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Background, rationale and issues for the 2012 revisions proposed for the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* and Ramsar Site Information Sheet (RIS)

Information paper prepared by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel

Contents

Summary – key considerations for the proposed 2012 revisions

1. There are some particular considerations to note in relation to the review process and proposed COP11 draft materials. These are summarized below.

2. The work has been a collaborative and iterative process between Contracting Parties, the Secretariat, the International Organization Partners (IOPs), and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). For example, a sample of Contracting Parties have provided advice (through a questionnaire survey) on current issues and problems with the existing RIS and *Strategic Framework* that needed to be addressed, and they have and/or are

presently testing the revised Ramsar Information Sheet using their existing Ramsar Site information;

3. The revised *Strategic Framework* provided in COP11 DR8 is largely a reorganization of existing text from the previous editions of the *Strategic Framework* and other, partly duplicative, guidance materials developed over the past years concerning RIS preparation and the Ramsar Site designation processes. The material has been restructured into a more logical and consistent sequence of sections, with cross-referencing from each part of the *Framework* guidance to the relevant field of the RIS.

4. The revised *Ramsar Information Sheet* (RIS) likewise contains a similar number of fields to the current RIS, but these have been reorganized into a clearer sequence, and each field has been cross-referenced to the relevant section of the guidance in the revised *Strategic Framework*. In paper form, the revised RIS format is physically longer, but that is because the format moves from current 'free-text' descriptions to coded 'tick-boxes' or checklists. There are several important reasons for this, notably that:

    i)   it will avoid the current risks of incorrect coding by Secretariat staff when interpreting free-text fields for entry into the Ramsar Sites Database, because the Parties will be coding the information themselves when preparing the RIS;

    ii) the revised format has been designed in such a way that all of the data and information can subsequently be automatically entered into a database (i.e., similar to the Secretariat's present system for handling Parties' National Report information), which will lead to significant improvements in cost and time efficiency in the Secretariat's work, especially for the regional teams; and

    iii) the revised RIS format has also been designed so that it can be readily developed as an 'online' form for Parties to compile and submit new designations and updates of existing sites. The future development of such an online system would finally respond to the request in Resolution VIII.13 (2002) for such a system to be established.

5. The part of the revised RIS dealing with ecological character of the wetland being designated has been designed to be consistent with the format for Ecological Character Description (as well as for baseline wetland inventory), in accordance with the intent of Resolution X.15 (2008). For those Parties that, prior to designation or updating, have made an ecological character description in line with the Resolution X.15 format, it should be straightforward to transfer the relevant data and information into the revised RIS format. More detailed ecological character descriptions may be annexed to the globally-standard RIS itself.

6. Using these revised formats and updated mechanisms is expected to streamline significantly the processes of compiling, checking, and entering data at all stages of the Ramsar Site designation and updating procedures, and they will also permit enhanced consistency and the availability of the full range of data and information contained in the RIS.

7.   The present Ramsar Sites Database, maintained for the Convention by Wetlands International, is regardless of the format of the RIS in urgent need of full redevelopment. Currently a) like the RIS itself, it has been progressively modified over time in a piecemeal fashion rather than under a strategic design framework; b) it does not accept all information provided in an RIS (e.g., species-level information); c) it employs seriously outdated software which has increasing limitations, resulting in difficulties in maintaining and making any further modifications to the database structure and data management system; and d) it cannot accept data and information entry automatically from a 'paper' or online RIS.

8.   An implementation plan for the 2012 revised RIS and *Strategic Framework* is in preparation, with a transitional period following COP11 and the introduction of the new procedures and data handling mechanisms in 2014.

9.   Answers to a set of 'frequently asked questions (FAQs)', to help explain the processes and their implications for Parties, is provided as Annex 2 to this paper.

1.   Background

10. The organization and reporting of information about Ramsar Sites lies at the heart of the Convention's activities. It informs diverse needs such as:

  * the international mapping of site locations;
  * knowledge of which wetland types occur within national and international networks of sites – and thus of the extent of these wetland types so conserved;
  * the reasons why Ramsar Sites have been designated by Contracting Parties;
  * the pressures and threats acting upon individual sites, and thus, at international scales, knowledge about which issues should be priorities for the strategic attention of the Convention inasmuch as they affect multiple sites;
  * and indeed, all aspects of the effectiveness of the Convention with respect to Wetlands of International Importance.

11. The importance of this key need was specifically highlighted in the Final Act of the 1971 Conference in Ramsar, Islamic Republic of Iran, which stated that "the entries in the List of Wetlands of International Importance which is to be maintained under the Convention could usefully be supplemented by descriptions of the biotopes involved and an enumeration of the bird species especially in need of protection therein."

12. The particular emphasis given to this information requirement at that time, before any consideration had been given to other processes supporting the Convention, was significant. It was not until COP4 in 1990, however, that an Information Sheet was formally established as a means of collating this information.

13. The format of Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) has been progressively revised at subsequent meetings of the COP, but at a frequency that balanced the need for stability in established processes with both the development of the Convention's growing needs for better strategic overviews of the List of Ramsar Sites and the technological abilities to disseminate this key information to the wide spectrum of users.

14.   Most recently, COP10 (in Resolution X.10) requested the STRP to undertake a number of tasks related to the Convention's guidance on the selection of Ramsar Sites and its need for data and information at the point of designation. These tasks included:

   a)   undertaking a review of the consistency, logic and clarity of the targets and guidelines that support Ramsar's site selection criteria;
   b)   seeking the views of users of this guidance;
   c)   undertaking a review of options for revising the format of the Information Sheet for Ramsar Wetlands (RIS), in an effort to ensure linkages and synergies with other Ramsar instruments for collecting and reporting data and information on listed sites; and
   d)   further considering the data and information needs related to the description of ecological character at the point of designation, as well as to the assessment of potential change to the ecological character following designation.

2.   The rationale for the STRP's approach to this task

15.   In view of the significant linkages in the nature of these tasks, they have been undertaken together in an integrated manner so as to harmonise the relevant technical guidance and to avoid as far as possible the need for future changes.

16.   The STRP has approached this work by adopting a number of principles that have informed the approach taken. These, in no priority order, are that:

   i)   the review requested by COP 10 should be sufficiently comprehensive to ensure no further changes to the RIS in the medium term[1];
   ii)   there should be clear needs and uses for the data and information that Contracting Parties are requested to provide;
   iii)   information reported should be usable for informing multiple Convention processes – and indeed should potentially inform the relevant needs and processes of other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs);
   iv)   all aspects of data and information reported by Contracting Parties, both currently and in the future, should be readily available to others through the Convention's Ramsar Sites Information Service. This is not the case at present[2];
   v)   no significantly greater reporting burden for Contracting Parties should be created by the redesign of the RIS. Indeed, every opportunity should be taken to simplify reporting to facilitate the ease with which the RIS can be completed at designation and updated subsequently;
   vi)   accordingly, mechanisms for online data capture (and database-to-database information transfer) should be developed (as urged in Resolution VIII.13), thus eliminating the costly and inefficient re-entry of RIS information to the Ramsar Sites Database by Secretariat staff;

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[1]   It is impossible to rule out further changes in the longer term, however, because of the ever-changing needs and circumstances of Contracting Parties.
[2]   For example, reported information on species presence and status in the RIS is 'degraded' into categorical information related to higher taxonomic groups when the data is entered into the Ramsar Sites Database.

vii) further to iii) above, the Convention's information processes should be structured such that there is a technical capacity for information provided by Contracting Parties to be readily provided to other MEAs and relevant international bodies;

viii) the approach adopted should draw on the practical experience of those responsible for the completion and use of data and information in RISs – accepting that there will never be unanimity of approaches and thus that there will always need to be compromises to achieve consensus;

ix) in compiling the RIS and in subsequent management of the data, there should be a clear separation between information provided at designation and its subsequent update, in order to provide a clear audit of changes at a site over time;

x) proposals should clearly respond to the widely varying administrative capacity of Contracting Parties and the extent of available data and information about Ramsar Sites, bearing in mind that there is no expectation that all fields will be completed for many Ramsar Sites; and

xi) the description of the ecological character of the wetland should lie at the heart of the RIS, as indicated by Resolution X.15, both with respect to its initial description and to facilitate the subsequent assessment of change.

17. With the assistance of Secretariat, the STRP has sought input from individuals in Contracting Parties and others with recent experience of compiling and submitting RISs. Learning from such experience has been important in avoiding potential ambiguities in new proposals. These inputs are gratefully acknowledged below and have been highly significant to the completion of this task.

3. Approach to the proposed improvements

3.1 2012 *Strategic Framework*

18. The approach adopted by the STRP has been to:

i) 'repackage' the various existing agreed and adopted guidances that have been developed separately since COP4 and have accumulated a degree of unnecessary overlap and duplication. This revised *Strategic Framework* largely comprises existing adopted guidance, but it has been re-ordered, better structured, and its duplications removed to make it more easily understood by Contracting Parties and other users. It also brings together a range of other guidance adopted by the Parties into a single document and integrates the Ecological Character Description Sheet adopted by Resolution X.15;

ii) ensure that the guidance and proposals reflect the very variable extent of data and information on sites available in different countries. The 'ideal' extent may be impracticable in some countries owing to resource and other constraints. Some aspects of the guidance are presented as a hierarchical approach which recognises that some countries are less 'data-rich' than others;

iii) simplify the guidance and provide worked examples and illustrative case studies that may help those compiling or revising Ramsar Information Sheets (the latter through linked pages on the Ramsar website);

iv) provide a more consistent structuring for the guidance associated with each Criterion, drafting additional text as required;

v) provide a more consistent structuring for the guidance associated with under-represented wetland types, drafting additional text as required; and

vi) remove the 'Long-term Target' associated with each Criterion, given the many inconsistencies and ambiguities in the expression of these and the fact that some of them are merely elaborations of the criteria or rather general statements of intent, rather than specific 'targets'.

19. Annex 1A summarises the specific issues concerning the *Strategic Framework* that have been raised during the review and the responses to those issues.

3.2   2012 Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS)

20. The rationale behind the redesign of the RIS has been to:

i) simplify the form;
ii) provide a logical structure for the different types of information required that will aid compilers in their task;
iii) better capture information on the ecological character of the Ramsar Site; and
iv) facilitate the development of online reporting and RIS submission.

21. Simplification has been undertaken by moving (where possible) from 'free-text' descriptions to a 'tick-box' or checklist approach. Wherever possible, the tick-box options adopt existing feature categories or definitions already used in the Ramsar Sites Database. The difference is that Contracting Parties will categorise the information for their own Ramsar Sites, rather than the Secretariat subsequently having to interpret and codify textual descriptions provided by Parties, with its inherent risks of misinterpretation of the data and information.

22. Following the STRP's recommendation, a major part (Part 3) of the revised RIS form is drawn directly from (and relates to) Ecological Character Description (ECD) categories. This follows from the rationale of Resolution X.15, which tried to conceptually 'join up' the Convention's different data and information instruments.

23. The result of incorporating the ECD categories as a central part of the RIS (especially a check-list of ecological services) is that a number of previous RIS sections could either be deleted or merged, resulting in an overall simplification of the form. Thus the form should be significantly easier for Parties to complete, especially following the development of the check-box approach.

24. A central need, repeatedly expressed by Contracting Parties and others, is for an unambiguous description of ecological character at the point of designation which can subsequently act as a baseline description. The STRP's work has shown that a significant amount of the data and information used with the Ecological Character Description Sheet can be delivered by the Ramsar Information Sheet. Ensuring that the RIS delivers the necessary information on ecological character has the advantage of:

i)   reducing reporting burdens by collecting data just once that can then be used for several different international processes;

ii)   ensuring that data collected at the time of a site's designation much better defines the ecological character of the site at that time, thus enabling future changes from that baseline to be assessed; and

iii)   creating the potential for using data collected at the point of Ramsar Site designation (and updates thereof) for other MEA reporting processes. This has still to be explored in detail.

25.   Annex 1B summarises the specific issues concerning the RIS format that have been raised during the review and the responses to these issues.

3.3   Future development of the Convention's data and information management systems for Ramsar Sites

26.   Consultations have indicated a widespread desire for a major redevelopment of the Convention's information systems, especially in moving on from existing processes where Parties submit a 'paper' RIS and Secretariat staff manually re-enter the data into the Ramsar Sites Database.

27.   Systems for online submission of RIS should be developed, and indeed such developments were specifically requested by the Parties in 2002, in Resolution VIII.13 which:

> REQUESTS the Ramsar Bureau and Wetlands International, working with interested Contracting Parties, to develop protocols for the electronic submission of RISs, where this is possible and desirable, so as to facilitate the supply of data from the information systems of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Sites Database. (www.ramsar.org/pdf/res/key_res_viii_13_e.pdf)

28.   The revised RIS format has been designed to aid in this development of online and automated information submission, particularly through the use of 'drop-down' menus and simple check-lists. There are now technical means by which much or all information in such a format can be directly captured from an RIS form and entered into the database without the need for any re-keying of data by staff.

29.   Furthermore, as outlined in paragraph 7 above, the present Ramsar Sites Database, maintained for the Convention by Wetlands International, is in any case in urgent need of full redevelopment. With the introduction of the '2012 revised' format of the RIS, it will thus be timely to redevelop the Ramsar Sites Database to increase the effectiveness of RIS data and information management. Such redevelopment may need additional short-term funding, but it would subsequently release significant amounts of Secretariat staff time for more productive and useful tasks in supporting and advising the Parties.

30.   Given the varying capacities of Parties, the *RIS – 2012 revision* format will be made available as both a Web-based online submission system and an electronic (MS Word) format document.

32. The MS Word version of the *RIS – 2012 revision* format provided in COP11 DR8 Annex 1 is in a 'flat text' format in order to show all of the 'multiple choice' options under each of the RIS fields. In the MS Word version of the *RIS – 2012 revision* format, however, the RIS form will be prepared with the 'multiple-choice' options as drop-down menus, i.e. in a format similar to that already used for the COP11 National Report Format. Such a format will also facilitate the automated transfer of the RIS data into a redeveloped Ramsar Sites Database.

3.4 Under-represented wetland types

33. Recent international assessments (see Beck *et al.* 2011) have highlighted the 85% global loss of bivalve (shellfish) reefs, a wetland type which provides a wide range of ecosystem services and has significant economic benefits in the regions where reefs occur. Bivalve (shellfish) reefs have not been listed as a specific wetland type in the adopted 'Classification System for Wetland Type' applied in the designation of Ramsar Sites, and although bivalve (shellfish) reefs undoubtedly do occur in a number of coastal and estuarine Ramsar Sites, their presence and importance appears not to be generally recognized.

34. To promote their consideration as an important and threatened wetland type, the STRP has drafted specific additional guidance to aid the designation of bivalve (shellfish) reefs as Ramsar Sites, and this is incorporated in the *Strategic Framework – 2012 revision*.

Acknowledgements

References

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Annex 1

Annex 1A. Specific issues concerning the *Strategic Framework* raised during the review, and the STRP solutions to these issues

Issues raised	STRP solutions
Multiple sources of overlapping guidance as to how to complete RIS	All guidance consolidated in single document (2012 *Strategic Framework*), clearly cross-referenced to 2012 RIS
Poorly structured as a consequence of past partial revisions: information on the same topic in various different places	Guidance restructured to assist users, with multiple linkages to RIS and other sources of relevant information
Not all Parties have the same levels of available information/capacity	Guidance structured hierarchically: a) key messages first; then b) more detail for those Parties with more sophisticated national monitoring, processes or capacity
Guidance related to Criteria poorly structured, incomplete and inconsistent	Reformatted to uniform structure: **Criterion X** What this criterion is seeking to achieve? How to interpret this criterion – what does it mean? What data and information is needed to apply this criterion? Potential ambiguities/pitfalls in applying this criterion Where to go for further help or information

Annex 1B. Specific issues concerning the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) raised during the review, and the STRP solutions to these issues

Issues raised	STRP solutions
RIS lacking logical organization	RIS given a clear and logical structure: **Part 0:** Summary description **Part 1:** Administrative and locational details **Part 2:** Why is the site internationally important? (Criteria for designation)

Issues raised	STRP solutions

	Part 3: What is the site like? (Ecological character description)
	    a) Ecological components
	    b) Ecological processes
	    c) Ecosystem services
	Part 4: How is the site managed? (Conservation and management)
	    a) Land tenure and management ('about managers')
	    b) Conservation threats and responses ('about management)
	Part 5: Providing additional information relevant to this Ramsar Site

RIS should include unambiguous description of ecological character at the point of designation which can act as a baseline description. Current RIS does this poorly.	Ecological Character Description moved to the structural centre of the RIS with fields drawn from the Ecological Character Description Sheet (adopted by Resolution X.15)
Unclear separation of data and data handling process in relation to description of site at the time of designation and subsequent updates of that description	Clearly distinguishable update fields specifically linked to specified time periods Anticipated delivery through use of drop-down fields in proposed online system Any enhanced information system to be able to clearly manage data relating to different periods (in contrast to status quo)
Multiple sources of overlapping guidance as to how to complete RIS	All guidance consolidated in single document (*Strategic Framework – 2012 revision*), clearly cross-referenced to 2012 RIS
Existing RIS largely descriptive and textual, resulting in the need for further interpretation by Secretariat staff and difficult to directly computerize RIS format not well-designed for handling by modern information systems	Move to more 'categorical' data – yes/no or presence/absence type fields • simpler for Parties • easier to input to database • easier database-to-database RIS submissions • helpful for development of online RIS submission • categories proposed are those already used in current Ramsar Sites Database, which will continue to be compatible with existing data summaries
Information on species' presence in Ramsar Sites reported by Parties but not recorded or made available through the Ramsar Sites Database	Clear fields to capture information about plant and animal species and their status Adoption of CITES taxonomy as standard for completion of species information in RIS
Lack of clarity as to how to report Invasive Alien Species(IAS) at Ramsar Sites (as requested by Resolution VIII.18)	Specific sub-fields for reporting of Invasive Alien Species in relevant plant and animal fields.

Annex 2

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

This Annex provides answers and clarifications to a number of questions which have been asked by Parties and others about the RIS – 2012 format and proposed future processes for RIS submissions during consultations.

We are currently completing a Ramsar Information Sheet for a proposed new Ramsar Site that my country hopes will be designated in late 2012. Do we need to use the revised format RIS as soon as it is adopted at COP11?

> The Standing Committee, in the Draft Resolution (DR8) on the RIS, is recommending to the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Parties that the revised RIS format enters formally into force only in January 2014, thus providing a transition period to allow familiarity with the format of the new form and time for the Secretariat to redevelop the Ramsar Sites Database to be able to receive submissions in the new format. You can use the existing format RIS until the end of 2013, though if you do wish to use the new format for this designation after COP11 it will probably involve less work to complete, and will certainly be helpful. It will also ensure that all the information in the RIS will be available via the Ramsar Sites Database.

We understand that it is intended to move from paper RIS forms to a system of online electronic RIS submissions. Once the new RIS format comes into force, will we have to submit the RIS through this online system, or can we alternatively submit the RIS in an 'off-line' electronic format (in MS Word) as we do with the current RIS format?

> It is certainly intended to move to a primarily online system of RIS submissions. This will result in more efficient use of Secretariat resources, thus freeing time for other aspects of support to Contracting Parties, and it will also mean that all the information supplied by Contracting Parties on the RIS will be available via the database, which is not presently the case. However, it is also recognized that not all Ramsar Administrative Authorities will necessarily be able to use the online submission system – for example, if they have a very slow or intermittent Internet connection. The option of submitting the RIS as an electronic (MS Word) document, as is done for the current RIS, will still be available.

My government formally submits a Ramsar Site designation to the Secretariat through a Diplomatic Notification with a paper copy of the RIS. Can that still be done with the planned online electronic RIS submission system?

> Yes. A printed copy of the RIS new format can, as at present, continue to be sent to the Secretariat. The online submission system will have a function to print such a paper copy of the completed RIS. For data management purposes the Secretariat, as now, also needs to receive an electronic copy of the RIS. This can be in MS Word format or through the online submission system, once established.

When will the online RIS submission system be available?

The online version will be fully developed only following COP 11 since it is dependent both on the approval of the revised RIS format by the COP and on sufficient budgetary resources being available to allow all the necessary development work to be undertaken. It is planned that the full online submission system will be available by January 2014, when the RIS – 2012 revision format comes into force. A demonstration online version has been already made available before COP11 for testing and comment.

Has it been confirmed that all the data and information in the current RIS format can be readily transferred into the fields of 2012 revised format?

Yes, the STRP and volunteers from several Contracting Parties have tested and confirmed this as part of the review process, and worked examples of the information from existing RISs for designated Ramsar Sites transferred into the 2012 revised format are available on http://ris-2012.wikispaces.com/.

I need to update my Ramsar Site information from an RIS in the current format to the 2012 revised format. How long will it take me to transfer all the information?

This will depend on the amount and level of detail you have provided in the current RIS, but testing the transfer of such information into the 2012 revised format has suggested that this should take you not more than one to two hours.

If I have comments or feedback on the new process (including on the RIS, the *Strategic Framework*, or the online submission system) once I begin to work with it, should I send it to someone?

The new process will clearly benefit from feedback, not least to identify where further clarification or guidance may be needed. The new process will include such a feedback mechanism and this will be clearly highlighted within the new online RIS submission process. Please do provide such feedback, which will benefit future users of the system!

What taxonomy should I use to list the species occurring in our Ramsar Site in the new format RIS?

The draft revised *Strategic Framework* indicates that the taxonomic standards followed by CITES should also be followed for the purposes of Ramsar Site description. As all Parties to Ramsar are also Parties to CITES this should not prove problematic. These standards are available at http://www.cites.org/eng/res/all/12/E12-11R15.pdf and are updated following each CITES COP.

I want to submit an RIS online but I would like also to submit some photographs, maps, and hard-copy supporting documents. How do I do that?

Such supporting information provides a valuable means of enriching the description of the site. The new online system will allow electronic media (photographs, maps, videos, etc.) to be attached to any of the RIS fields, either directly or as hyperlinks, and so submitted as part of the RIS. Ideally, supporting hard-copy documentation should be scanned so that it can be shared more widely, including through the Ramsar Sites Information Service, but if

that is impossible, it will still be possible to submit a hard copy to the Ramsar Secretariat, just as at present.

Once I have submitted a new RIS online, can I update it at any time? How do I do that? Will an audit-trail of updates be maintained?

As at present, it will be possible to update a RIS at any time, for example to reflect improved knowledge or changes in the site. Exactly the same process will be used for such updates, and the system will allow simple editing of previously submitted forms. Needless to say, it will be crucial to maintain an audit of such submissions, and information in any RIS will be electronically 'date-stamped' to record when it was submitted by the Contracting Party. Unlike the current Ramsar Sites Information System, this will then enable historical queries to be made of information submitted by Parties.

What will happen to old RISs once they are replaced by the new format ones? Will an archive be kept somewhere?

All old RISs will be retained on the Ramsar Sites Information Service where they will be available as clearly 'date-stamped' assessments of the status of the site at the point at which the RIS was compiled. Over time this will build up a better archive of knowledge about each Ramsar Site, whether that relates to knowledge of species or habitats of interest, or of changes at the site as demonstrated by monitoring there.

Can the Ramsar Convention help with the resources I need to compile my RISs?

The Convention has three grant assistance programmes from which it may be possible to apply for assistance for Ramsar Site designations. Alternatively, it is highly recommended that Contracting Parties discuss the preparation of new designations with the Convention's International Organization Partners (IOPs), since through their national or regional offices and programmes, they may be able to assist in the process of compiling the data and information needed.

Can I get help with questions about compiling a new RIS while I am drafting it, for example if I have difficulty interpreting the questions in the format? Whom do I ask?

As at present, the Secretariat, especially via the Regional Assistants, will be pleased to provide support and advice. The Secretariat is currently developing an Implementation Plan for the new system, which will consider any necessary training that might be needed in the period from COP11 until the revised RIS format comes into force in 2014. Should there be a need for more technical guidance, feedback on problematic issues will also help the STRP to work with the Secretariat to provide such further assistance.