

40th meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee

11-15 May 2009

Opening statement on behalf of the five International Organization Partners

Delivered by Leon Bennun, BirdLife International

Thank you and good morning, Mr Chair and distinguished delegates. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to attend this Standing Committee meeting, my first, on behalf of BirdLife International, and to give this short opening statement on behalf of the Convention's International Organization Partners.

This meeting follows half a year on from a very successful and important Conference of the Parties. In the Ramsar cycle, it should thus be a time for consolidating plans and building momentum to take forward the Strategic Plan 2009-2015 and other key decisions and recommendations of COP. Globally, however, these are increasingly difficult and uncertain times. With economic recession biting savagely across the world, decision-makers are distracted and preoccupied, and funds are scarce. The wise use and conservation of wetlands, along with other environmental issues, seems likely to be pushed still farther to the political periphery. If there is a silver lining in the reduced demand for resources and the drying up of investment capital, it may be in a slight and temporary respite for some wetlands from the threat of new industrial and agricultural developments. In so far as this breathing space exists, we encourage Parties to grasp the opportunity for moving forward sound wetland management planning at the site scale, and appropriate, ecosystem-based policy development nationally.

Ramsar's tenth COP is out of the way, and COP11 is still only just on the horizon. However, two crucial Conferences of Parties for other Conventions are approaching rapidly – COP15 of UNFCCC, the Climate Change Convention, this December, and COP10 of the Convention on Biological Diversity in October 2010. The outcomes of both will be crucially important for the future of wetlands, and the success of the Ramsar Convention. Parties to Ramsar need to bring the threads together, and ensure that wetland concerns and experiences shape their inputs to the negotiations running up to these two key meetings. On climate change, for example, it is crucial that the Copenhagen agreement recognises the role of wetlands and other natural ecosystems, and the vital services they provide, in climate-change mitigation and adaptation. We note that there is growing support amongst countries to include wetland accounting in the new climate treaty. If this is achieved then there are also strong possibilities that mechanisms like Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation will provide real incentives for wetland conservation and restoration. The case is very clear in particular for peatlands, which store twice as much carbon as all the world's forests. We encourage, and offer support to, Ramsar delegates to reinforce the importance of this opportunity with your colleagues handling UNFCCC negotiations. Issues of water management, and pressure on water resources for food production, are also closely linked to climate change. They form a prominent topic at the upcoming Stockholm Water Week, and were debated at the recent World Water Forum in Istanbul.

Next year is the International Year of Biodiversity. It is also the year of reckoning for the 2010 target to 'reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity'. Globally, all indications are that we have not even come close to achieving this, despite some encouraging localized successes. The Convention's own target, intended as a contribution to the global one, is to ensure that the List of Wetlands of International Importance contains at least 2,500 sites covering 250 million hectares – initially by 2010, now by 2015. Despite some impressive recent listings, including the world's largest Ramsar site (the rainforest wetland Ngiri-Tumba-Maindombe in Congo, designated last July with facilitation from one of the IOPs, WWF, and clocking in at a remarkable 6.5 million hectares), and over 120 other sites reported in the pipeline, there are still nearly 700 sites and 70 million hectares to go before the Convention reaches this target.

Failing to achieve the 2010 biodiversity target should be met with more than a shrug of the shoulders; it is a serious indication of the grave peril that biodiversity faces. Failure to meet the Ramsar target needs to be taken seriously too, and should form a prompt to all Parties redouble their efforts on implementing the Convention. This of course goes far beyond site designation, useful indicator though that is of progress. As the Secretary-General notes in his written report to this meeting, it is essential to put more effort on management of sites as well as monitoring and evaluation of existing management plans. It is also very important to pay attention to wetlands that qualify as Ramsar sites but have not yet been designated. From the biodiversity point of view, such sites have been identified worldwide for waterbirds through BirdLife's Important Bird Area process, and compiled as Ramsar 'shadow lists' for Europe, Africa and Asia; further lists are on the way for other continents. Taking up such lists as a basis for designation and management, as some Parties have already done, would be a major contribution to achieving a future global biodiversity target.

The shape of a post-2010 target, or targets, remains to be hammered out, and the Ramsar Secretariat, not just the Parties, has a strong voice in that debate. Lessons should be learned from the strengths and drawbacks of the current target. The IOPs believe it is essential that a new target build carefully on existing work; combine a long-term vision with an achievable, shorter-term target; be more easily communicable and understood; and have clearly defined sub-targets with time-bound measures of progress. This last point is particularly important as a guide and spur to practical implementation. It is obviously especially relevant to Ramsar too.

A strength and unique feature of Ramsar is the partnership formed with the five IOPs, who support and contribute to the Convention in a wide range of ways. There is, though, potential for this partnership to do so much more. I would like to mention the 'Wings over Wetlands' project as an example of what can be achieved by working together. This brings together Ramsar with another Secretariat, for the Africa-Eurasia Waterbird Agreement, and two IOPs – Wetlands International and BirdLife. The main financial supporters are currently GEF-UNEP and the German government. The project focuses on identifying critical sites (all of them listed or shadow Ramsar sites) for migratory waterbirds across the AEWA region, and building capacity to conserve them. I mention it specifically for two reasons. First, because the project is now evolving into a long-term programme partnership, with all involved continuing to pull together in a joint effort to support Ramsar and AEWA implementation. Second, because the partnership is functioning effectively at a local, national and sub-regional level, as well as at flyway scale. It has been pointed out that existing Ramsar partnerships have focused mainly on global-level interactions. There is huge potential to achieve real gains by working together at smaller scales, bringing in to play the IOPs extensive field programmes and national and local partnerships and networks.

A major constraint in taking this forward, however, remains the limited capacity for partnership co-ordination and engagement. This gap is on both sides, but particularly acute in the small and severely stretched Ramsar secretariat. The prospect of a Secretariat Partnership Officer being brought on board, which will be under discussion at this meeting, is thus a welcome one. The partnership review that the Secretariat proposes to undertake first will be a valuable exercise, and we expect will reveal both how much the IOPs are already contributing, and how much more could be catalysed given better co-ordination capacity. We look forward to the review helping us to maximise the potential of our existing relationships, and in the expectation that any major effort to establish new partnerships is well-targeted to increase the effectiveness of implementation of the Convention. We encourage the Parties to give their support to the partnership review and welcome their commitment to working with us to make the Convention stronger. Thank you, Mr Chairman.