

Review of the Himalayan Wetlands Conservation Initiative

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Abstract

The ecological function and services of Himalayan mountain wetlands are essential for the sustainable development of more than 10 countries in Asia, which concerns at least 140 million people who live in the mountain ranges, and 1.4 billion people live downstream. Unfortunately, the environmental trend in the region caused by both economic development on the ground, and the global warming clearly indicate significant degradation of the ecosystem function and services. To stop such trend, or mitigate its negative impact needs urgent trans-boundary cooperation. Among a number of initiatives to look at this issue, Himalayan Initiative is one of them. This document is to provide a brief review of the Himalayan Initiative, and to provide recommendations, through analyzing the initiative development against the “guidance for the development of regional initiative in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands” adopted in the 8th Conference of the Parties (Ramsar Resolution VIII 30). Results indicate that innovative partnership and networking which mobilizes political wills, stakeholder involvement, financial resources, is the pre-requisites condition to achieve the goal of the initiative.

I. Introduction

The Himalayas Initiative refers in this document covers mountain system of Himalaya, Hindu Kush, and Pamir Alay in Asia, comprising a series of parallel and converging ranges and forming the highest mountain region in the world, where over 140 million people live (ICIMOD, 2004). These high altitude wetlands are unique ecosystems. They are important sources of water for many rivers, and have cultural and spiritual values for local peoples.

Global warming, or rise in temperature, impact directly on these high altitude wetlands and glaciers. In recent years, there has been a rapid rise in the melting rate of the Himalayan glaciers. Those glaciers, some 15,000 of them, constitute the largest body of ice in the world, apart from the two polar caps. The Himalayan mountain ranges are source of water for more than 1.4 billion people (IUCN et al. 2003), and the mountain system is a source of many rivers, most notably the Indus, Ganges, Amu Darya, Salween, Kabul, Konar, and Brahmaputra, the Mekong, Yangtze and Yellow river.

The Himalayas have many marsh, peat and lake wetlands, which make it a unique ecosystem that fulfills important functions in the overall water cycle of the basins, and provide habitats for wildlife. However, these wetlands have received little attention so far in terms of their conservation and management, but they are increasingly becoming important due to the possible consequences of the global climate change, and globalization in economic development. Conservation of these unique

spaces needs special effort by the whole societies. They need support, both technical and financial. Some of the lakes and wetlands are trans-boundary extending into more than one country, while in other places the catchments are shared by more than one country. To address the situation, regional cooperation and urgent measures from more than one country is required. Therefore, the government of China, and WWF International took the initiative in 2002, organized the first regional workshop, Urumqi Workshop, which kicked off the processes to develop a regional initiative aiming at conservation and wise use of Himalayan mountain wetlands (Himalayan Initiative). This document is to provide a brief review of this initiative, and to provide recommendations, through the analyzing the initiative development against the “guidance for the development of regional initiative in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands” adopted in the 8th Conference of the Parties (Ramsar Resolution VIII 30).

II. The Processes: From Urumqi to Evian

2.1 Urumqi Workshop: Urumqi Call

The workshop was jointly organized by the Ramsar Bureau, WWF-International and the Government of China (through the Ramsar Implementing Office in the State Forestry Administration). Each country was requested to provide a national report on High Altitude Wetlands well before the workshop. A common pro forma was prepared with the consultation of countries for the national reports.

More than 35 participants attended the workshop. Each participating country presented a country report, highlighting the importance of the area, the threats to the wetland systems, and their limited resources for their management and conservation management. Three WWF country offices presented their work and initiatives for the conservation of High Altitude Wetland areas (WWF & Ramsar, 2003).

All the participants strongly felt that there is an urgent need to set up a form or any type of structure to promote regional cooperation and provide platform for addressing the regional issues. They also felt that the area of work is very vast and none of the countries present in the High Altitude Wetlands area have resources for their conservation and management. It can only be possible through a joint regional project under the umbrella of regional cooperation □ this is the only way to conserve a fragile ecosystem jointly for future generations. Therefore, the participants formulated an “Urmqi Call”.

Urumqi Call for the Conservation of High Altitude Wetlands, Lakes and Catchments in the Himalayan region (below, Box 1).

Box 1, Urumqi Call

We, the participants from Bhutan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Pakistan, in the “Workshop on Conservation of High Altitude Wetlands and Lakes in the Himalayan Region”, held in Urumqi, China from 4 to 8 August 2002, having shared the information, reviewed the current situation related to this unique ecosystems and their role in cultural, spiritual, biological, economic aspects and expressed the urgency and agreed for a “Urumqi Call”;

Recognise the special need to conserve High Altitude Wetlands in the light of climate change and its impact on water crisis. Most of the important rivers in the region - Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra - originate from these high altitude wetlands and lakes. Unless these sources are properly conserved, the water security of more than one billion people in the region could further lead to a crisis situation. Therefore, we recognise the critical role of these areas in water resources management of this region, home of more than 20 per cent of the world’s population;

We have noted that High Altitude Wetlands:

- have significant cultural, religious and spiritual significance □ they are a source of inspiration.
- sustains the biodiversity of the region and some of the most endangered species in the world;
- have great potential for fostering regional co-operation and promotion of peace in the region;

We have identified more than 200 sites in the region of international importance for their biodiversity and cultural significance, to become Ramsar sites and UNESCO world heritage sites. Furthermore, to initiate joint action, more than 15 sites have been identified for transboundary co-operation.

We have agreed that there is an urgent need to initiate a “Himalayan wetlands and Lakes Forum” (Himwetlaks) to conserve High Altitude Wetlands and Lakes in the region. The Forum would consist of all the countries in the region □ Bhutan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan □ as well as local, regional, and international organisations working in there. The Forum would meet once in year in one of the countries willing to host the meeting. The Forum may have the following objectives: information exchange, technical support, initiation of regional projects, awareness raising, fund raising, etc.

We also call on other agencies in this Year of Mountains, who are working in these areas, to join hands and conserve the unique ecosystems of High Altitude Wetlands. (done in Urumqi, China, on 8 August 2002).

2.2 Kathmandu Workshop: Framework for an action plan on “Wetland Conservation and Wise Use in the Himalayan High Mountains”

In order to implement the Urumqi Call and the Ramsar resolution VIII.12, WWF International, the Ramsar Bureau and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) jointly organized a follow-up workshop on ‘Wetland Conservation and Wise Use in the Himalayan High Mountains’ from August 30 to September 1, 2003, in Kathmandu. The workshop was attended by 34 participants from 11 countries comprising government representatives from Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, and Kyrgyzstan and representatives of national and international agencies and institutions including the World Conservation Union (IUCN), Wetlands International, National Institute of Environmental Studies in Japan, International Institute for Geo-information Science and Earth Observation (ITC) of the Netherlands, The Mountain Institute (TMI), WWF national offices of India, Pakistan, and China, Nanjing Institute of Geography and Limnology (China), and Jawahar Lal University (India). Government representatives from Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Tajikistan expressed an interest in being involved in the process but were unable to attend the meeting (ICIMOD *et al*, 2003).

Goals and Objectives

The overall goal of the workshop was to strengthen regional cooperation on the conservation and sustainable use of high mountain wetlands in the Himalayan region.

Specific objectives are:

- to strengthen the regional network initiated in the Urumqi workshop;
- to identify sites that can be declared as Ramsar sites, with an emphasis on trans-boundary cooperation;
- to seek a consensus on establishing a regional center (on wetland conservation in the Himalayan high mountains); and
- to discuss and approve a concept note for further development of a joint project for water resource management of highland lakes.

Agreed Outcomes and Follow-up Actions:

- List of the Ramsar and potential Ramsar sites in the high mountains: Countries have agreed that the list of sites identified in Urumqi will be further examined and an action plan will be prepared to include new sites in the future.
- Transboundary sites: Countries emphasized the need to work on transboundary wetland sites, in particular to list them as Ramsar Sites.
- Highland lake initiative: ICIMOD presented a draft project concept note on ‘Freshwater Resource Management and Wise Use of Highland Lakes in Great Asian Mountains’. Participants agreed in principle on the concept note, and suggested new components and ways to go forward for further development of a revised concept note by the end of October 2003. Efforts will be made to prepare a full proposal by the end of 2003.

- Regional Center: Countries agreed in principle that there is a need to establish a regional center for high mountain wetlands. It was decided that further details of the regional center (such as the scope, functions, location, and others, and opportunities to link this to the highland lake initiative) would be discussed by a task force .
- Continuation of the Regional Forum: It was agreed that this Regional Forum should meet again within a year; the final dates and venue will be decided later.

2.3 Sanya Workshop: Define Regional Facilities & Framework of regional initiative

This workshop focused on the theme “Wetland conservation and Wise Use in the Himalayan and Central Asian Highland” was held in Sanya (14-18 February 2004), in the People’s Republic of China, with joint effort by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), WWF International, Ramsar Convention Bureau, and the Government of the People’s Republic of China. Chinese Academy of Sciences provided technical as well as logistical support. About 30 people participated in the workshop. They were scientists and officials from regional countries, Bhutan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan of Hindu-Kush-Himalaya-Pamir-Alay region and representatives from, WWF International, WWF India, WWF China, WWF Hongkong, WWF Nepal, WWF Pakistan, IUCN and ITC, as well as scientists from India and the Chinese Academy of Sciences (ICIMOD *et al*, 2004).

Specific objectives of this technical workshop were to finalize the following two draft proposals:

- Establishment of a Regional Wetland Centre in Great Asian Mountains to set up a proper institutional base to assist the regional governments in a) improving regional co-operation, b) harmonizing the data collection and reporting c) training and capacity building.
- ‘Water Resources Management and Wise Use of Highland Lakes in Great Asian Mountains’. The project document will a) generate a credible knowledge base, b) suitable technical options and c) policy development and advocacy.

Conclusion of the Workshop

2.3.1 Agreed Overall goal

Conservation and wise use of the high altitude wetlands in the Himalaya-Hindu Kush-Pamir-Alay region.

2.3.2 Agreed objectives

OBJECTIVE 1 – Inventorying and collection of information

- Identification of information needs
- Development and agreement on the Guidelines for High Altitude Wetlands inventories (data to collect, data standards, data organization, data structures and compatibility, etc)
- Pilot testing and refinement of Guidelines
- High Altitude Wetlands inventories
- Data base creation, updating and expansion
- Dissemination of information and results through different media and languages

OBJECTIVE 2 – Regional cooperation, networking and capacity building

- Develop a common vision on High Altitude wetlands conservation and wise use
- Facilitate networking among national, regional and international partners.
- Training needs assessment
- Organizing courses and other training events on the prioritized areas

OBJECTIVE 3 – Research and generation of information on High Altitude Wetlands functions and values

OBJECTIVE 4 – Management of High Altitude Wetlands

- Formulation of comprehensive Management plans for conservation of HA Wetlands
- Development of Guidelines for effective management and wise use of HA Wetlands
- Development monitoring mechanisms to track the conservation and health of HA Wetlands
- Identification and inscription of HA Wetlands as Ramsar Sites
- Support appropriate management of Ramsar Sites

OBJECTIVE 5 – Awareness and participation

- Develop and implement an awareness generation strategy including all types of means (publications, videos, theatre, music, etc) and targeting different social groups and organizations.
- Develop material resources for awareness and training of different social groups

OBJECTIVE 6 – Policy

- Develop policy recommendations for conservation and management of HA Wetlands, based on research results, field management experience and other sources.

2.4 Evian Encounter: Reconfirming and consolidating Himalayan Initiative

The Evian Encounters are an important component of a Ramsar Convention project financed by the Groupe Danone, owner of the Evian Mineral Waters Society. The Encounters, of which this was the fifth since 1998, are designed to bring together high-level officials of the Convention's Contracting Parties, along with the Convention's NGO International Organisation Partners and other relevant international organizations, so as to discuss in an informal atmosphere the current approaches and challenges in the implementation of the Ramsar Convention. The 2004 Evian Encounter meeting provided the opportunity for a valuable further step in consolidating the initiative, and to define its *modus operandi*, so as to support effective regional cooperation on the conservation and wise use of wetlands in the Himalayas' shared watersheds and river basins (Ramsar, 2004).

The general consensus amongst the countries of the region on the need for a regional Himalayan wetlands initiative was re-affirmed.

Discussion on further development of the Initiative focussed on developing a regional strategy for delivery of the common vision; the geographical and altitudinal (high altitude and downstream) scope and focus; identification of additional key objectives to those developed by the Sanya

workshop; simplifying coordination and governance structures, and the next steps towards Ramsar COP9, including priorities for project development for initiating implementation.

Developing a Regional Strategy for Himalayan wetlands

It was agreed that a Regional Strategy is needed to identify how to deliver the common Vision for the Initiative (which itself also needs to be developed), and the Initiative's objectives. It should set the context within which to set priorities, and to develop regional projects.

The key priority issues which, from the countries' perspectives, would benefit from regional action and which should be identified in the Strategy were identified as: climate change impacts and adaptation responses; approaches to enforcement of legislation; engaging participatory involvement of all stakeholders; empowering high-altitude wetland custodian communities through incentives and education and awareness and capacity building; development of policy and management plans; inventory and assessment; cultural values of wetlands; traditional knowledge, including traditional medicine; hydrological aspects in management of wetlands, the role of wetlands in groundwater recharge and aquifers; the role of wetlands in poverty alleviation and wealth generation; engaging improved awareness of wetland values and services at local government level; promoting downstream and upstream linkages; and addressing common issues of ecological safety (wetlands-related disasters).

In support of the Strategy, it was agreed that an early step in the Initiative should be to undertake a systematic analysis of relevant ongoing projects and Initiatives in the regions, and to undertake a "Key gaps analysis", and to then identify donors interested in supporting work on the topics relevant to the initiative priority issues.

Confirming the Objectives of the Initiative

The Encounter confirmed that the Initiative objectives developed at the Sanya Workshop were appropriate, but three additional objective topics were identified and which should be addressed at a regional scale through the Initiative:

- Community-driven participatory management (building especially from Thailand's experiences);
- Valuation of wetland ecosystem services as a tool for informing decision-making;
- Linking upstream – downstream – upstream livelihood support

A description of each of these objectives needs to be developed and added to the suite of 'Sanya workshop objectives'.

III. Actions

3.1 Site Designation and Membership Accession to Ramsar Convention

Up to December 2004, China has completed the procedures for the designation of 8 high altitude wetland sites; Kyrgyzstan is working on the designation of two high altitude wetland sites. Besides, India and Pakistan are working a number of sites.

In early November 2004, Myanmar government submitted their accession documents to the UNESCO.

3.2 Project proposals

- “Wetland Inventory in the Himalayan region” has been submitted to European Commission by Wetlands International, ICIMOD and other international partners, in October, 2004.
- “Conservation and management of Himalayan mountain lakes”, drafted by ICIMOD, need more information on the progress.
- “Capacity building for the high altitude wetland managers” has been prepared by Ramsar Convention Secretariat and WWF. Funds have been committed by Danone and WWF International.

IV. Analysis of the regional initiative in comparison to Ramsar Guidelines

During the 8th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties, a resolution on “regional initiative for further implementation of the convention” was adopted (Ramsar Resolution VIII 30). This resolution endorsed a “*Guidance for the development of Regional Initiatives in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands*”. A comparative analysis of the Himalayan Initiative against this guidance will be helpful to understand where they are, and how the initiative been developed. The comparative analysis consists of following four parts:

4.1 On the aim of the initiative

Key factor set by the Guidance	Current situation of the initiative
to promote the objectives of the Convention in general and to implement the Ramsar Strategic Plan in particular, through regional and sub-regional cooperation on wetland-related issues of common concern?	Yes

4.2 On Substantial Elements, there are a number of key factors to assess:

Key factor set by the Guidance	Current situation of the initiative
A Bottom-up Approach?	YES
Participation of Ramsar Administrative Authorities, & Other Stakeholders?	YES
Creating Enabling Environ. For the involvement of all stakeholders at all level?	In processes
Seek Cooperation with other Intergovernmental, International Partners?	YES

Based upon Strong Scientific and technical Backing?	In Processes
Strategic and Operational Targets should be fully aligned with Ramsar Strategic Plan?	YES

4.3 On financial and other Support:

Key factor set by the Guidance	Current situation of the initiative
Political and Financial Support from CPs and Other Partners in the region?	?, partially
Substantial Support from hosting country is especially important?	?, not yet confirmed
Launching of the initiative should rely upon secured start-up funding for planned activities?	Develop project proposals
Financial support from Convention's core budget, should the CoP so decide, will be?	Propose a COP9 resolution?

4.4 On governance:

Key factor set by the Guidance	Current situation of the initiative
Establish advisory mechanisms, involving all stakeholders?	In processes
Coordination between the initiative and the Convention?	Yes

V. Recommendations

From the above analysis, following gaps remain:

- Creating an enabling environment for the involvement of all stakeholders at all level?
- Based upon strong scientific and technical backing?
- Political and financial support from CPs and other partners in the region?
- Launching of the initiative should rely upon secured start-up funding for planned activities?
- Financial support from Convention's core budget?
- Establish advisory mechanisms, involving all stakeholders?

Therefore, development of the Himalayan Initiative will be depends on how we fill the above gaps in the near future. Specific recommendations to fill the above gaps are:

5.1 Development of a common vision

This is the most effective mean to create an enabling environment for the involvement of all stakeholders at all level. The processes to develop a common vision, though sharing of knowledge, define common concerns and the future ideal scenarios that all stakeholders would like to achieve through the cooperation, will gradually get all stakeholders on board. In particular, partnership with scientific societies, and with local communities are essential for the development of the common vision.

5.2 Gaining political support and initiative authorisation

'Himalayan Initiative Framework Agreement' should be drafted for endorsement by national governments.

5.3 Generate financial resources /joint project proposals

Since there are no donor countries in the Himalayan region – so any donor funding will need to come from outside the region covered by the Initiative. Apart from develop joint project proposals, we should first focus on:

- Existing and/or completed projects and mechanisms relevant to the Initiative should be identified and used to build upon as much as possible as initial contributions to implementation, and so as to demonstrate the added value of the Initiative.
- As far as possible existing and imminent projects should be used to profile and demonstrate that implementation of some of the Initiative's objectives are attracting donor funding support. Notably, the current Danone/WWF project will support further networking and capacity building in the coming year, including through its planned technical workshop in June 2005. Likewise the Wetlands International/ICIMOD inventory proposal, if funded, would demonstrate an important kick-start to that objective of the Initiative.
- The June 2005 workshop provides an opportunity to plan a technical and scientific programme, including preparation of a list of brief project concepts (and summaries of current projects) relevant to the delivery of each of the Initiative's objectives.
- A multi-country regional project, designed to support further development and initial implementation of the initiative, should be developed as a priority.
- Seek the recognition of the Ramsar Convention at COP9 for support for further development of the Initiative. Two options exist for COP9 support: endorsement of the Initiative and encouragement for its further development (i.e. as was done for the High Andean initiative by COP8); or such endorsement plus a request for financial support for the start-up of the Initiative from a core budget line for 2005-2008 for regional initiatives.

5.4 Developing coordination and governance mechanisms

Based on the experience from MedWet and High Andean Initiative (below, box 2), Himalayan Initiative should have a simple and evolving governance and coordination structure at first, and then

develop this as and when resources become available, and to focus on initially developing and funding some initial projects to start delivery of priority objectives.

Box 2. The experience of the progressive development of the Ramsar Convention's Mediterranean Wetland Initiative (MedWet) and the issues emerging from the development of the High Andean wetlands initiative, noting that a coordination unit for MedWet was not financially feasible at the outset – rather the function was first delivered through initial and progressive donor-funded project coordination. With the maturing and growth of MedWet, a coordination unit was later established and which is financed from several sources: ongoing projects overheads; generous support of the host country (Greece) where the MedWet Coordination Unit office is based; additional annual contributions from all Mediterranean Ramsar Parties; and an allocation from the Ramsar core budget line for the regional initiative for 2002-2005. It has taken some time to establish such a structure and secure these funds. Similarly, the Medwet advisory committee was created subsequent to the initial development of the initiative, and its meetings still need to be funded through additional voluntary contributions from donor countries in the regional and elsewhere.

VI. Conclusions

Himalayan Initiative tackles ecological and environmental degradation in the roof of the world, which address issues that at least from more than 10 countries per se, but also closely linked to global warming and its impact on downstream. To deal with such extensive and complex system, innovative partnership and networking which mobilizes political wills, stakeholder involvement, financial resources, are the pre-requisites conditions. The “guidance for the development of regional initiative in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands” adopted in the 8th Conference of the Parties provided a powerful tool to steer the direction of the initiative development.

Acknowledgement

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