

A contemporary report of Ramsar COP2, Groningen, 1984

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Front Cover: Ramsar Takes Off! (question: how far can it go on a packet of birdseed?)

Groningen 1984 – a bigger splash or a drop in the ocean?

The Second Conference of Contracting Parties to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (usually called the Ramsar Convention) took place in Groningen, the Netherlands, from 7 to 12 May 1984.

THIRTY-TWO of the Convention's then 35 (36 since Uruguay's accession, see page 45) Contracting Parties were represented and - an encouraging sign - twenty other nations had observers there. Many observers were from countries in developing regions, and there is good reason to hope that some of these countries will now take steps to join the Ramsar family, so far distributed mainly in the world's wetter, wealthier and cooler regions (see map, page 44, for Convention facts).

ELEVEN international organisations, including Unesco (the Convention's Depositary), IUCN and the International Waterfowl Research Bureau, also came to Groningen. The others were Ducks Unlimited, European Environmental Bureau, EC Federation of Hunting Organisations, International Federation for Conservation of Game, International Council for Bird Preservation, World Wildlife Fund International and the joint IUCN/WWF Advisory Committee for the Wadden Sea.

Among observer nations (other than Uruguay) which pledged to make early efforts to investigate joining the Convention were Belgium, Chad, Costa Rica, France, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria and the USA.

The List of Wetlands of International Importance, to which Ramsar Parties are required to add at least one site when they ratify, has already grown to nearly three hundred sites covering around 20 million hectares: new listings promised at Groningen could swell the list to more than 500 sites and almost treble its area coverage.

On these grounds alone, the Groningen Conference was a signal success. It also succeeded in most of its stated aims, which included an overall review of the reasons why wetlands require conservation and a survey of progress and problems since the Convention's last ordinary Conference at Cagliari, Sardinia, in 1980.

But on the most mundane yet most crucial debating point, the establishment and financing of a permanent Secretariat for the Convention, no firm conclusion was reached and the prognosis is that the bureau duties presently performed by IUCN with technical support from IWRB will have to continue for some time to rely on the charity of IUCN and IWRB themselves and of the few Parties, notably the Netherlands, prepared to make voluntary contributions to maintaining the Convention apparatus.

Delay in nailing down a lasting and adequately financed administrative structure must be reckoned particularly irksome at a time when more and more countries where conservation resources are lacking and where drought and other special problems are making wetland conservation an almost impossible task, are looking to institutions like the Ramsar Convention for a helping hand (see page 47).

[Picture: *Netherlands Agriculture and Fisheries Minister G. Braks opening the Groningen Conference with news of the Wadden Sea's designation as a Ramsar site.* (Photo: Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Netherlands)]

Good news for Wadden Sea

The Conference got off to a spirited start with an opening address by the Netherlands Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Mr G. Braks, who recalled that the Convention places two main obligations on its Contracting Parties; the specific undertaking to add wetlands to the world list, so pledging to preserve their natural characteristics and another, more general but no less important commitment to plan actively to make wise use of *all* wetlands. Braks ventured to suggest that the first of these obligations had been worked harder than the other and that policy in the Netherlands was an exception to this tendency.

He proceeded to make an exception to this exception by announcing that his Government had taken steps to designate the whole of the Netherlands Wadden Sea (some 250,000 hectares) as a Ramsar wetland, thereby giving its protection international legal status. The same status was (he announced) in prospect for four other major Netherlands wetlands - the Eastern Scheldt estuary, the Markizaatsmeer, the Zwanenwater and Oostvaardersplassen in the IJsselmeer polders.

The Province of Groningen's Governor Vonhoff replied not only as the Queen's representative in the host province but also as Chairman of the non-governmental Council for Nature Protection. He warmly welcomed the news of the Wadden Sea's listing and the other prospective new listings but drew the attention of the Conference to the plight of another Netherlands wetland in need of extra protection, the Maarkermeer, a part of the IJsselmeer which is still open water but where plans for further polderisation (reclamation) are under discussion at present.

Outside the Conference agenda, other differences of opinion were to be aired. Several Wadden Sea protection groups joined forces to stage a presentation of ongoing problems on the site, which they hope the Sea's new status as a Ramsar wetland may help to clear up (see feature, page 52) and delegates visiting the Wadden Sea itself during one of the many stimulating extramural events arranged by the Conference organisers, were lobbied by protesters concerned at the use of parts of the Wadden Sea as military exercise areas. After the Wadden Sea presentation, a petition was handed to Professor D.J. Kuenen, the Conference Chairman and a past President of IUCN, for him to convey to the Netherlands authorities. It called for several conservation measures to be applied in the Wadden Sea to supplement the existing policies operating there.

Why conserve wetlands?

After more opening addresses, by, among others, the representatives of Unesco and FAO and IUCN's Director General, Kenton Miller, delegates at Groningen heard four overview addresses about the ecological importance of wetlands, the need for international cooperation in their conservation, land-use approaches to wetlands throughout the world and legal and planning mechanisms for wetland conservation. On the basis of this 'refresher course' on the principles behind the Convention, the Conference later split into working groups to develop ideas for courses of action that were logical extensions of these principles.

The working groups' conclusions were embodied in a Resolution as a series of Action Points and an advisory Framework for Implementing the Convention.

The seven Action Points are:

- Elaboration of a system of wetland classification or typology;
- Preparation of a standard data sheet on wetlands and of guidelines for its use in wetland inventories;

- Development of common criteria for evaluating the importance of wetlands at local, national or international level; and, in particular, expansion of the existing Cagliari Criteria to cover also ecological factors concerning life forms other than waterfowl;
- Development of a common base for recording and evaluating long-term trends in the ecology of wetlands through monitoring of physical and biological parameters, taking into account the different levels of expertise and support in the various Contracting Parties;
- Quantification of both direct (monetary) and indirect (non-monetary) values of wetlands and formulation of criteria to enable all values to be taken fully into account in the planning of conservation projects and projects which may lead to changes in the ecological character of wetlands.
- Development of strategies and techniques for wetland management including measures to enable the retention of natural characteristics of wetland areas after execution of modification or transformation projects; and
- Promotion of increased international cooperation among the Contracting Parties and interested states; in particular, development of a clearing-house function for special assistance for wetland conservation projects in developing countries.

Progress since Cagliari

One of the most productive sessions of the Conference took the form of a review of National Reports submitted by Party states. These reports illustrated progress achieved since the last (Cagliari) Conference and highlighted special problems encountered by several countries in implementing the Convention.

It was during this session that delegates heard of the many actual and proposed additions to the Convention's tally of Parties and listed wetlands. Since Cagliari, the list of Parties had grown by seven to 35 and the list of wetlands by 75, to a total of 292. Among these, the Australian and Canadian listings were of outstanding significance, the former's because they extended Australia's coverage to three different states (where formerly her listed sites were all restricted to her Northern Territories), and Canada's because of the wide range of biotopes now listed there and their remarkable extent - more than ten million hectares, or over half the total area listed under the Convention!

The Parties which promised to make new additions were Algeria (two sites), Australia (at least one), Bulgaria (two), Canada (two), Denmark (one - but an important one; the whole Danish sector of the Wadden Sea), Federal Republic of Germany (one), Finland (27), Italy (at least two), Mauritania (one), Norway (eight), Portugal (one) and the United Kingdom, which upstaged everyone by announcing that a remarkable 132 sites would be designated by 1986.

The FRG, while making no promises about listing its sector of the Wadden Sea, announced that two National Parks were to be created in the area, which would provide effective safeguards for its natural character.

No de-listing but some losses

The Convention allows for Party states, in their urgent national interest, to de-list sites, provided that they compensate for the lost ground by creating new reserves elsewhere and that what can be saved of the de-listed sites' area and character is given adequate protection. Happily, not a single Ramsar wetland has been deleted from the List, a clear signal that Parties regard listing as a binding engagement.

Another positive trend was signalled in National Reports: new work is being done to improve existing sites like Lake Hornborga in Sweden and Coto Doñana in Spain, to restore them to something nearer their original condition following ecological changes caused by ineffective drainage and agricultural expansion.

In several cases, designation under Ramsar has been a powerful factor in preventing degradation of existing sites. A road bridge planned to cross the Rhine near Eltville in the Federal Republic of Germany has been re-routed to avoid a Ramsar site, while, in Portugal, plans for urban and fish-farm development at Quinto do Ludo (Faro) have been dropped.

There have been changes in the area and character of some wetland sites, listed and unlisted. Restriction of boundaries has affected some sites in Iran, while the United Kingdom reported a general reduction of saltmarsh and lowland mire wetlands. At Tablas de Daimiel (Spain), increasing exploitation of underground aquifers for irrigation is threatening to cause the whole of this listed site to dry out. The Danube and March riverine forests (Austria) are likely to be affected by a massive river regulation and hydroelectric scheme (see Hamburg feature, page 60).

There may be a danger that, rather than removing denatured wetlands from the Ramsar list, states may be content to retain their listed status without regard for their actual condition. The Conference Chairman voiced many delegates' concern over this possibility and the similar danger that wetland sites worthy of conservation under the Convention's more general provisions, may be neglected and attention distracted from their condition by the mere fact that they are not singled out for listing.

"National policies need to be elaborated in step with the listing process," suggested Kuenen, "otherwise there is a very real problem of a lack of balance between these complementary means of wetland conservation."

The biggest problem, however, remained the range of obstacles to wetland conservation in less developed countries, particularly those in semi-arid zones of Africa (see page 47). Many representatives from these countries called for training, equipment and other forms of special assistance to help them conserve their wetlands, and it is clear that the question of integrating wetland conservation with development will remain a dominant preoccupation of the Convention for many years to come.

Protocols and professional support

At the First (Cagliari) Conference, Ramsar's Parties recommended adoption of two amendment Protocols, both aimed at strengthening the Convention's machinery. The first and simplest of these Protocols was adopted in Paris at an Extraordinary Meeting of Parties held in 1982. It provides for an established amendment procedure and for designation of additional authentic language version of the Convention text.

The Paris Protocol will come into force when accepted by 22 Contracting Parties: 15 have already taken this step and several others are now ready to follow suit. The Spanish-speaking delegates present at Groningen were able to agree on the wording of the official Spanish text of the Convention; along with an existing official French text, this should mean that more countries where these languages are spoken will join the Convention.

A draft for the second Protocol, also incorporating recommendations made at Cagliari, was developed by the Netherlands and submitted for consideration at Groningen in anticipation of a meeting where it might be possible to amend the Convention. It was the proposed administrative arrangements and their financial ramifications in this draft document that proved an awkward sticking-point.

The draft's principal provisions were for:

- The holding of regular and extraordinary conferences (the Convention at present sets out no stipulations on frequency);
- Adoption of rules of procedure and attendance of observers especially from non-government organisations (not specifically mentioned in the Convention at present);
- Authority of the conference to adopt financial provisions (missing at present);

- Creation of an annex containing criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance (currently lacking, and covered only by a Cagliari Recommendation);
- Authority to create subsidiary bodies, in particular a scientific committee (currently lacking);
- Establishment of a permanent secretariat (IUCN at present performs 'continuing bureau duties' with no independent secretariat at the disposal of the Contracting Parties);
- Full definition of secretariat functions (at present only brief description of 'continuing bureau duties');
- Inclusion of clauses on stricter domestic measures and settlement of disputes (currently lacking).

While many delegations were broadly in favour of these proposals, which reflected, inoffensively enough, their own recommendation at Cagliari, several had reservations. The Australian delegation (which had not been present at Cagliari) voiced these reservations most forcefully: they feared that, with a Convention and two Protocols of Amendment, different states would be bound by different texts in what would turn out to be a three-tiered Convention. The underlying worry of Australia and other like-minded delegations was the extent of financial commitment the new Protocol would require of the Convention Parties, especially the money needed to finance a permanent Secretariat. Ways to achieve the Convention's desired effects without spending money on administrative and technical support had not, Australia felt, been exhaustively checked out. And even if a permanent Secretariat did prove indispensable, the Convention's present 'cabin crew' was not necessarily the most cost-effective. Other delegations pointed out that (as in the case of other international agreements) less developed countries could not foot the bill for running the Convention and providing it with technical support: a scale of charges, with only token or rebated levies on poorer countries, would be the only feasible arrangement.

During further discussion of the need for a permanent Secretariat, it was made clear to delegates that the present interim 'bureau duties', performed by IUCN on the Parties' behalf, did not pay for themselves, any more than did the support provided by the International Waterfowl Research Bureau. The generous voluntary contributions to the Convention's running costs made by the Netherlands and a few other Parties by no means defrayed all the costs incurred by IUCN and IWRB even on the Convention's present day-to-day needs, to say nothing of the innovations that Parties themselves wanted to see made in the Convention's scope.

Everybody agreed that the present, interim arrangement could not continue indefinitely. To address this problem, the Conference set up a Task Force composed of representatives of five Party states; Canada, Denmark or Sweden, Netherlands, Poland, Senegal and Tunisia.

The Task Force will, with the backstage help of IUCN and IWRB, meet to examine options for establishing a permanent structure for running the Convention and to refine the Second Protocol in the light of its findings so that a new version can be offered for adoption at the next Conference of Contracting Parties once the first "amendment" Protocol had entered into force.

Japan pleads poverty

The Japanese delegation and several others said that, while they appreciated the Convention's difficulties, their countries were having to cope with budget deficits and it would be impossible to justify the expense of supporting the Convention on a regular *or* a voluntary basis. On the other hand, the FRG, Swedish, and United Kingdom delegations indicated that for legal reasons their countries could not, even if they wanted to, make voluntary contributions, but rather would be in a position to help once a fixed financial requirement was in place in the form of an amendment to the Convention. A resolution was at length passed urging all Parties to consider stepping up voluntary contributions until a conclusion had been reached by the Task Force and acted on by the Parties. Meantime, IUCN and IWRB will have to continue to try to make ends meet on the Parties' behalf, and potential new Parties may continue to hold back from joining until they know what they are letting themselves in for.

The overall picture emerging from Ramsar's Second Conference was of a dynamic and positive Convention being used by its Parties to real and ever-greater effect. There are problems, notably in developing regions and in the Convention's own back room, problems in both cases of lack of cash. Nobody wants to see the Convention's potential for achieving wetland conservation go to waste but cash liquidity is one upstream resource that nobody yet seems ready to let through the dam.

URUGUAY FIRST TO RATIFY AFTER MAY CONFERENCE

On 22 May, Uruguay acceded to the Ramsar Convention. The Convention's terms require that, upon accession, new Parties submit a description of a wetland to be entered on the List of Internationally Important Wetlands. In Uruguay's case, the *Bañados del Este y Franja Costera* wetland complex is offered for listing. Uruguay's decision comes soon after the recent Second Conference of the Parties to the Convention and adds significantly to the instrument's Latin American coverage.

"Uruguay's move could not have been more welcome or timely," says Daniel Navid, Secretary General at Groningen and the IUCN officer responsible for the interim secretariat. "It is a sign that more and more countries are coming to recognise the benefits in terms of international cooperation which membership of Ramsar can bestow, and it keeps up the momentum of the forward progress made during the Groningen meeting. I am sure I speak for everyone who has the Convention's interests at heart in offering sincere congratulations to the government of Uruguay for their far-sighted and prompt action."