

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

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Workshop B Introduction

**From wetlands for birds to water for people - integrated water resource
management needs inside and outside of the European Union**

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International wetland policy has developed in the last four decades from a focus on wetland birds towards a tool for integrated water resource management for mankind and biodiversity.

Ramsar developments

The adoption of the Ramsar Convention in 1971 served as an important milestone in the international recognition of the values of wetlands.

It were mainly birds enthusiasts in the western world that had been the driving force in the sixties to prepare this international agreement in the Iranian city of Ramsar. Birds were (and still are) seen as a common heritage and a clearly visible part of our biodiversity. Birds are also powerful “messengers” to inform the public on environmental and biodiversity issues.

The main focus in the seventies and eighties was the designation of Ramsar sites as important habitat for (bird)species. These wetlands serve as core areas in the flyways of bird species, linking north and south. Knowledge and data on waterbirds were extremely important for the work. These data, collected and maintained already for many decades, are a very good example of an indicator of species and biodiversity development.

During the eighties and nineties attention focused more and more on the development of the “wise use “ concept of wetland areas, besides site designation. The importance of integrated water management was acknowledged. Both waterquantity and waterquality were seen interrelated and of great importance for the sustainable management of wetland areas and their dependant species. The wise use concept was developed in a similar integrated way with more and more focus on other services of wetlands for drinkingwater, flood regulation, fisheries and certain types of agriculture. The Sustainable Development summit in Rio in 1992 has accelerated this development and further linkages were developed with biodiversity policy and poverty alleviation, which also broadened the global support for the Convention. The role of NGO’s and business sector were recognized to reach the goals that had been set.

The importance of an integrated water resource management was further developed in Ramsar context, resulting e.g. in the guidelines on allocation of water. These guidelines form an important

result of the CoP8 in Valencia and the Ramsar guidelines. We will see a presentation of its implementation in the Republic of Moldova.

EU policies and European Region

A similar sequence can be seen in the EU policy. The Birds Directive in 1979 formed the first important legal framework in the EU to protect species and the habitat on which they depend. Again birds were in the forefront.

A more integrated approach was taken in the Habitat Directive of 1992. This legal framework aimed particularly on all habitats of importance for a wide range of species and their interrelation. The concept of an ecological network (Natura 2000) served as a basic tool to establish links between habitats. Both Directives have given a very important boost to implementation at national level and a legal response to other threats. Implementation is still continuing.

Water policy itself has developed rapidly in the EU in recent years. It resulted in the Water Framework Directive of 2000 and a “horizontal guidance on wetlands” document on the role of wetlands in the Framework Directive. On national level many examples exist towards a proactive approach on integrated water management and the role of wetlands. The shift from protection to development has been made. The focus on establishment of “ecological networks” towards a robust framework of natural areas appeared to go very well hand in hand with the needs for “flood mitigation” in several river systems like the Loire in France and Rhine/Waal in the Switzerland/Germany/Netherlands.

The enlargement of the EU and the voluntary programs of non-EU countries in Central and Eastern Europe to comply with the WFD approach, has also accelerated an integrated river basin approach, from which we will see presentations of the Danube and Romania. The Pan European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy serves as an accelerator for the development of a Pan European ecological network and biodiversity policies.

We have to conclude that the Birds Directive, Habitat Directive and Water Framework Directive are important tools for the EU implementation. The Ramsar Convention itself is therefore a bit “hidden” in the EU behind these Directives. To guarantee a successful and efficient implementation, it is important to seek more synergy between the Directives and Ramsar, particularly in its goals, guidelines and reporting requirements.

	Ramsar focus	EU	global
'70s	Birds + habitats	Bird Directive '79	Ramsar
'80s	Habitats + Integrated water mgt		
'90s	Biodiversity + sustainable development	Habitat Directive '92	CBD
'00s	Waterresources, river basin and ecosystemapproach	Water Framework Directive	WSSD, WWF
challenges	Waterconvention?	Spatial planning?; pro active approach	Link to other conventions and organizations, funding?

Developments towards Integrated Water Resource Management

In recent years, further synergy has been reached between the international water policy and wetland policy. The Netherlands, among many others, have actively promoted this. The cooperation between Ramsar, CBD, CMS and other international agreements and organizations like FAO has been developed and should be strengthened further. New sources of funding and investments by both governments and water sector can be used. The organization of three international World Water Fora has also strengthened the recognition the linkages between the water sector, wetland policies and food security issues. It also calls for increased synergies at national policy level.

The 2nd World Water Forum in the Hague had triggered an international dialogue between Water for Food and Environment. Practical examples have been presented on 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, resulting in more attention for the important role of wetlands and other ecosystems in the water cycle, benefiting people through production of food and protection against floods and droughts. More and more a river basin approach and an ecosystem approach are the basis for water policy development, but action on the ground is still an challenge. The worlds between the “watersector”, “agricultural” and “ environmental” sector need to bridged further by sharing good examples. The Netherlands is preparing with FAO a conference in the Hague on “water for food and ecosystems” in January 2004 to strengthen the ecosystem approach by discussing case studies and lessons learned.

Just in recent weeks, as part of the EU Presidency period, the Netherlands has organized as well a Conference to celebrate the 25 years of the Bird Directive.

Much has been achieved, like the establishment of an extensive network of special protection areas (8% of Europe), establishment of a strong protection regime for wetlands and other habitats and improvement in status of birds. Remaining gaps were identified as well. It was noted that many common bird populations continue to decline and that protection require measures also outside the protected areas through integration with policy developments in other sectors (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism, transportation, energy) and spatial planning. 10 priority objectives were identified to reinforce the commitments of the EU to safeguard the wild birds and their habitats.

Future steps

In a certain way we are at the crossroad of developments, in which Ramsar develops further from a “wetlands” convention to a real “water convention”. The challenges ahead of us are as follows:

- 1) **Strengthening the links of Ramsar with the international water discussions:** Ramsar, as a Convention dealing with wetlands and water, is a natural partner in the international water discussions. Ramsar could help to focus on ecosystems and their role in the watercycle and benefits to human wellbeing. However, such river basin and ecosystem approach on international level requires co-operation and support from national governments as well, including implementation on national level by the “water”, “agriculture” and “environment” sector.

- 2) **Innovative instruments for implementation through integrated spatial planning and new approaches:** We should integrate the requirements of our wetland policy objectives (and EU Bird/Habitat and Water Framework objectives) into a wider integrated spatial planning process and relevant policy areas, including agri-environment and forest-environment measures. We should develop new approaches by combining functions e.g. “free space for rivers” to combine flood mitigation, water supply and benefit to local economies (e.g. tourism) with the creation and restoration of new wetlands and flooded areas.
- 3) **Synergies with EU policy and legislative instruments:** Ramsar and the EU Directives underpin and reinforce each other. Synergies could be strengthened particularly in its practical implementation of guidelines and reporting requirements by using similar formats. Overlap in reporting or bureaucratic processes should be prevented.
- 4) **Don't lose our sight on birds:** Birds are important to communicate bird conservation and wetland problems to the general public (CEPA). They are as well important biodiversity indicators to the achievement of the 2010 biodiversity target to reduce the loss of biodiversity loss.