



13th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

“Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future”
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Report of the Secretary General on the implementation of the Convention: Work of the Secretariat

1. This report covers the work of the Secretariat from the closing of the 12th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP12), on 9 June 2015, until 31 July 2018.
2. The current Secretary General assumed her duties on 22 August 2016. While the Secretary General has not overseen the work of Secretariat over the full triennium, this report provides both an overview and selected highlights of the work completed by the Secretariat during the triennium, drawing from the reports presented by the previous and current Secretaries General and the interim Acting Secretary General to the 52nd, 53rd and 54th meetings of the Standing Committee (SC52, SC53 and SC54)¹. The documents prepared for COP13 provide further detail on various areas of the Secretariat's work.
3. Upon taking up her position, and with the agreement of the Executive Team, the Secretary General conducted broad external and internal consultations with representatives from Contracting Parties, including chairs of subsidiary bodies and working groups, heads of Convention Secretariats, International Organization Partners (IOPs), and other external stakeholders, as well as all staff members of the Secretariat. The consultations focused on identifying strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in the implementation of the Convention and work of the Secretariat, including gaps in capacities. Efforts have focused on strengthening the work of the Secretariat so that it can effectively deliver on its mandate specified in Article 8 of the Convention, implement the instructions given to it by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee, and support Parties to implement the Strategic Plan of the Convention. The main areas for this are mentioned below including highlights of actions taken.

Strengthening service to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability

4. A major area for improvement identified by the Secretary General was the delivery of the Secretariat's core role of servicing Contracting Parties, including the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies and accountability in all the work of the Secretariat to implement decisions and requests from the Contracting Parties. This was reflected in the recruitment of staff positions (see paragraph 38 below) and in the prioritization of this area in the whole team's work as reflected in the integrated 2017 and 2018 Annual Work Plans and the 2016-2018 Triennial Work Plan for the Secretariat approved by the Standing Committee at SC53 and SC54.

¹ Documents SC51-06, SC52-04 Rev.2, SC53-02 and SC54-5.

5. A critical function of the Secretariat is the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention, including the Standing Committee and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). During the triennium, the Secretariat has made logistical arrangements, prepared meeting documents, and prepared daily reports and a final report for STRP19, STRP20 and STRP21, and for SC51, SC52, SC53 and SC54. It has also prepared for the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP13), including five regional preparatory meetings, and contributed to other groups established by the Standing Committee and the COP.

6. An important area of the Secretariat's work is to support the STRP and provide assistance in the delivery of the STRP 2016-2018 work plan and high priority tasks, working closely with the Chair. Notable outcomes include:
 - *Global Wetland Outlook: State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People*: This flagship report is scheduled to be released on 27 September 2018 in advance of COP13. The Secretariat has been active in supporting the authors of the report, including organizing drafting workshops, hiring a professional editor and advising and supporting on communications aspects and policy relevance of the report. It also coordinated design and production aspects of the report along with an executive summary and Briefing Note for policy makers.

 - Policy Briefs: The Secretariat prepared the terms of reference, facilitated the drafting, identified and reached out to partners and oversaw the production, editing, translation and dissemination of the following Policy Briefs:
 - Policy Brief 1: *Wetlands for disaster risk reduction - Effective choices for resilient communities* (2017) with Wetlands International, the Partnership for Environment and disaster Risk Reduction (PEDRR) and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR);
 - Policy Brief 2: *Integrating multiple wetland values into decision-making* (2017) with the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES);
 - Policy Brief 3: *Ramsar Advisory Missions - A mechanism to respond to change in ecological character of Ramsar Sites* (2018); and
 - Policy Brief 4: *Implementing environmental flows with benefits for society and different wetland ecosystems in river systems* (2018).

 - Briefing Notes: The Secretariat prepared the terms of reference, facilitated the drafting and oversaw the production, editing, translation and dissemination of the following Briefing Notes and Ramsar Technical Report:
 - Briefing Note 8: *Ramsar Advisory Missions: Technical advice on Ramsar Sites*;
 - Guidelines for conducting tropical peatland inventories to facilitate their designation as Ramsar Sites;
 - *Wetland restoration for climate change resilience*; and
 - Ramsar Technical Report: *The use of Earth Observation for wetland inventory, assessment and monitoring: An information source for the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands*.

 - The Secretariat published an online Ramsar Sites Management Toolkit, drafted by the STRP (<https://www.ramsar.org/resources/ramsar-sites-management-toolkit>).

 - At STRP20, representatives of the Secretariats of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the

Technical Committee of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) provided perspectives on opportunities for collaboration.

- At STRP21, key outcomes included advancing the STRP tasks, finalizing scientific and technical draft resolutions for COP13, and establishing priorities on scientific and technical aspects of the Convention for 2019-2021. The Secretariat also coordinated consultancies and external reviews for various drafts related to STRP high priority tasks, including an independent review and analysis of the organization of Ramsar Advisory Missions as well as an update of the Wetland Extent Trends (WET) Index by the UN Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC).

Overall, the results of this area of work were positive and the Chair of the STRP commended, at STRP21, the support that the Secretariat had provided in its work, noting that the Panel had received strong support from the Secretariat over the triennium.

7. A major highlight in the triennium was the organization of the 51st, 52nd, 53rd and 54th meetings of the Standing Committee. Prior to SC53, the Secretariat conducted a full review of existing decisions and Resolutions to ensure that requests from Contracting Parties were followed up and relevant items included in the agendas of the meetings. Guidance for the preparation of documents was developed to ensure consistency. The Secretariat prepared documents for the meetings, organized logistics and processes for Contracting Parties' consideration of draft resolutions at SC54 and COP13, and prepared daily and final reports of the meetings. SC54 had the highest participation for a meeting of the Standing Committee in the history of the Convention, with 120 participants and 19 observers. At the time of writing, the Secretariat is preparing the SC55 and SC56, to be held immediately before and after COP13. The Secretariat team has worked in a coordinated manner with clear roles and responsibilities to support these meetings. Participants have expressed satisfaction with the organization and running of these meetings.
8. Regarding the organization of the meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, the Secretariat carried out an evaluation of COP12, held in Punta del Este, Uruguay in June 2015, and developed a manual in February 2016 that provides guidance on planning and preparing for future meetings of the COP.
9. In preparation for COP13, the Secretariat and organized five regional pre-COP meetings as follows:
 - Africa Region (26 February – 2 March) Dakar, Senegal
 - Asia Region (26 February – 2 March) Colombo, Sri Lanka
 - Americas Region (12 – 16 March) San Jose, Costa Rica
 - Oceania Region (12 – 16 March) Auckland, New Zealand
 - Europe Region (19 – 23 March) Olomouc, Czech Republic

The Secretariat would like to express its gratitude to the host countries of these meetings. Contracting Parties consider these meetings as valuable fora to comment on the draft resolutions that were subsequently discussed at SC54 and will be negotiated at COP13. These meetings also provide an opportunity for Parties to share experiences in implementation of the Convention at the regional and national levels, to raise issues of mutual interest and to hold preliminary discussions about the election of regional representatives to the Standing Committee.

10. The Secretariat has been actively liaising with the United Arab Emirates as the host country for COP13 on event planning, logistics and communications. Key responsibilities include: development of a memorandum of understanding including the statement of requirements; registration; sponsored delegate travel; coordination of side events; communications; and preparation of meeting documents.
11. The Secretariat has also been active in supporting implementation of decisions made at COP12 and by the Standing Committee. This includes supporting several working groups that were given specific tasks at COP12, SC52 and SC53. In particular, the Secretariat has provided considerable assistance to the Facilitation Working Group (FWG) in its task to review the effectiveness of the Convention's governance. Secretariat support was provided to the Standing Committee's Working Group on Language Strategy, in preparing a proposal for the Committee's consideration. Additionally, the Secretariat assisted the Independent Advisory Committee to review the nominations for Wetland City Accreditation and the CEPA Oversight Panel and its work to provide recommendations on the governance of communication, capacity building, education, participation and awareness (CEPA).
12. The Secretariat developed the National Reporting format for COP13 and made it available to all Parties through an online system together with an offline option. It also provided guidance and training to Contracting Parties and analysed the submissions to get an overview of the implementation of the Convention, which is provided in document COP13 Doc.11.1.
13. The Secretariat has made efforts to enhance its performance in strengthening services to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability. Additional capabilities and experience were strengthened with the recruitment of the new Deputy Secretary General in 2017 with responsibilities focused on supporting governing and subsidiary bodies and overseeing implementation, and a Conference Assistant in 2018. The Deputy has provided considerable expertise and capacity on matters of governance of the Convention. Detailed guidance has been provided to the Secretariat with planning sessions held with all staff in advance of the main meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies, to further strengthen capacities and coordination of staff. However, the effective delivery of this core function is challenged by various factors that the Secretariat has brought to the attention of the FWG and the Standing Committee :
 - There is an inconsistency in the deadlines for submission of documents for meetings of the Standing Committee, such that the deadline for submission of draft resolutions is a month after the deadline for publication of documents to be considered by the Committee.
 - A considerable number of meetings have been scheduled in 2018, namely STRP21, five regional pre-COP meetings scheduled in February and March, SC54 from 23 to 27 April, COP13 from 21 to 29 October, SC55 on 21 October and SC56 on 29 October. This is a result of the timeline established with the COP being held in October and the expectation that DRs be considered in all these meetings, even if the rules of procedure only refer to consideration by the SC.
14. This puts a very heavy workload on the Secretariat in terms of preparation of documents and meeting organization, but also, in terms of seeking funds for five regional pre-COPs and the COP in the same year. The Secretariat has raised with the FWG the need to review the sequence of meetings and timelines for submission of papers and draft resolutions to enable the Secretariat to deliver efficiently on the Parties' expectations. Other options suggested on the Group's request and drawn from the operations of other Conventions, include: having full SC meetings only in the years in which the COP does not meet; and holding regional meetings immediately

before the COP (and at the same venue) with the option of holding other regional meetings to share experience in implementation, for interested hosts to organize, including in the context of Ramsar Regional Initiatives. The Secretariat welcomes the work of Contracting Parties at SC54 and COP13 in this regard and looks forward to their consideration of ways to address these challenges so that the Convention can improve its effectiveness and to enable the Secretariat to deliver on this function in an efficient way.

Increasing relevance of wetlands and the Convention to global sustainable development policy objectives

15. The Secretariat has strengthened its work in supporting international cooperation and enhancing the relevance of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. Capacities for this are being reinforced with the recruitment of a Director of Science and Policy (see below paragraph 38) and with the engagement of the Secretariat's professional team in relevant policy processes. Given that the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are driving national and international planning and funding efforts, increased attention has been given to ensure that wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks. The Secretariat has therefore actively engaged in discussions regarding achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including with regard to SDG Indicator 6.6.1 (on change in extent of water-related ecosystems), as requested in Decision SC53-17. It participated in the 6th and 7th meetings of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) in Manama, Bahrain (11-14 November 2017) and Vienna, Austria (9-12 April 2018) and continued its engagement in the work of the target team on Indicator 6.6.1 led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Secretariat also participated in the global workshop for integrated monitoring of SDG 6 on water and sanitation, organized by UN-Water Technical Advisory Unit and eight United Nations agencies in The Hague, the Netherlands (21-23 November 2017). The aim has been to ensure that the process for monitoring achievement of the SDGs, especially on water-related ecosystems, takes account of Contracting Parties' commitment to reporting on the extent of wetlands. An important development is that, because of this work, the IAEG-SDG decided in November 2017 to make the Ramsar Convention a co-custodian for this indicator, together with UNEP. It further decided to approve two parallel reporting lines to the global SDG database hosted by the UN Statistics Division. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands will contribute data from National Reports based on Ramsar definitions and requirements; UNEP will be responsible for the internationally comparable methodology with national data, regional and global aggregations for Indicator 6.6.1. In July 2018, the Secretariat participated in the High-level Political Forum, in New York, which reviewed implementation of SDG 6 and SDG 15.
16. The Secretariat has been active in supporting the achievement of SDG 14 ("Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development"). The Secretariat participated in the first UN Ocean Conference (New York, 5-9 June 2017) in which the Secretary General moderated the Partnership Dialogue on Coastal and Marine Ecosystems, and served as a panellist at two side events, participated in a press conference on the Partnership Dialogue, and delivered a statement to the plenary of the Ocean Conference in the UN General Assembly Hall, emphasizing the important role of the Convention to help achieve SDG 14. As a follow up, the Secretary General was invited to act as one of the two focal points for the "Community of Ocean Action on Mangroves", which is one of nine communities established by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Oceans, Ambassador Peter Thomson. The Community will mobilize and expand the implementation of more than 1,300

commitments made at the Ocean Conference, including through the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

17. The Secretariat has also been active in supporting SDG 15 (“Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss”) and the biodiversity agenda. The Ramsar Secretariat has significantly strengthened its engagement in the CBD. In 2016, the Secretariat participated and engaged Contracting Parties in a workshop on cooperation among Conventions led by the CBD. The Ramsar Secretariat identified strategic areas of joint work and provided inputs to different processes, such as the follow-up to the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. The Secretariat participated actively in CBD COP13 in Cancun (4-17 December 2016) raising the visibility of the Ramsar Convention in the High Level Segment, round tables on agriculture and fisheries and in two side events which it organized. It also participated in various meetings of the subsidiary bodies of CBD and initiatives to enhance the profile of wetlands in the biodiversity agenda and contribute to the post-2010 biodiversity framework. The Secretariat is also collaborating with UNEP-WCMC to ensure that Ramsar Sites are included in the World Protected Areas Database, which provides the information for SDG indicator 15.1.2. The Secretary General participated in the plenary panel on this issue at the High-level Political Forum review on the implementation of SDG 15 (13 July 2018).
18. The Secretariat has continued to participate actively in the Biodiversity Liaison Group (BLG), in particular through the Secretary General’s attendance at the 12th Ordinary Meeting of the BLG (28 September 2017), in which a major focus was how to increase the visibility and relevance of biodiversity. The Secretariat also co-hosted an event with other biodiversity-related Conventions at the High-level Political Forum in New York on 10 July 2018.
19. The Secretariat signed an important Memorandum of Cooperation with the Secretariat of IPBES and participated in the fifth session of the Platform’s Plenary in Bonn (IPBES-5, 7-10 March 2017). It also coordinated input to the IPBES Global Biodiversity and Regional Assessments. Collaboration with IPBES also included the joint launch of the Policy Brief on *Integrating multiple wetland values into decision-making*.
20. Given the critical role played by wetlands in climate change mitigation and adaptation, the Secretariat has engaged in the climate change policy agenda. In particular, the Secretariat participated in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP22 in Marrakech (7-18 November 2016) with the Secretary General publishing a joint opinion editorial with the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, highlighting the important role of wetlands and the Convention in mitigating and adapting to climate change and COP23 in Bonn (6 - 17 November 2017), with a focus on peatlands, water and coastal and marine ecosystems. The Secretariat has also stepped up the positioning of the Convention in the Global Peatlands Initiative (of which it is a founding member) to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by protecting peatlands, including by engaging in the preparation, launch and follow-up of the rapid response assessment *Smoke on Water – countering global threats from peatland loss and degradation* published on the occasion of UNFCCC COP23, as well as in events on water and other relevant issues. It also joined the International Partnership for Blue Carbon in 2017, focusing on coastal and marine ecosystems.
21. The Secretariat engaged actively in the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly in Nairobi (UNEA-3, 4-6 December 2017), emphasizing the role of wetlands in pollution control and water purification, and more broadly, their contribution to the achievement of SDG 6. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and its fourth Strategic Plan 2016-2024 are mentioned in the resolutions on “Addressing water pollution to protect and restore

water-related ecosystems” and on “Pollution mitigation by mainstreaming biodiversity into key sectors”. The Secretary General made interventions at the Leadership Dialogue on practical solutions for a pollution-free planet, at a high-level panel discussion on the protection of coral reefs and mangroves, and at an event on gender and environment, notably speaking at the launch of the International Gender Champions. The Secretary General delivered a plenary statement on the role of wetlands as a sustainable solution for water purification and participated in a meeting with the heads of the Secretariats of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) on an integrated approach to delivery on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.

22. During the reporting period, the Secretariat sought to strengthen its relationship with the Geneva-based missions and UN agencies. On 21 June 2017, the Secretary General presented an Executive Briefing to the Permanent Missions to the United Nations in Geneva, on “The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands towards the Sustainable Development Goals”, hosted by the Director of the UN Office of Geneva (UNOG). A briefing on COP13 to the Permanent Missions to the United Nations in Geneva also hosted by UNOG is scheduled for 13 September 2018.
23. Other highlights include:
 - Participation in the 13th session of the Committee on Science and Technology of UNCCD, in Ordos, China, 6-9 September 2017, including a presentation at the IBPES Progress Briefing on the Comprehensive Assessment of Land Degradation and Restoration. Discussions with the UNCCD Secretariat are ongoing on opportunities for collaboration;
 - Participation in the COP of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) held on 23-28 October 2017, where the Secretariat was represented at the High Level Panel discussion on “Pollution and Wildlife” and in three side events;
 - Engagement in the water agenda including participation in: the 2016 International Water Summit in Abu Dhabi (18-21 January 2016); Budapest Water Summit (28-30 November 2016); Stockholm World Water Week 2016 (28 August – 2 September 2016) and 2017 (24-31 August 2017) including meetings of UN-Water and participation as panellists in the high-level dialogue session on Building a Resilient Future through Water and events on Alliance for Freshwater Life, Nature-Based Solutions for Better Climate Resistance, and Source-to-Sea Balancing Act; 8th Water Forum in Brasilia 18-23 March 2018; and input to the World Water Development Report 2018 focused on “Nature and Water” launched in March 2018;
 - Contribution to important assessments, in addition to those of IPBES, in particular: the sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6) freshwater chapter; and engagement of the STRP in the call for reviewers of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) first order draft of the 2019 Refinement to the 2006 IPCC Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories; and
 - Collaboration with the Secretariat of AEWA as a member of the Steering Committee of the project “Renforcement d’Expertise au Sud du Sahara sur les Oiseaux et leur Utilisation Rationnelle en faveur des Communautés et de leur Environnement” of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).
24. In fulfilment of its mandate, the Secretariat has enhanced its engagement with relevant Multilateral Environmental Agreements and United Nations processes. However, a major challenge during the reporting period was that the Secretariat was denied the right to

participate, on behalf of the Convention, in the UN High-level Political Forum meeting in July 2017, which reviews the implementation of the SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This was because the Ramsar Secretariat does not have observer status in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), nor in the UN Economic and Social Council, which is the UN platform for debate on sustainable development. The Secretariat informed the Executive Team and Co-Chairs of the FWG and, with the Legal Adviser, provided support to Uruguay, as the Chair of the Standing Committee, for a request to the General Assembly to grant observer status to the Ramsar Secretariat. The request was deferred until the 73rd UNGA session, scheduled to start on 18 September 2018, and is included in its agenda. At SC54, in Decision SC54-07, the Standing Committee “instructed the Secretariat, in conjunction with interested Parties, to continue exploring options for gaining access to meetings of the United Nations General Assembly and related high-level fora.” This issue is in the agenda for SC55 and COP13. In the meantime, the Secretariat was able to attend the HLPF in July 2018 as a member of the IUCN delegation. The Secretariat has also encountered limitations to its engagement on the United Nations water agenda, which is coordinated across the UN system by UN-Water. Contrary to other Multilateral Environmental Agreements, the Ramsar Convention is not a “member” of UN-Water, as it is not part of the United Nations system. The Secretariat can only contribute as a “partner”, which implies limitations to its engagement.

Strengthening support and enabling implementation

25. Over the triennium the Secretariat has provided support in the designation of 131 Ramsar Sites and the update of information for 299 existing Ramsar Sites, including support in data transfer into the new Ramsar Sites Information System (RSIS), publication and translations. The Secretariat supported Contracting Parties with nine Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs): Plurinational State of Bolivia (Los Lípez), Colombia (Sistema Delta Estuarino de Río Magdalena, Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta), Indonesia (Berbak National Park), Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Hawizeh Marsh, Central Marsh and Hammar Marsh), Italy (Laguna di Venezia: Valle Averte jointly with World Heritage Centre), Nicaragua (Sistema de Humedales de San Miguelito), Norway (Nordre Tyrifjord Wetland System), United Arab Emirates (Ras Al Khor), and the United Republic of Tanzania (Kilombero Valley Floodplain). SC53 approved funds for further RAMs that include Côte d’Ivoire (Grand Bassam Ramsar Site), Nicaragua (Bluefield Ramsar Site and Corn Island) and Uganda (Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Wetland System Ramsar Site and Lake George Ramsar Site) that will take place in October 2018. Thirty Contracting Parties were supported in the development of wetland inventories. There will be new opportunities to support Contracting Parties in this area with the appointment of the Ramsar Convention as co-custodian of SDG 6.6.1 on wetland extent.
26. The Secretariat has prioritized transfer of data in the new RSIS. Data completion has been finalized for 1,096 Ramsar Sites and all data from the old database migrated to the new RSIS platform.
27. The Secretariat continues its efforts to strengthen its “enabling” role (vis-à-vis direct support to individual Contracting Parties), to use its limited capacity and resources in a more efficient and strategic way. Regarding capacity building, the Secretariat engaged in numerous capacity building efforts including training sessions and workshops. In looking at enhancing effectiveness and reach, the Secretariat introduced internet-based approaches and in particular the use of webinars. In late 2017, four sessions were organized to provide training on the use of the RSIS with 53 attendees from 23 Contracting Parties. In order to support Contracting Parties in the preparation of National Reports and to progress reporting on “wetland extent” as a contribution to SDG Indicator 6.6.1, the Secretariat developed a tutorial for the National

Reports Online Reporting System and guidelines on information to be provided in Target 8 “National Wetlands Inventory” and in particular on “wetland extent”. This tutorial was delivered via webinars and Skype calls. Another area in which capacity was strengthened included the use of earth observation tools for wetland mapping and inventory (GlobWetland Africa Toolbox). Efforts are underway to put in place a more coordinated whole-of-Secretariat approach to capacity building across the regions. This includes the identification of needs and priority areas in which capacities are needed, development and use of common approaches, materials and tools (such as the use of webinars), development of partnerships for capacity building, and monitoring of outcomes.

28. In the context of furthering its enabling role, the Secretariat continues to support Ramsar Regional Initiatives which remain active, including by: participating in their coordination meetings; advising on and supporting the implementation of their activities; supporting their fundraising efforts in line with the COP12-approved priorities; facilitating and compiling their reports to the Standing Committee; and providing support to the Standing Committee’s Working Group on Regional Initiatives. The Secretariat has also engaged in strategic partnerships. The Secretariat renewed its partnership with Danone for three years (2017 – 2019). This partnership extension provides resources for World Wetlands Day and the Ramsar Awards, as well as for other activities to increase visibility and awareness of wetlands and the Convention. The partnership also provides for collaboration towards sustainable watershed management and climate change with validated tools and methodologies. Given the shift in Danone’s priorities, the Secretariat expects that, starting in 2019, it will need to raise additional funds for World Wetlands Day celebrations and for the Ramsar Awards programme. The Danone partnership continues to open doors to new opportunities, such as potential collaboration with the Livelihoods Fund and the CEO Water Mandate. The Star Alliance partnership with both the Convention and IUCN was terminated in 2017 owing to a change in management priorities at Star Alliance. The MAVA project on Conservation of the Natural and Cultural Heritage in Wetlands came to an end in March 2018 and the Standing Committee provided guidance for its final stages. The Secretariat has reviewed the existing partnerships for which cooperative agreements (e.g. Memoranda of Cooperation, Memoranda of Understanding) are utilized and presented its findings at SC54. The Standing Committee endorsed the proposed approach and accompanying decision-tree for determining when cooperation agreements should be used.
29. On 2 May 2017 the Secretariat organized a meeting of the heads of IOPs to renew the existing Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) and specify more strategic ways of working together. This meeting resulted in agreement on joint activities that would enable the partnership to become a “whole greater than the sum of its parts”. These joint activities were subsequently reflected in the revised MOC for the period 2018 – 2024.
30. Regarding resource mobilization, during the triennium the non-core resources amounted to CHF 2,312,000 to support the priorities established by the COP in Resolution XII.7 Annex 3. During this period, CHF 157,000 has been raised for RAMs, CHF 221,000 for sponsored delegate travel to COP13 and pre-COP meetings, and CHF 33,000 has been raised for Regional Initiatives. A major highlight in the reporting period was the recruitment of the Director of Resource Mobilization and Outreach. A first important step was the development of a Resource Mobilization Strategy as requested in Decision SC52-23. This plan was presented at SC54 and endorsed by the Standing Committee. This will enable a more strategic approach for this important area of work of the Secretariat.

31. The Secretariat also has provided support to Contracting Parties in their fundraising efforts. In Africa, it assisted Gabon to develop a GEF-funded project entitled “Project on Sustainable Management of Critical Wetland Ecosystems” for USD 7.521 million and is currently assisting Benin, Burkina Faso and Guinea to develop wetland projects to be submitted to the Green Climate Fund. In Asia, it worked with the IUCN Asia Regional Office on a project worth EUR 2,530,000, entitled “Building Resilience of Wetlands in the Lower Mekong Region through a Ramsar Regional Initiative”. In the Americas, fundraising has been focused on the priorities identified by Contracting Parties, namely, the Regional Initiatives. The Secretariat and Contracting Parties are looking for donors for High Andean, La Plata River Basin and Mangroves and Coral Reefs Regional Initiatives. In Europe, it facilitated exchanges between the European Commission (major donor), wetland-related project coordinators and Ramsar Administrative Authorities in order that maximum benefits can be provided from EU-financed projects for wetland management, restoration and policy development at all levels.

Enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention

32. The visibility of wetlands and the Convention are being raised through a variety of communications outreach efforts. The Secretariat has strengthened information sharing among the stakeholders of the Convention and increasing public awareness about wetland services and benefits through the Ramsar website, social media, newsletter, a broad range of e-lists and outreach campaigns such as World Wetlands Day. The Secretariat has taken an approach to speak with “one voice” across the Secretariat to our target audiences about wetlands issues and linking wetlands to relevant policy frameworks such as SDGs and climate change. Since the launch of the new Ramsar website in 2015 website traffic has increased by 10% annually. The site has received more than 1.3 million visitors since its launch.
33. Communications outreach activities have increased in support of the Secretariat’s participation in more than 60 global fora and events over the triennium. Key Ramsar Convention messages delivered via social media and other communication channels have included the role of wetlands in climate change adaptation and mitigation, water quality and quantity, and disaster risk reduction. More than 800,000 people worldwide have been directly reached via social media. A joint opinion editorial by the Ramsar Secretary General and the Executive Secretary of UNFCCC was published in more than 30 media outlets, generating a potential viewership of 10 million people.
34. The Communications team worked closely with the STRP Chair to develop outreach activities for each STRP product and provided guidance on making these products more policy-relevant and appropriate for communications purposes. A major area of work has been the preparation and launch of the Global Wetlands Outlook, including a media and social media outreach plan developed and implemented. A separate microsite for the Global Wetland Outlook and associated products was created and communicated to global media and the public.
35. These communications efforts have been part of the Secretariat’s implementation of the CEPA Action Plan. The Secretariat assessed the status of implementation of the Plan, and reviewed expected outcomes in line with its capacity and taking a whole-of-Secretariat approach. The Secretariat integrated the Plan’s outcomes into its triennial and annual work plans to align and streamline its work, with approval from SC53 and SC54.
36. World Wetlands Day continues to be a powerful outreach platform from which to raise global and national awareness about wetlands. Over the triennium the Secretariat noted a steady increase in the number of events organized by Parties and other environment organizations

from 1346 (2016) to 1507 (2018). With funding provided by the Danone Group, the Secretariat produced a range of information materials to support the outreach efforts of Parties on the themes of livelihoods (2016), disaster risk reduction (2017) and urban wetlands (2018). Furthermore, the Secretariat sought out strategic collaboration with the IOPs and relevant United Nations agencies to capitalize on their networks and reach a broader audience. These included United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), and UN Habitat. Social Media as well as the Global Wetlands Youth Photo Contest held in 2016 and 2017, were other important channels employed to increase youth awareness and engagement on World Wetlands Day. More specifically, during the triennium the combined use of the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Instagram potentially reached 16 million in 2016, 25 million in 2017 and 9 million to date in 2018.

Strengthening the Secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness

37. The guiding objective since the current Secretary General took office has been to “organize to deliver” on the Strategic Plan of the Convention and the mandate of the Contracting Parties, and to use in the most efficient way the limited resources of the Convention and the capacities of the Secretariat.
38. Capacity gaps were identified especially in two areas, namely the core function of supporting the governing and subsidiary bodies and the linkage with relevant policy processes through policy-relevant science. Adjustments have been made to job descriptions of vacant posts, including after retirement of the incumbents, and administrative staff to cover capacity gaps. In the last two years, the Secretary General has recruited the following positions: Deputy Secretary General, with a job description refocused on governing and subsidiary bodies and ensuring overall accountability to the Contracting Parties; Director of Resource Mobilization and Outreach (with advice from the Resource Mobilization Working Group in the development of the job description); Finance Officer; Senior Regional Advisor for Asia and Oceania; Director of Science and Policy; Conference Assistant, (to further strengthen capacities in supporting subsidiary and governing bodies), Communications Assistant and three Interns. Efforts have been made to have regional and gender diversity to the extent possible. Eleven positions have been recruited since the current Secretary General assumed her responsibilities from the following regions: Europe (4), Africa (2), Asia (2), North America (1), Latin American and Caribbean (2), Oceania (0). Currently, 60 percent of Secretariat staff are women.
39. Technologies and business practices that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Secretariat have been actively evaluated and adopted. Of particular importance is the adoption of a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database that will enable more efficient management of mailings, meeting registration, and contacts and allow compliance with new privacy laws. The CRM has been used in managing all aspects of registration for COP13. Other technologies that have been adopted include voice-over-internet services for conference calls, online learning (webinars) and higher utilization of digital document sharing mechanisms.
40. A review was conducted by the Secretary General of the financial management of the Secretariat in October 2016. The Secretary General provided reports to the Executive Team, the Subgroup on Finance, the Facilitation Working Group and SC53 and SC54. Measures have been taken and efforts continue to address problems identified and to ensure that the Convention has a rigorous, transparent and accountable finance management system, in line with the IUCN policies and standards. The improvements made in this area were validated by the external auditors. The Secretariat has strengthened compliance with IUCN policies and procedures where applicable, with related processes and procedures having been put in place in 2017 or

being put in place in 2018. Capacities have been built in this regard and performance objectives included in management positions. As directed by SC53 and SC54, a finance/management review of non-core funds is being conducted. The Secretariat asked the IUCN Head of Oversight Unit to conduct the review, and preliminary results were presented to the Subgroup on Finance at SC54. The final report will be shared with Contracting Parties.

41. A staff workshop was conducted on 2 November 2016 in which the findings of the new Secretary General's external and internal consultation were shared and discussed. The Secretariat staff worked on ways to address key areas that needed to be strengthened.
42. Professionally facilitated Planning Workshops for the Secretariat were conducted in January 2017 and November 2017. The workshops focused on: the review and assessment of progress of the triennial and annual work plans, including the development of an integrated framework approved by SC53; uniting the team in its clarity of role, identity and accountabilities; principles to guide how the Secretariat works; and changes needed to better serve Contracting Parties and deliver on the Secretariat's mandate. The Secretariat also reviewed lessons learned in the implementation of its Work Plan and developed a proposed new structure and format for the next triennium that could better serve as a planning and monitoring tool. This framework was approved by SC54.
43. Staff development needs of the Secretariat were assessed through an internal survey. Training priorities were identified and a training plan was designed with activities organized starting in the 4th quarter of 2017. The following training activities took place: one-day executive communications skills training for Senior Management Team members; one-day open communication skills for all other staff members (14 participants attended); a training session on finance for all staff. The remaining training activities which were identified will be conducted before the end of 2018.
44. Considerable progress has been made in strengthening the Secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness, and in filling gaps in its capabilities. The team has worked hard in this regard with encouraging results in key areas of work of the Secretariat as described in this report. However, further work is still needed. Moving towards a whole-of-Secretariat approach has presented challenges as this requires changes in ways of working and organizational culture within the Secretariat and in its engagement with Contracting Parties. The Secretariat is developing Standard Operating Procedures which will contribute to making further progress. Other areas for further work include: streamlining work planning process and links to individual performance plans; developing more coherent and coordinated approaches across regions to get efficiencies and better serve Contracting Parties; balancing enhanced accountability for implementation of the decisions taken by the COP and Standing Committee with the service provided to Contracting Parties in each region; balance between regional and thematic approaches; further strengthening accountability to financial standards and operational procedures; and continuing to build capacities and skills in core functional areas of the Secretariat's work.