

37th Meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee

12/06/2008

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)
37th Meeting of the Standing Committee
Gland, Switzerland, 2-6 June 2008

Opening Statement by the IUCN Director General

Delivered by Mark Smith, on behalf of Julia Marton-Lefevre

Thank you and good morning Mr Chair and distinguished delegates.

I am here representing Julia Marton-Lefevre, the Director General of IUCN. She sends her apologies for not being able to deliver this opening statement in person because this meeting of the Standing Committee falls on the same day as the annual meeting of the IUCN framework donors. As Ramsar requested the use of the conference rooms in this building before IUCN, you obviously have the priority and the DG is meeting in another location away from the Secretariat.

I am pleased to convey the following message to you.

IUCN welcomes you all back to Gland. As ever, IUCN is very pleased to provide the venue for this important meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee. And you are back so soon. Given that the Standing Committee was just here in February, it is clear that this is an important year for Ramsar, with the COP coming in Korea. Of course, this is also an important year for IUCN, because we will host the World Conservation Congress just two weeks prior to the Ramsar CoP. Be sure that we will also be with you in Korea – perhaps a little tired, but not less committed to Ramsar.

The alignment of these two events takes place in a year when media, public and political attention on critical global issues is intense: food,

energy, climate, urbanisation, biodiversity loss all feature regularly in headlines and in speeches by world leaders. The Ramsar COP and the World Conservation Congress are thus coming at the right time – a time when people and governments worldwide are looking for answers. Our joint challenge therefore is to use the platforms provided by these events to push sustainability to the top of the global agendas emerging from debates over the dominant issues of the day. We have a golden opportunity to create fertile ground for continuing and expanding work on implementation of sustainable practice, as is exemplified in the application of wise use principles in many Ramsar sites worldwide

The list of Draft Resolutions for the COP in the documentation for this meeting of the Standing Committee tells us something important about Ramsar. Biodiversity is an important theme as you'd expect. Also important technical guidance is being put forward that will no doubt support the strengthening of the ability of the Parties to implement the Convention on the ground. But there is also prominence given to: climate change, human health, poverty, food security, biofuels, extractive industries, urbanisation, partnerships with business. The fact that these issues are being considered for transmission to the COP of the Ramsar Convention makes clear that water and wetlands sit at the heart of all of these complex issues.

Water and wetlands are thus fundamental and central concerns in the major societal challenges of the day. Water and the natural infrastructure of wetlands link poverty and climate change adaptation. They link food security and sustainable energy; they link urbanisation and human health. It is evident therefore that Ramsar has a pivotal role to play in helping the world respond effectively to the challenges it faces – by encouraging and enabling implementation of wise management of wetlands in ways that promote sustainable development. For it to do so most effectively, the Convention, and its implementation itself needs to be connected – to wider dialogues on water and biodiversity, but also on climate, health, poverty and energy.

The COP and dialogue over these Draft Resolutions is an excellent opportunity to ensure that this happens.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment laid down a marker that the irreplaceable contributions of ecosystems to human well-being are in danger of being lost. Ramsar of course played a vital role in the MA, helping to spell out the importance of reducing threats to wetland-related ecosystem services, and therefore of using the benefits that wetlands bring us to spur human development.

We know that reducing those threats is certainly not a simple matter. However, we also know that there are effective policy choices available, there are effective

practices that can make an important difference. Both the Ramsar COP and the World Conservation Congress will be vital forums in which people and governments can widen the uptake and application of the best of those policies and practices.

As a result I am greatly looking forward to seeing Ramsar move to the centre of key global debates on sustainable futures. And I am greatly looking forward to seeing as many as possible of the delegates who are here at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona in October.

Thank you Mr Chairman