



# *The Ramsar concept of “wise use”*

## CONVENTION ON WETLANDS

(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

Under Article 3.1 of the Convention, Contracting Parties agree to **“formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List, and as far as possible the wise use of wetlands in their territory”**. Through this concept of “wise use”, which was pioneering when the Convention was drafted, the Convention continues to emphasize that human use on a sustainable basis is entirely compatible with Ramsar principles and wetland conservation in general. The Ramsar wise use concept applies to all wetlands and water resources in a Contracting Party’s territory, not only to those sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance. Its application is crucial to ensuring that wetlands can continue fully to deliver their vital role in supporting maintenance of biological diversity and human well-being.

As this term “wise use” gained currency within the Ramsar community and was used elsewhere for different purposes, the Conference of the Parties recognized the need for greater precision and adopted a definition at its 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting in Regina, Canada, in 1987. This definition was revised in Resolution IX.1 Annex A (2005) as follows:

**“Wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.”**

To assist the Parties in implementing the wise use concept, the Wise Use Working Group, established at Regina, developed *Guidelines for the implementation of the wise use concept*, which were adopted by the 4<sup>th</sup> COP in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1990. Also at the 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Wise Use Project was instituted, funded by the Government of the Netherlands, and an international panel of experts began work which culminated in the *Additional guidance for the implementation of the wise use concept*, adopted by the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties in 1993, as well as in the book of principles and case studies entitled *Towards the Wise Use of Wetlands*, edited by T.J. Davis (Ramsar, 1993).

The pioneering ‘Wise Use Guidelines’ emphasized the importance for Contracting Parties to:

- **adopt national wetland policies**, involving a review of their existing legislation and institutional arrangements to deal with wetland matters (either as separate policy instruments or as part of national environmental action plans, national biodiversity strategies, or other national strategic planning);
- **develop programmes** of wetland inventory, monitoring, research, training, education and public awareness; and
- **take action at wetland sites**, involving the development of integrated management plans covering every aspect of the wetlands and their relationships with their catchments.

The Wise Use Guidelines also emphasized the benefits and values of wetlands for sediment and erosion control; flood control; maintenance of water quality and abatement of pollution; maintenance of surface and underground water supply; support for fisheries, grazing and agriculture; outdoor recreation and education for human society; and climatic stability.

The Ramsar Secretariat assists the Contracting Parties in implementing the original Guidelines and Additional Guidance and their subsequent commitments on the wise use of wetlands by:

- providing expertise, either through Ramsar technical personnel and its network or through external consultants;
- making available the further guidelines adopted by the Conference of the Parties on many aspects of wetland conservation and wise use;
- funding projects through the Ramsar Small Grants Fund, Wetlands for the Future, and Swiss Grant for Africa; and
- seeking third-party funding for wise use projects.

The original Wise Use Guidelines and Additional Guidance documents were ground-breaking in their time, but they have since been partially superseded by the wide array of related guidance that has subsequently been adopted by the Conference of the Parties, and Resolution IX.1 Annex A, *A Conceptual Framework for the wise use of wetlands and the maintenance of their ecological character* (2005), represents an attempt to provide a coherent context for all of these various aspects.

The continuing work of the Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) in elaborating and refining the concept of wise use can be found in many of these additional guidance documents that have been adopted by the COP, now published as the *Handbooks for the Wise Use of Wetlands*. The Conceptual Framework can be found on the Ramsar Web site at [www.ramsar.org/key\\_guide\\_framework\\_wiseuse\\_e.htm](http://www.ramsar.org/key_guide_framework_wiseuse_e.htm) and in Handbook 1 of the Ramsar Toolkit, [www.ramsar.org/lib/lib\\_handbooks2006\\_e01.pdf](http://www.ramsar.org/lib/lib_handbooks2006_e01.pdf).

**Note:** The "wise use" principle inscribed in Article 3.1 of the Convention in 1971, and its definition and application by the Conference of the Contracting Parties, have been established and have evolved completely independently from the so-called "wise use movement" that has emerged in recent years in North America. The use of the same term does not necessarily indicate that there is any commonality of understanding and/or purpose.

**The original 1987 definition of the wise use of wetlands first established the important Ramsar principle that its purpose was "for the benefit of mankind": "The wise use of wetlands is their sustainable utilization for the benefit of mankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem" (Recommendation 3.3, 1987, now superseded).**

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