

Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)
4th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties
Montreux, Switzerland
27 June – 4 July 1990

Recommendation 4.2: Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance

RECALLING that the Third Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties approved Recommendation 3.1 which called for the establishment of a Working Group “to examine the ways in which the criteria and guidelines for identifying wetlands of international importance might be elaborated, and the wise use provisions of the Convention applied, in order to improve the worldwide application of the Convention”;

NOTING that a “Working Group on Criteria and Wise Use” was established by the Standing Committee at its Third Meeting on 5 June 1987, with the participation of seven Contracting Parties (Australia, Chile, Iran, Mauritania, Norway, Poland and USA - one from each of the Standing Committee’s regions);

AWARE that the Working Group met on the occasion of the Fourth Meeting of the Standing Committee in Costa Rica in January 1988 and elected Norway as Chairman of the Working Group, and that observers from many other Contracting Parties took part in this meeting of the Working Group, as well as in subsequent deliberations;

TAKING NOTE of the Report of the Working Group, circulated to all Contracting Parties with Bureau Notification 1989/3 (31 March 1989), and revised according to comments received from Contracting Parties;

EXPRESSING ITS APPRECIATION to the Working Group and its Chairman for their work in clarifying the criteria and developing the guidelines on wise use;

THE CONFERENCE OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES

RECOMMENDS that the “Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance”, contained in Annex I of the Working Group’s report, discussed at the present meeting of the Conference and appended as Annex I to the present document, be used for identification of wetlands to be designated for the List under Article 2 of the Convention;

FURTHER RECOMMENDS that, as far as possible, further amendments to these Criteria be avoided so as to facilitate establishing a definite basis for uniform application of the Convention; and

DRAWS SPECIAL ATTENTION to Annex II of the Working Group’s report, also discussed at the present meeting of the Conference and appended as Annex II to the present document, and recommends that the Contracting Parties focus particularly on subsequent action after designation which will maintain the ecological character of designated wetlands.

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Introduction

Article 2.1 of the Convention states that “Each Contracting Party shall designate suitable wetlands within its territory for inclusion in a “List of Wetlands of International Importance”. The guidance provided by the Convention text on identification of “wetlands of international importance” is in Article 2.2, which refers to “international significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology” and indicates that “In the first instance, wetlands of international importance to waterfowl at any season should be included”. The Criteria set out below, which have been approved by the Conference of the Contracting Parties, are for identifying wetlands of international importance.

Criteria

A wetland is identified as being of international importance if it meets at least one of the criteria set out below:

1. Criteria for representative or unique wetlands

A wetland should be considered internationally important if:

- (a) it is a particularly good representative example of a natural or near-natural wetland, characteristic of the appropriate biogeographical region;
- or (b) it is a particularly good representative example of a natural or near-natural wetland, common to more than one biogeographical region;
- or (c) it is a particularly good representative example of a wetland, which plays a substantial hydrological, biological or ecological role in the natural functioning of a major river basin or coastal system, especially where it is located in a trans-border position;
- or (d) it is an example of a specific type of wetland, rare or unusual in the appropriate biogeographical region.

2. General criteria based on plants or animals

A wetland should be considered internationally important if:

- (a) it supports an appreciable assemblage of rare, vulnerable or endangered species or subspecies of plant or animal, or an appreciable number of individuals of any one or more of these species;
- or (b) it is of special value for maintaining the genetic and ecological diversity of a region because of the quality and peculiarities of its flora and fauna;

- or (c) it is of special value as the habitat of plants or animals at a critical stage of their biological cycle;
- or (d) it is of special value for one or more endemic plant or animal species or communities.

3. Specific Criteria Based on Waterfowl

A wetland should be considered internationally important if:

- (a) it regularly supports 20,000 waterfowl;
- or (b) it regularly supports substantial numbers of individuals from particular groups of waterfowl, indicative of wetland values, productivity or diversity;
- or (c) where data on populations are available, it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterfowl.

Guidelines for Application of the Criteria

To assist Contracting Parties in assessing the suitability of wetlands for inclusion on the List of Wetlands of International Importance, the Conference of the Contracting Parties has formulated the following guidelines for application of the Criteria:

- (a) A wetland could be considered of international importance under Criterion 1 if, because of its outstanding role in natural, biological, ecological or hydrological systems, it is of substantial value in supporting human communities dependent on the wetland. In this context, such support would include:
 - provision of food, fibre or fuel;
 - or maintenance of cultural values;
 - or support of food chains, water quality, flood control or climatic stability.

The support, in all its aspects, should remain within the framework of sustainable use and habitat conservation, and should not change the ecological character of the wetland.
- or (b) A wetland could be considered of international importance under Criterion 1, 2 or 3 if it conforms to additional guidelines developed at regional (e.g. Scandinavian or West African) or national level. Elaboration of such regional or national guidelines may be especially appropriate:
 - where particular groups of animals (other than waterfowl) or plants are considered more suitable as a basis for evaluation;
 - or where waterfowl and other animals do not occur in large concentrations (particularly in northern latitudes);
 - or where collection of data is difficult (particularly in very large countries).

- or (c) The “particular groups of waterfowl, indicative of wetland values, productivity or diversity” in Criterion 3(b) include any of the following:
- loons or divers: Gaviidae;
 - grebes: Podicipedidae;
 - cormorants: Phalacrocoracidae
 - pelicans: Pelecanidae
 - herons, bitterns, storks, ibises and spoonbills: Ciconiiformes;
 - swans, geese and ducks (wildfowl): Anatidae;
 - wetland related raptors: Accipitriformes and Falconiformes
 - cranes: Gruidae
 - shorebirds or waders: Charadrii; and
 - terns: Sternidae.
- or (d) The specific criteria based on waterfowl numbers will apply to wetlands of varying size in different Contracting Parties. While it is impossible to give precise guidance on the size of an area in which these numbers may occur, wetlands identified as being of international importance under Criterion 3 should form an ecological unit, and may thus be made up of one big area or a group of smaller wetlands. Consideration may also be given to turnover of waterfowl at migration periods, so that a cumulative total is reached, if such data are available.

DESIGNATION OF WETLANDS FOR THE LIST AND SUBSEQUENT ACTION

It is important to emphasize that, when a wetland fulfils the “Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance”, it remains the prerogative of the Contracting Party (or Parties), in whose territory (or territories) it is situated, to decide upon its designation for the List. The following considerations may help the Contracting Parties in deciding on designation and action to be taken following designation:

1. The Convention leaves each Contracting Party free to decide on the legal status or protection measures which are appropriate at the time of designation. Contracting Parties have adopted a wide variety of approaches to this matter: among these the following may be mentioned:
 - (a) the wetland may already enjoy legal protection at national level (or at state or provincial level in a Contracting Party with a federal system);
 - (b) the wetland, when legally protected, may include one or more core areas with stricter regulations, and a surrounding buffer zone where regulations are less strict;
 - (c) the wetland need not have specific protection (e.g. as a national park or nature reserve) at national level (or at state or provincial level in a Contracting Party with a federal system); the Convention’s aims can, however, be achieved by applying existing general legislation (e.g. by limiting the discretionary powers of the authorities concerned); and
 - (d) the wetland may be in public or private ownership.
2. The Convention text provides guidance on measures to be taken at a wetland once it has been listed. Article 3.1 states that Contracting Parties “shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List”, while Article 3.2 stipulates that information shall be passed without delay to the Bureau “if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the List has been changed, is changing or is likely to change as a result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference”. The principal undertaking of Contracting Parties with respect to listed wetlands is to promote their conservation with the aim of preventing changes to their ecological character.
3. Article 4.1 of the Convention states that “Each Contracting Party shall promote the conservation of wetlands and waterfowl by establishing nature reserves on wetlands, whether they are included in the List or not”. Establishment of nature reserves (whether strict or less strict) is one way of maintaining the ecological character of listed wetlands. Provided its ecological character is maintained, wise use of the wetland is possible, and indeed maintenance of traditional land use practices and values may be the best way to guarantee ecological character. At each listed wetland, consideration should be given to the need for management; if management measures are deemed appropriate, a management plan should be developed and put into action.