was amongst the list of tasks assigned to the STRP by the Conference of the Contracting Parties by RES C.5.5.

Noting the last point, participants considered that the STRP could play a valuable additional advisory role, which would assist Bureau staff with the processing of project proposals. It was emphasized that this need not involve significant additional administration and that once STRP members had been sent the annual project package, follow-up would be primarily through informal contacts between the Panel members and Bureau Technical Officers. Formal meetings would continue to focus on the issues assigned by Standing Committee.

Agenda item 8: Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance for fish and fisheries

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 3rd STRP meeting, written comments from Contracting Parties, and consultations with relevant experts.

During discussion, further specific proposals for amendments to the draft criterion and guidelines were put forward, with the main points as follows:

- Fish criterion cannot be seen simply as a subset of existing criterion 2; they need to stand alone as a fourth criterion.
- Sub-criterion 4(a) should be amended to read "... it supports significant proportion of any indigenous fish species or family" and "...and/or species interactions";
- need to clarify in the guidelines the relevance of the criterion to long-term sustainable yield of fisheries;
- problem of sectoral approach to Ramsar, so that agencies dealing with fish and fisheries may know little about the Convention and fear tough legal, protectionist regulation of their activities;
- the fish criterion guidelines need to be fully cross-referenced to the Ramsar Wise Use guidelines;
- there should be special emphasis on promoting/publicising the fish criterion and guidelines, if and when accepted in Brisbane - have to reach out beyond traditional Ramsar contact points;
- should use opportunity of Brisbane Conference to ensure presentation of local examples showing the role of fish and fisheries as an integral part of the ecological functioning/character of Moreton Bay (Oceania Day or Opening Day speeches?)
- need to extend definition of "fishery" to make clear that it covers both fin- and shell-fish, but that it differs from aquaculture;
- need to recognize in criteria that many wetlands support ecological processes which support fisheries, even though the wetlands themselves do not contain significant fish populations e.g. value of marshes in providing nutrients for offshore fisheries - mention invertebrate and sea-grass base to food-web;
- some terminology e.g. "indigenous", "shellfish" problematical to translate into French or Spanish - needs assessing;
- need to introduce and adequately cover "biogeographical" as a qualifier for "region" in sub-criterion 4(a);
- need to include importance of wetland as part of migratory route, but issue of migration vs mobility; long-distance spawning or feeding movements distinct from local movements, but may not cross national borders; add "migration path/channel" to sub-criterion 4(a);
- number of species to be covered by the new criterion would increase greatly if Ramsar became significantly involved with coral reefs;
- concept of "communities" and "assemblages" of fish to be added to sub-criterion 4(a);
- sub-criterion 4(b) needed to emphasize international importance of nursery etc; adjective(s) needed to stress key value - not just any wetland with fish (significant, key, appreciable, relevant etc.); explain that ecological support system is essential/critical;

- "rationale" section should be at the top of each sub-criterion guideline, giving a sequence of: rationale, criteria, definition
- Prof Bruton to reply in writing to comments just received by fax from the UK;
- need to include concept of "dependence" in sub-criterion 4(b); reworded to read "if it is a migration path, spawning ground and/or nursery on which an offshore fishery or a fishery elsewhere in the catchment is dependent";
- use scientific names wherever possible to avoid problems of there being no equivalent common names in all three of English French and Spanish;
- need to explain in the guidelines for sub-criterion 4(a) the concept of extreme/marginal habitats in tropical areas;
- need to list groups included in definition of shellfish; also, add definition for "migration path" and consider if "alpine" can be used in South America.
- sub-criterion 4(c) should be worded to put the emphasis on the fishery, upon which a local community is dependent. The need for the fishery to be sustainable would also have to be highlighted.

Prof. Bruton was asked to prepare a final draft, as soon as possible, for forwarding to the Standing Committee and (subject to Standing Committee authorization) transmission to Contracting Parties with Brisbane Conference documentation. Prof. Bruton's updated report is attached as Annex 11 to these minutes.

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

Dr Finlayson recalled, from his earlier presentation, that the STRP's work on change in ecological character underpinned the successful operation of the Montreux Record.

The secretariat noted that difficulty was still being encountered with the operation of the Montreux Record. Whilst the procedure contained in the annex to Kushiro Recommendation C.5.4 was quite clear, it did not provide sufficient guidance to either Contracting Party or Bureau as to what level of information might be required for addition and (especially) removal of a site from the Montreux Record.

Following discussion it was agreed to recommend the following to the Standing Committee:

- that the STRP be involved fully in the operation of the Montreux Record and provide advice to the Bureau and Contracting Parties on site-specific cases;

- that the form for addition/removal of sites referred to in the minutes of the Third STRP meeting be drafted as soon as possible by Dr Finlayson for submission to the Brisbane Conference (subject to discussion by Standing Committee in September 1995).

Dr Finlayson noted that BirdLife International had drafted a paper on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for possible inclusion in a Brisbane Technical Session. Following discussion, it was decided that this paper would be more appropriately included in Technical Session A (National Wetland Policies & other policies affecting wetlands) than in the Ecological Character Technical Session. Prof. Bruton and Dr Finlayson strongly recommended that consideration be given to the broader concept of Integrated Environmental Management, since EIA by itself had many problems.

Agenda item 10: Information from the Ramsar Database

The Ramsar Database Manager, Mr Scott Frazier, presented the report attached as Annex III to these minutes. During discussion, the following points were noted:

- the level of information submitted by Contracting Parties remained severely inadequate; 7% of sites have no maps, whilst 16% of sites have very poor maps.
- it was hoped to produce a major 25th Anniversary publication on the world's Ramsar Sites, and funding for the project had been secured by IWRB. However, the poor level of information available for many sites would jeopardise the value of the publication unless Contracting Parties moved to fulfil their data provision obligations.
- use of the Ramsar Information Sheet (and associated guidelines for completion) was patchy, at best. Contracting Parties should be required to provide a Ramsar Information Sheet at the time of site designation, even if some of the sections are filled in with the comment "information not available". It was much more valuable to have negative answers, than no answers at all.
- Bureau to distribute Information Sheet and latest version of guidelines (English, French and Spanish) by Diplomatic Notification. Bureau also to write directly, where appropriate, to Administrative Authorities, requesting completion of Information Sheets.
- Contracting Parties should be required to update their Information Sheets from time to time, perhaps for every other Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties.
- there should be a Plenary Session presentation on the Database at the Brisbane Conference. This should highlight the serious information gaps which exist and emphasize

the potential value of the missing information for improving implementation of the Convention at site level. A Resolution on interpretation of Article 2. 1 should be developed, indicating that completed Ramsar Information Sheets would become a requirement for site designation.

Agenda item 11: Future structure and work of the STRP

The secretariat recalled the process for STRP selection outlined by Kushiro Resolution C.5.5 and reported that a Diplomatic Note seeking STRP nominations for the post-Brisbane triennium had been distributed to all Contracting Parties. Nominations received would be brought to the attention of the Standing Committee which, in turn, would make a recommendation for membership of the Panel to the Brisbane Conference.

During subsequent discussion, it was decided that the Standing Committee should be asked to endorse the Panel's strong recommendation that alternate STRP members be designated for each region. This would ensure a wider availability of expertise and would help to avoid the situation which had arisen several times in 1994 and 1995 whereby STRP meetings had to take place with only partial representation. It was emphasized that the recommendation to designate alternate members would not compromise the efficiency of the Panel, nor require additional financial resources, since an alternate would only be invited to attend an STRP meeting if the Panel member him/herself was unable to attend.

Agenda item 12: Other business

(a) Brisbane Conference

Plenary Session Keynote presentations - the secretariat reported that it was planned to introduce several short keynote presentations on wetland issues of major or global concern during the plenary sessions at Brisbane. These would aim to stimulate and inform debate during the Conference. Themes which might be considered for inclusion were as follows (including suggestions from STRP members) :

- water resources for people
- pollution (especially agricultural run-off)
- MedWet
- dams and floodplains
- global climate change
- acid rain

how much wetland is there in the world? wetland megaprojects
Ramsar and marine wetlands

Darwin Pre-Conference Meeting - Dr Finlayson circulated the programme for the "International Workshop on Sustainable Harvest of Tropical Wetland Resources" to be held in Darwin from 14-16 March 1996. During discussion it was recommended that as many STRP members as possible should endeavour to attend the workshop. It was noted that Bureau participation would be precluded by preparations for the Brisbane Conference itself.

(b) Draft 1997-99 Strategic Plan

It was noted that this subject had already been covered adequately under previous agenda items (e.g. item 5).

(c) INTECOL V

Dr Finlayson reminded participants that the International Association of Ecology (INTECOL) would be holding its Vth International Wetlands Conference in Perth, Western Australia, from 22-28 September 1996. Copies of the First Announcement for the conference were distributed to participants.

(d) Ramsar classification of wetland type

Dr Finlayson reported that a scientific paper challenging the Ramsar classification of wetland type in favour of a geomorphologically based system would shortly be published by an Australian scientist.

During brief discussion, it was recalled that the Ramsar Classification of Wetland Type had never been aimed at providing a comprehensive classification of wetlands; it was simply a tool for use with a global database. It would always be the case (e.g. with coral reefs, for which only one over-all heading is given in the Ramsar classification) that a more sophisticated system would be needed for many other purposes.

(e) Technical cooperation with other environmental treaties

It was agreed that the need for closer technical links (as opposed to already existing policy/administrative links) between Ramsar and other environmental treaties should be drawn to the attention of the Standing Committee.

Agenda item 13: STRP Report to September 1995 Standing Committee

In view of the unavoidable absence of the STRP Chairman, and uncertainty over his participation in the September meeting of the Standing Committee, the secretariat was asked to compile these minutes and to circulate them, complete with annexes, to the Standing Committee, as far in advance of the meeting as possible. A progress report by the Chairman of the Panel, or his nominated representative, would then be presented at the meeting itself.

Agenda item 14: Date and venue of next STRP Meeting

The meeting felt it was necessary for the STRP to meet in Brisbane, just before the start of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, and that members should be available to advise the Standing Committee and Bureau on scientific and technical issues throughout the Conference. It was strongly suggested that the 1996 STRP core budget allocation should be used, if necessary, to support STRP travel (developing countries and countries with economies in transition only) to Brisbane, on the understanding that the Bureau would seek additional support for further STRP meetings in 1996, if necessary. STRP members (and observers) who would not be eligible for travel support agreed that they would seek the necessary funding themselves.

There being no further business, the acting Chairman thanked participants for their work and closed the meeting.