

JOINT IOP STATEMENT AT THE 51st RAMSAR STANDING COMMITTEE

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Thank you for this opportunity to address the new Standing Committee for 2015-2018 on behalf of the six International Organisation Partners. We warmly welcome you and look forward to working with you and the Secretariat to achieve our ambitious Strategic Plan objectives adopted by the 12th meeting of the Conference of Parties.

With the increasing pressures being placed on the world's natural environment and resources, and the challenges all parties to this Convention face in addressing them, the responsibilities and roles of the Standing Committee have never been so important over the coming time leading to the 13th CoP In 2018.

The achievements of the Ramsar Convention, the world's first Multilateral Environment Agreement, are considerable. Our network of wetlands covers over 200 million hectares, in over 2,000 sites, across 169 countries. Working together we have helped to safeguard huge swathes of our world.

However, as we all know, wetlands are still being lost faster than any other ecosystem. The world is experiencing a period of substantial change. Current political unrest and uncertainty, together with increasing corporate globalisation and consequent demands on water and other natural resources, are bringing about rapid and frequently adverse impacts on biodiversity and the lives of people. The challenge of climate change could make matters even worse.

How can Ramsar best address these challenges. We believe we need to look forward with new ambition and new answers. In the words of one of the Convention's oldest champions, Dr Luc Hoffmann, "the treaty will have to adapt itself continually in order to do justice to the wetlands' vital importance in today's world."

In the new Strategic Plan we have the key components of a way for wetland conservation to turn a corner, and really become wetland restoration.

The opportunity is to share our new understanding of the "wise use of wetlands" and to integrate that new understanding in national policy. Let us take the meaning of wise use to its fullest, that it is not just about managing the way we exploit the wetlands we already have. That is simply maintaining the status quo.

Goal 3 of the Strategic Plan states that wise use requires that Parties ensure they are addressing wetlands beyond those currently included in the Ramsar Site network. It is not just about conserving the very best but about all wetlands that help to sustain the world's biodiversity, economies and ultimately our own species.

The Conference of the Parties has stated that “wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character”, but wise use must also be about creating new wetlands as an intelligent way to deal with society’s biggest challenges.

Of course we must continue to address the direct drivers of wetland loss—development, agriculture, pollution, abstraction and invasive species. But we must also create new drivers of wetland creation and restoration. These will include planning rules, communication, and economic incentives.

The Australian government now promotes Water-Sensitive Urban Design as an active solution to natural disasters like flooding, drought and extreme temperatures. This approach is now required for all new development and cities like Melbourne are enthusiastically embracing habitat creation as part of drainage and water treatment.

However, actions like this are still isolated initiatives. In the UK, London is working on a Sustainable Drainage Action Plan, but the national Government is introducing legislation to speed the development of 300,000 houses a year, without yet recognising the potential for natural water management. To turn round the state of wetlands, their importance must be built in to this kind of plan every time.

We urge the Parties to incorporate the importance of wetlands in all aspects of their domestic policy: planning, education, economy and environment. We invite the Parties to learn from each other and to draw on the expertise that the IOPs have to offer in embedding an ambitious approach to wetland creation in national policy across Government. We can all make wise use of new wetlands in meeting our social and economic goals.

This leads on to a second challenge: to integrate the importance of wetlands in other international agendas and to strengthen international environmental cooperation.

Leonardo da Vinci wrote that “Water is the driving force of all nature”.

So, let us make Ramsar the driving force of international cooperation for nature.

The facts are familiar:

- wetlands occupy a small part of the Earth’s surface, but support a huge number of species. Freshwater habitats occupy 1% of the Earth’s surface, yet are hotspots that support 10% of all known species, and 30% of vertebrate species”.
- peat wetlands alone store more carbon in the soil than rainforests do. They store a third of the world’s total despite only taking up 3% of the world’s surface.

As our “sustainable livelihoods” theme for **World Wetlands Day 2016** recognises, Wetlands are a life-support system for the future of humanity and particularly for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people.

Ramsar action is critical for combating threats like climate change, poverty, desertification and biodiversity loss. The oldest Multilateral Environmental Agreement has much to offer the newest.

Our model for cooperation between NGOs, governments, business and between international agreements can make Ramsar a lynchpin of international environmental ambition.

2016 will be the 50th anniversary year of the International Waterbird Census, the longest running global citizen science programme. Wetland International plan to launch a campaign, “IWC – Let’s make it count” to celebrate this initiative as part of a wider campaign for wetlands. Wetland International will only be acting as the catalyst for the campaign. We want all governments, partners, and indeed potentially the private sector to join the action for wetlands and waterbirds. We believe that Ramsar has a prominent role to play in achieving this.

Recent events around the world underline our need to redouble collective action.

Meanwhile, economic pressures are making Governments look again at international agreements. The UK is planning a referendum on European Union membership. The EU is re-evaluating the Birds and Habitats Directives, the Union’s most important environmental laws. The response to that review showed the amazing power of partnership between Governments, NGOs and citizens. Ministers from around the continent joined with over 520,000 people and hundreds of NGOs in defence of the Nature Directives.

The Ramsar model presents great opportunities for this kind of coordinated action, between countries, civil society and individual citizens. The communications, education, participation and awareness raising agenda will be essential in making this work, and should include other multilateral agreements and national governments among its audiences, as well as communities. We offer our support to the Parties in considering how to make this a core part of delivery of the Strategic Action Plan.

The Strategic Plan presents a powerful roadmap. It can provide opportunities for cooperation at all levels and it sets actions and targets that speak of a world of better wetland management, as part of a greener future.

To make that vision a reality, we need to make the best of the old and the new.

We must draw on the Convention's strong history of site-protection and partnership, while raising our sights to spearhead innovative, ambitious action for wetland restoration, in communities, civil society and across Government — locally, nationally and around the world.

Together, we can make the next phase of the Ramsar Convention our most successful yet.

Thank you very much.