

Ramsar Convention Monitoring Procedure

Report No. 3: Ichkeul, Tunisia

General Introduction

1. Each Contracting Party to the Ramsar Convention (“Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat”, Ramsar, 1.971) “shall designate suitable wetlands within its territory for inclusion in a List of Wetlands of International Importance” (Article 2.1 of the Convention). The Contracting Parties “shall designate at least one wetland to be included in the List” (Article 2.4) and “shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List” (Article 3.1). Furthermore, each Contracting Party, “shall arrange to be informed at the earliest possible time if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the list has changed, is changing or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. Information on such changes shall be passed without delay to the organization or government responsible for continuing bureau duties” (Article 3.2).
2. These are the principal stipulations of the Convention concerning wetlands included in the Ramsar List. Successive meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (held in 1980 at Cagliari, Italy, in 1984 at Groningen, Netherlands and in 1987 at Regina, Canada) have devoted special attention to the conservation of listed wetlands and to the best ways of avoiding ‘change in ecological character’.
3. Conference Document C.3.6 of the Regina meeting (“Review of national reports submitted by Contracting Parties and Review of implementation of the Convention since the second meeting in Groningen, Netherlands in May 1984”) included a section (paragraphs 66 to 107) entitled “Changes in the ecological character of listed wetlands”. This section recalls that it is “essential that, after a wetland has been designated for the List, its conservation status should be maintained”, and that “the concept of preventing ‘change in the ecological character’ is fundamental to the Ramsar Convention”. Paragraphs 74 to 107 then review the various wetlands on the List where such changes have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur.
4. During the discussion of these paragraphs, several delegates emphasized the importance of avoiding changes of this kind in listed wetlands and the Conference approved a Recommendation (C.3.9) on this matter. The Recommendation (text attached to the present document) urges Contracting Parties to take swift and effective action to prevent any further degradation of sites and to restore, as far as possible, the value of degraded sites; the Recommendation requests Contracting Parties in whose territory are located the sites identified in Conference Document C.3.6 as having incurred or being threatened by damage, to report to the Convention Bureau the actions undertaken to safeguard these sites.
5. At the fourth Meeting of the Ramsar Convention Standing Committee, the members (Pakistan, Canada, Chile, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Tunisia and USA) and observers (United Kingdom, IUCN, IWRB and WWF) considered the best way of promoting the implementation of Recommendation C.3.9. A “Monitoring Procedure”

(the text of which is attached to the present document) was adopted by the Standing Committee as a procedure to monitor Ramsar sites, and has been used since February 1988 by the Convention Bureau.

Ichkeul - general

6. Tunisia acceded to the Ramsar Convention by depositing its instrument of accession with the Director - General of Unesco on 24 November 1980. Tunisia designated one wetland for the List of Wetlands of International Importance; this was Ichkeul which covers 12,600 hectares.
7. The situation at Ichkeul has been discussed at the various meetings of the Conference of Contracting Parties. The Tunisian national report presented at Groningen noted that "changes were likely to occur as a result of the construction of dams on rivers supplying Ichkeul with fresh water during the rainy season. An impact assessment is under way." The Tunisian national report to the Regina meeting confirmed that these changes were still likely to occur and added that "the impact assessment proposed compensatory measures which were prohibitively expensive." The report further noted that "other measures are under consideration." A paper on the situation at Ichkeul was presented at Workshop D of the Regina meeting.
8. Conference document C.3.6 summarized in paragraph 107 the Ramsar sites where the likeness of ecological changes seemed greatest and to which the Conference of Contracting Parties might pay special attention. Ichkeul figures among the 23 sites listed, and is therefore an appropriate site to be covered by a report in the context of the Procedure adopted in Costa Rica.
9. Since the 1960s, the Tunisian government has drawn up a Plan for the utilization of the Waters of the North (and in particular of the Ichkeul catchment) by the construction of a series of dams. These dams will retain water which originally flowed into Lake Ichkeul through the Ghezala, Joumine and Sedjenane Rivers; the Ghezala and Joumine dams have already been built and the Sedjenane dam (the biggest) is under construction. Construction of three further dams is also envisaged. In 1980, the Ichkeul National Park was established by presidential decree. The dams are situated well outside the boundaries of the National Park, but are nevertheless likely to change its ecological character by decreasing the supply of fresh water; the decrease in fresh water inflow may well lead to an increase in inflow of sea water, since Ichkeul is linked with the sea via another channel, the Oued Tindja. The impact assessment was carried out by the Tunisian government with technical assistance from University College London, the French CNRS (National Council for Scientific Research) and from Sogreah, a French engineering consultant, and with financial support from the Commission of the European Communities and the French Environment Ministry. Its principal recommendation concerned the construction of a sluice on the Oued Tindja to control outflow of fresh water and inflow of sea water. It also suggested much more expensive long-term measures to reduce evaporation, such as construction of embankments in the lake or infilling of certain zones.
10. While the principal factor likely to cause change in the ecological character of Ichkeul is undoubtedly an alteration in the quality and quantity of water available, there are

other potential problems. Among these are overgrazing by domestic animals and the effects of the Plan for improvement of the Mateur Plain, which is adjacent to the Park. Among positive factors, the development of the Park's infrastructure should be mentioned.

Ichkeul - the current position.

11. Having visited Ichkeul many times over the last 25 years, I have had an opportunity to appreciate its real value and to follow the operations carried out in the wetland and the surrounding area by the Tunisian government. During a recent visit, made on 16 April 1988 with the Tunisian officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, I was able to see the latest developments.
12. The sluice: the principal new development is the commencement, in January 1988, of the construction of the sluice on the Oued Tindja. This structure is financed by the Tunisian government at a cost of about 800,000 Tunisian dinars (about #600,000 or 1,500,000 Swiss francs), and will be completed in February 1989. The Tunisian government is to be congratulated on this happy initiative, which is crucial for maintaining the quality and quantity of water at Ichkeul in the immediate future. It would be appropriate to consider immediately how the sluice is to be operated once it is finished; the sluice will be a major factor in the management of Ichkeul's waters and the various departments concerned (Major hydraulic works, Rural engineering, Forests, Environment, Fisheries) should all take part in decisions on its operation. However, given the importance of the sluice for maintaining the ecological character of the Park, the departments responsible for the management of the Park should play a predominant rôle in the operation of the sluice.
13. The Joumine canal: In 1981, the Joumine canal was dredged out in part of the preliminaries for the plan for improvement of the Mateur Plain. While dredging of this kind may improve water flow in an agricultural area, the digging of a deep canal within the national park has led to the drying out of the Joumine marsh. As a result of this drying-out the flora and fauna of the marsh have suffered (encroachment of salt-loving plants, decrease in wintering wildfowl), and domestic cattle have found easier access, thereby intensifying the overgrazing problem. The various departments concerned agree about the need to fill in the canal, and to allow the Joumine waters to spread over the whole marsh in the winter period. The infilling operation began at the end of 1987, but was not completed. To finish the work would be a relatively minor operation, requiring only a few days of work by a bulldozer, but it would have a major effect on the regeneration of the Joumine marsh.
14. The Melah canal: In view of the effect of the Joumine canal on the Joumine marsh, it is all the more unfortunate to note that the same thing has happened on the Oued Melah. In 1987, once again in connection with the Plan for improvement of the Mateur Plain, an embankment large enough to carry traffic was built to mark the boundary between the agricultural zone and the national park in the southwestern sector of the park (An embankment of this size bordering a sector which had hitherto been inaccessible will in any case aggravate the problem of controlling poaching). It appears that the departments responsible for the park were not consulted, since once again the dredging out of the Oued Melah extended into the park. The effects of this dredging is likely to be even

more serious than on the Joumine marsh, since even inside the park, the new canal passes between two low embankments and will quite certainly cause a considerable drying-out of the Melah marsh. The new canal should be filled in, and the low embankments should be levelled in the near future.

15. Development of the national park: Since the park was established a number of measures have been taken to improve its operation. Among these the following measures may be noted: acquisition of land formerly used for agriculture, inside the park; closure of several quarries on the mountain; construction of a building to house the visitor centre. Further progress has been achieved in recent months: work on the visitor centre has been completed by construction of a path up the mountainside and of several ancillary buildings; preparation of the exhibition to be set up inside the Ecomuseum is well advanced (consultations on this exhibition which is being made by IWRB and the British Museum (Natural History) with financial support from WWF were the principal reasons for my visit); finally measures to improve the hammams (Turkish Baths) have been taken (these baths which caused considerable disturbance in the park and carried a danger of pollution have been closed until sanitary measures are improved).

Recommendations on measures to be taken

16. (a) Above all, the building of the sluice should be completed. This is, by a very long way, the highest priority for maintaining the ecological character of Ichkeul.
- (b) While the sluice is being completed, operating rules for the sluice which give a major rôle to the departments responsible for management of the park should be prepared.
- (c) If necessary the technician or technicians in charge of operating the sluice should be trained. Tlae Ramsar Bureau is ready to offer cooperation in this field.
- (d) The Joumine and Melah canals should be filled in as soon as possible. It also appears appropriate to strengthen consultations and collaboration between the departments responsible for managing the park and other appropriate departments, in order to ensure full development of the park.
- (e) Care should be taken to ensure that the deadlines for completing the Ecomuseum exhibition are respected. It is due to be ready by February 1989 and thus to provide Tunisian and foreign visitors with an introduction to the riches of Ichkeul.

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Annex

MONITORING PROCEDURE

1. It comes to the attention of the Bureau that the ecological character of a listed wetland is changing or is likely to change as a result of technological development, pollution or other human interference.
2. Where appropriate, the Bureau shall ask the Contracting Party or Parties concerned to provide further information concerning the situation.
3. Where, as a result of this procedure and other information available to the Bureau, the Bureau is of the opinion that there is evidence of a significant change or likely change in the ecological character of a listed wetland, the Bureau shall collaborate with the Contracting Party or Parties concerned to arrive at an acceptable solution and the Bureau may offer advice and assistance to that Party or those Parties, if required. The Bureau shall inform the Standing Committee of any action it has taken in this connection.
4. If it does not appear that an acceptable solution can be readily achieved, the Bureau shall immediately bring the matter to the attention of the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee, acting through the Chairman and Secretary, provided by the Bureau, may pursue the matter, in direct contact with the Contracting Party or Parties concerned and, where appropriate, with other responsible agencies or bodies, with a view to helping to find a solution.
5. In the event of alterations to the List or changes in ecological character in wetlands included therein, the Standing Committee shall arrange for the information to be circulated for discussion at the next Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties in accordance with Article 8 paragraph 2 (d) of the Convention.
6. The Bureau shall periodically review and report progress on the conservation status of sites to which its attention has been drawn under this procedure. To facilitate follow-up, the Bureau shall maintain a register of activities undertaken in this connection.