



# What is the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands?

## CONVENTION ON WETLANDS

(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

The *Convention on Wetlands* is an intergovernmental treaty adopted on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar, on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. Thus, though nowadays the name of the Convention is usually written “Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)”, it has come to be known popularly as the “Ramsar Convention”. Ramsar is the first of the modern global intergovernmental treaties on the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, but, compared with more recent ones, its provisions are relatively straightforward and general. Over the years, the Conference of the Contracting Parties has further developed and interpreted the basic tenets of the treaty text and succeeded in keeping the work of the Convention abreast of changing world perceptions, priorities, and trends in environmental thinking.

The official name of the treaty, *The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, reflects the original emphasis upon the conservation and wise use of wetlands primarily as habitat for waterbirds. Over the years, however, the Convention has broadened its scope of implementation to cover **all aspects** of wetland conservation and wise use, recognizing wetlands as ecosystems that are extremely important for biodiversity conservation and for the well-being of human communities, thus fulfilling the full scope of the Convention text. For this reason, the increasingly common use of the short form of the treaty’s title, the “Convention on Wetlands”, is entirely appropriate.

The Convention entered into force in 1975 and now (as of January 2009) has 158 Contracting Parties, or member States, in all parts of the world. Though the central Ramsar message is the need for the sustainable use of all wetlands, the “flagship” of the Convention is the **List of Wetlands of International Importance** (the “Ramsar List”) – presently, the Parties have designated for this List more than 1,822 wetlands for special protection as “Ramsar sites”, covering 169 million hectares (1.69 million square kilometres), larger than the surface area of France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland combined.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) serves as Depositary for the Convention, but the Ramsar Convention is not part of the United Nations and UNESCO system of environment conventions and agreements. The Convention is responsible only to its Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), and its day-to-day administration has been entrusted to a secretariat under the authority of a Standing Committee elected by the COP.

The mission of the Ramsar Convention, as adopted by the Parties in 1999 and refined in 2002, is “*the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world*”.

## Why do countries join the Ramsar Convention?

Membership in the Ramsar Convention:

- entails an endorsement of the principles that the Convention represents, facilitating the development at national level of policies and actions, including legislation that helps nations to make the best possible use of their wetland resources in their quest for sustainable development;
- presents an opportunity for a country to make its voice heard in the principal intergovernmental forum on the conservation and wise use of wetlands;
- brings increased publicity and prestige for the wetlands designated for the List of Wetlands of International Importance, and hence increased possibility of support for conservation and wise use measures;
- brings access to the latest information and advice on application of the Convention's internationally-accepted standards, such as criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance, guidelines on application of the wise use concept, and guidelines on management planning in wetlands;
- brings access to expert advice on national and site-related problems of wetland conservation and management through contacts with Ramsar personnel and consultants and through application of the Ramsar Advisory Mission mechanism when appropriate; and
- encourages international cooperation on wetland issues and brings the possibility of support for wetland projects, either through the Convention's own small grants project funding mechanisms or through the Convention's contacts with multilateral and bilateral external support agencies.

## **What are the commitments of Parties joining the Ramsar Convention?**

When countries join the Convention, they are enlisting in an international effort to ensure the conservation and wise use of wetlands. The treaty includes four main commitments that the Contracting Parties have agreed to by joining.

### **1. Listed sites (Article 2 of the Convention)**

The first obligation under the Convention is for a Party to designate at least one wetland at the time of accession for inclusion in the **List of Wetlands of International Importance** (the "Ramsar List") and to promote its conservation, and in addition to continue to "designate suitable wetlands within its territory" for the List (Article 2.1). Selection for the Ramsar List should be based on the wetland's significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology, or hydrology. The Contracting Parties have developed specific criteria and guidelines for identifying sites that qualify for inclusion in the Ramsar List.

In Article 3.2, each Party has committed itself "to arrange to be informed at the earliest possible time if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the List has changed, is changing or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. Information on such changes shall be passed without delay" to the Ramsar Secretariat.

### **2. Wise use (Article 3 of the Convention)**

Under the Convention there is a general obligation for the Contracting Parties to include wetland conservation considerations in their national land-use planning. They have committed themselves to formulate and implement this planning so as to promote, as far as possible, "**the wise use of wetlands in their territory**" (Article 3.1).

The Conference of the Contracting Parties has approved guidelines on how to achieve "wise use", which has been interpreted as being synonymous with "sustainable use". The

COP has also adopted detailed guidance on the development of National Wetland Policies and on management planning for individual wetland sites.

### **3. Reserves and training (Article 4 of the Convention)**

Contracting Parties have also undertaken to establish nature reserves in wetlands, whether or not they are included in the Ramsar List, and they are expected to promote training in the fields of wetland research, management and wardening.

### **4. International cooperation (Article 5 of the Convention)**

Contracting Parties have also agreed to consult with other Contracting Parties about implementation of the Convention, especially in regard to transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, and shared species.

### **Compliance with the commitments**

The Ramsar Convention is not a regulatory regime and has no punitive sanctions for violations of or defaulting upon treaty commitments – nevertheless, its terms do constitute a solemn treaty and are binding in international law in that sense. The whole edifice is based upon an expectation of common and equitably shared transparent accountability. Failure to live up to that expectation could lead to political and diplomatic discomfort in high-profile international fora or the media, and would prevent any Party concerned from getting the most, more generally, out of what would otherwise be a robust and coherent system of checks and balances and mutual support frameworks. Failure to meet the treaty's commitments may also impact upon success in other ways, for example, in efforts to secure international funding for wetland conservation. In addition, some national jurisdictions now embody international Ramsar obligations in national law and/or policy with direct effect in their own court systems.

### **Reporting**

One extremely important part of the Parties' responsibilities has to do with reporting on the implementation of the Convention within their territories. The Parties report on their progress by submitting triennial National Reports to the Conference of the Contracting Parties – these are prepared following a format adopted by the Parties which is derived from the Convention's Strategic Plan and Work Plan for the triennium, and they become part of the public record. In addition, under Article 3.2 of the treaty, Parties are expected to report to the Secretariat any changes or threats to the ecological character of their listed wetlands and to respond to the Secretariat's inquiries about such reports received from third parties.

### **Bodies of the Convention**

#### **The Conference of the Contracting Parties**

The implementation of the Ramsar Convention is a continuing partnership between the Contracting Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Convention Secretariat, with the advice of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and the support of the International Organization Partners.

The **Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP)** is the policy-making organ of the Convention. Government representatives from each of the Contracting Parties meet every three years to receive national reports on the preceding triennium, approve the work programme and budgetary arrangements for the next three years, and consider guidance

for the Parties on a range of ongoing and emerging environmental issues. (Articles 6 and 7 of the Convention set out the duties of the Conference).

Representatives of non-member States, intergovernmental institutions, and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may participate in these meetings as non-voting observers. Ramsar COPs have gained the reputation of being highly effective events, allowing an active involvement and participation of the non-governmental and academic community.

Ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties have been held at: 1. Cagliari, Italy, 1980; 2. Groningen, Netherlands, 1984; 3. Regina, Canada, 1987; 4. Montreux, Switzerland, 1990; 5. Kushiro, Japan, 1993; 6. Brisbane, Australia, 1996; 7. San José, Costa Rica, 1999; 8. Valencia, Spain, 2002; 9. Kampala, Uganda, 2005; and 10. Changwon, Republic of Korea (scheduled for 2008).

### **The Standing Committee**

The **Standing Committee** is the intersessional executive body that represents the COP between its triennial meetings, within the framework of the decisions made by the COP. The Contracting Parties that are members of the SC are elected by each meeting of the COP to serve for the three years until the next one. The Committee meets annually to carry out activity on matters previously approved by the Conference; prepare documentation for consideration at the next COP; and supervise implementation of policy by the Ramsar Secretariat and execution of the Secretariat's budget.

There are presently 16 regional and two *ex officio* members of the Standing Committee, chosen on a proportional basis from the six Ramsar regions – Africa, Asia, Europe, Neotropics, North America, and Oceania – as well as the host countries of the most recent meeting and the next meeting of the COP. The Contracting Parties that host the Ramsar Secretariat and Wetlands International are invited to participate as Permanent Observers, and the “International Organization Partners” (see below) are invited to participate in an advisory capacity. All other Contracting Parties are always welcome to participate in Standing Committee meetings and working groups as observers, and other countries and non-governmental organizations may participate as observers in the absence of objections.

Permanent subgroups within the SC are presently the Subgroup on Finance, Subgroup on the COP (i.e., the next meeting of the Conference of the Parties), Subgroup on the Strategic Plan, Management Working Group, CEPA Oversight Panel, and STRP Oversight Committee.

### **The Secretariat**

The **Ramsar Convention Secretariat** carries out the day-to-day coordination of the Convention's activities. It is located in the headquarters facilities of The World Conservation Union (IUCN) in Gland, Switzerland, and Secretariat staff are legally considered to be employees of IUCN. It is headed by a **Secretary General**, who supervises the work of a small number (currently 15) of technical, communications and administrative staff, four interns/assistant advisors, and the MedWet Coordinator based in Athens, Greece. Additional staff are occasionally seconded to the Secretariat for special purposes, and consultants are recruited from time to time as needed.

The three staff members of the Ramsar Regional Center for Training and Research on Wetlands in the Western Hemisphere (CREHO) in Panama and the Ramsar Officer for Oceania hosted in the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP), Apia, Samoa, are considered to be associated Ramsar staff members.

## The Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP)

The **Scientific and Technical Review Panel** of the Ramsar Convention was established by Resolution 5.5 (1993) as a subsidiary body of the Convention to provide scientific and technical guidance to the Conference of the Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Secretariat. Its individual members, who are not paid for their services, are elected by the Standing Committee based upon nominations from the Parties, but they serve in their own capacities as experts in the scientific areas required by the STRP's Work Plan and not as representatives of their countries.

For the triennium 2006-2008, the STRP is chaired by Dr Heather Mackay of South Africa and vice-chaired by Rebecca D'Cruz of Malaysia – the membership consists of six regional representatives (one chosen from each of the six Ramsar regions), who are charged with networking with the scientific communities in their regions; six thematic experts chosen for their expertise in the priority areas of work for the period; and representatives of the five International Organization Partners, for 17 full members in all. In addition, the Parties have specified a list of 24 convention secretariats, convention subsidiary scientific bodies, and scientific organizations as officially Invited Observer Organizations, and additional consultants, experts, and organizations are asked to participate as required. The progress of the STRP's work is guided and supervised from within the Secretariat by the Deputy Secretary General.

## The International Organization Partners

The Convention works especially closely with five global non-governmental organizations (NGOs), four of which have been associated with the treaty since its beginnings and were confirmed in 1999 in the formal status of International Organization Partners of the Convention. In Resolution IX.16 (2005), the Parties judged that IWMI meets the qualifications for Ramsar IOP status that were outlined in 1999 and endorsed the addition of that organization as the fifth official partner of the Convention.

The five IOPs are:

- BirdLife International
- IWMI – The International Water Management Institute
- Wetlands International
- The World Conservation Union (IUCN)
- WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) International



The IOPs provide invaluable support for the work of the Convention at global, regional, national, and local levels, chiefly by providing expert technical advice, field level implementation assistance, and financial support, both from their headquarters units and from their national and regional offices and affiliates and from their expert networks. In addition, they themselves embody the philosophy of the Ramsar Convention and its wise use concept and support the use of the Ramsar guidelines in their own work around the world. The IOPs also participate regularly as observers and key actors in all meetings of the Conference of the Parties and the Standing Committee, and as full members of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel.

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