

**5th European Regional Meeting
on the implementation and effectiveness of the Ramsar Convention**

4-8 December 2004, Yerevan, Armenia

Aims of the Meeting

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Dear Participants

Our host, the Armenian Ministry of Nature Protection, and the Ramsar Secretariat are happy to welcome you to this conference, the fifth in a series of meetings bringing together all countries in Ramsar's European Region, following earlier gatherings in Lelystad (the Netherlands 1992), Varna (Bulgaria 1995), Riga (Latvia 1998) and Bled (Slovenia 2001). Since the early 1960s, conservationists from European countries have been at the forefront to create the Convention on Wetlands. And still today, we should provide it with direction, in order that it remains a modern instrument for wetland conservation.

Regular occasions to meet and exchange our experiences and views are a crucial part of our common work of international cooperation for a better and more equitable Europe. Besides the large global meetings of the Conference of the Parties, the occasion to gather in smaller groups, focusing on specific problems of the wetlands on our continent, provides an opportunity to take stock of our achievements and to define the needs for further efforts.

We are welcoming you to Yerevan, a city full of history and culture, but also a young capital in Europe's far East. Enjoy the Meeting and engage in lively exchanges, debates and reflections on "*wetlands and water - supporting life, sustaining livelihoods*", - the theme of the 9th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP9) in November 2005 in Kampala, Uganda. It reflects the necessities of the 21st century: how to integrate traditional nature conservation approaches with other policies - notably water resources management - in order to support biodiversity and to care for those wetland resources on which our livelihoods depend - as much in the wealthy metropolises of the European Union as in the deforested and arid rural areas of Europe's poorest regions.

What to focus on during this Meeting ?

How best to implement the Convention? Are we doing enough? Are our approaches still adapted to new pressures of an evolving situation in Europe and the World? Where can we do better? What are our constraints? How to overcome them? Where does the Ramsar Convention stand at the beginning of the 21st century? How to interact with our partners and other stakeholders?

The Meeting is first and foremost for the “Ramsar community” - all those of us responsible for the implementation of the obligations and recommendations embedded in the Convention principles, as spelt out in its text and elaborated in the guidelines adopted through a number of Resolutions of the eight meetings of the Conference of the Parties so far.

Let’s not get isolated and not preach only to those already converted. Let us sharpen our analysis of the work done and the efforts still to be undertaken, let’s identify the need to work with others, and to convince them of the utility of the approaches and principles enshrined in the Convention. After our exchanges and reflections here in Yerevan, let us go home to our capitals, to our ministries and administrations, to our institutes, to our river catchments, and to our specific wetland ecosystems, in order to continue our work at our individual level of responsibility; freshly enthused by new ideas and convictions obtained during this meeting.

How to organize our reflections and debate ?

Foremost, this Meeting should serve the purpose of direct, physical encounters and exchanges with our colleagues throughout Europe - linking North to South, West to East, rich to poor, dry to wet. Hopefully this will help to sharpen our understanding of the crucial problems and the solutions to be sought. Let us focus on what the Convention asks us to do. Let us measure our own achievements on the ground, at local, national and regional level: against the objectives and targets listed in the Convention’s Strategic Plan.

During the weeks following the Christmas break, we will have to report on this by using the *National Planning Tool* and *National Report Format for COP9* – the deadline for submission being the end of February 2005. This Meeting, therefore, provides a timely occasion to prepare us for the analysis to be done and the look forward to be prepared.

When presenting our own achievements in a specific field, let us always have in mind how this fits in the overall plan of the Convention? What can we contribute for others, to learn a lesson? What should we do differently, do better, or do in addition?

What outcomes are we looking for ?

We will address the Convention themes through a number of opening keynotes, trying to situate the Convention and its objectives in the modern world and to identify its specific niche among many, more recent initiatives and currently running programmes. Let us also recognize the increased stress and constraints imposed on many of us who are formally entrusted to implement the Convention.

Our notes taken during the Meeting, and the recommendations emanating from the workshops, should provide precise proposals on how to overcome such constraints, what to focus on, where to increase our efforts - technically and financially, and what to make

different in order to be more efficient? They will form part of the formal Meeting Report for COP9 and its debate at global level.

Specific themes to be addressed in different workshops

Eight workshops are planned to address major themes under work and analysis during this triennium (leading to COP9) by the experts of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). While draft documents for COP9 are not yet ready in many cases, this is a good opportunity to provide your input to the work of STRP. Many of STRP's European members and associated experts are with us during the Meeting and will introduce the workshop themes and guide our discussions. In addition, STRP focal points in each country will be contacted individually.

The workshop themes are somewhat overlapping. This is unavoidable, given that wetland conservation and wise use need to be undertaken by using an integrated approach. This provides you also with the opportunity to discuss similar themes in separate workshops, approaching them from different angles.

Although the workshop themes may not sound entirely new to you, their re-occurrence is a sign of their continued importance, and shows how crucial they are to achieve lasting conservation and sustainable development on the ground. Here are a few questions to provide an incentive for your own reflections:

5 December - Morning Session

RAMSAR'S WISE USE CONCEPT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Workshop A: National Wetland Policies and Committees - How efficient are they to further the implementation of the Convention at national level, why have many countries not set them up yet, what better approach could be suggested? How does my country elaborate and implement national wetland policies? What are my experiences with a national Ramsar Committee?

Workshop B: From wetlands for birds to water for people - Those who prepared the Convention in the 1960s were waterbird enthusiasts. Nowadays, we acknowledge that wetlands have much more to offer, and that wetland conservation and management is intrinsically linked to water management. Where do we stand after 25 years of implementation of the EU Wild Birds Directive, and with the new EU Water Framework Directive at our disposal? How are we going to work efficiently at river basin scale? What is the meaning of the "new division" of Europe (EU vs. non-EU)? How affect the policies of the "European Union of 25" the remaining European countries? Where - and how - do East and West meet today?

5 December - Afternoon Session

INCREASING OUR CAPACITY TO COPE WITH NEW REQUIREMENTS

Workshop C: The role and effectiveness of CEPA activities - Are we delivering our messages sufficiently clear, how much outreach - and to whom - is needed? What should be the role of communication, education and public awareness to increase our capacities, at all

levels, local, regional, national? Can we learn from programmes and experiences in other countries?

Workshop D: Shared catchments and wetland ecosystems - Many wetland sites and river basins are shared among neighbouring countries. What can we gain from increased transborder cooperation? How should it be undertaken? What guidance do I need to designate transboundary Ramsar Sites, and to manage them jointly with my neighbours? What formal agreements are needed? Which are the obstacles to increased transborder cooperation?

7 December - Morning Session

WETLAND INVENTORY AND ASSESSMENT

Workshop E: Wetland inventory and assessment - How are we progressing with wetland inventories at national scale? Are we making sufficient use of new tools, such as remote sensing data and low-cost GIS? Are we taking cultural aspects into account? How are we defining and monitoring ecological character? And how are we reporting on its change?

Workshop F: Implementing the strategic vision for the Ramsar List – What are the Ramsar Sites in my country contributing to biodiversity conservation (threatened species and habitats), to the preservation of social and cultural heritage, to support sustainable development and to reduce global environmental problems (climate change, greenhouse gases, desertification)? Which additional sites need to be added to the Ramsar List, how to make it truly representative?

7 December – Afternoon Session

WETLAND MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING

Workshop G: Monitoring the ecological character of wetland sites - How are we coping with increasing development pressures on designated Ramsar Sites and other wetlands? Are we successful in conserving those sites, if not why? How to cope with natural dynamics (succession, erosion) for sustainable site management? Are local stakeholders sufficiently involved? Has wetland management become a general concern, reflected by the decisions taken by local authorities? What are the ways of monitoring ecological character and its change?

Workshop H: Site management viewed from the catchment basin perspective - Wetland sites form part of water catchments. Is this reflected in our management approach, are the relevant interest groups working together with us? Is our water resources management taking wetland functions into account? Do we understand the relevant groundwater flows, and are they taken into account? How to connect river basin management with wetland management at local scale? Are water resources and flows allocated in a way to allow for continued wetland ecosystem functioning?

Having launched all these questions at you, we wish you are very interesting and successful meeting. Hopefully, by its closing session, we will have a number of responses, providing clear indications and recommendations on how to move forward.

