

Ramsar Convention Monitoring Procedure

Report No. 13: Siedem Wysp ("Seven Islands") Reserve, Lake Oswin, Poland (1989)

General Introduction

1. Each Contracting Party to the Ramsar Convention ("Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat" Ramsar, 1971) "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.

Siedem Wysp - general background

6. Poland deposited its instrument of accession to the Ramsar Convention with the Director-General of Unesco on 22 November 1977. On that occasion it designated a single wetland - Lake Luknajno - for the 'List of wetlands of international importance'. On 5 January 1984, Poland's Permanent Delegate to Unesco deposited maps and descriptions of four further Polish wetlands which were to be added to the List. These were: the Slonsk reserve, Lake Swidwie, Lake Karas and the 'Seven Islands' Reserve.

7. Information on Siedem Wysp is contained in the description of the wetland deposited with Unesco in 1984. This description is the basis for the entry on Siedem Wysp in the "Directory of wetlands of international importance" prepared by the Ramsar Bureau for the Regina Conference. At Regina information on the sites was appended to the Polish national report in revised format.

8. According to these documents, the Siedem Wysp Reserve comprises Lake Oswin (340 hectares), surrounding marshes, meadows and woodlands, with a total area of 1016 hectares. Oswin Lake is a shallow freshwater lake in a very inaccessible area near the frontier between Poland and the USSR. The area is important for the mammals which occur there (including wild boar, roe-deer, elk, fox, hare, beaver, musk, otter and squirrel). Its bird populations are also of great importance, both breeding birds and passage migrants. The breeding birds include species which breed elsewhere in Poland, but not in such a large concentration, some 115 species including grebes, bitterns, black stork, mute swan, several species of duck, white-tailed eagle, crane, coot, woodcock, a large black-headed gull colony, river warbler, bluethroat and bearded tit. In migration periods, the reserve is an important stopover point for migrating cranes, geese, ducks, gulls and coots. These documents also indicate that there is no economic activity, and no activity affecting the ecological character of the site.

9. The Polish national report, submitted to the third Conference of the Contracting Parties held in Regina in June 1987 (published in full in the Proceedings of the Conference, pages 508-510 in the English version) also indicates that "neither pollution nor harmful results of other human activities, causing changes of the wetlands' ecological conditions, have been recorded". The report does however note that at Siedem Wysp "a slow disappearance of water plants has been observed. It is probably caused by abiotic factors. It is a shallow lake, in winter covered with a thick ice layer, in which the submerged plants get ice-bound. In spring the shifting ice-floes cause uprooting of the water plants. The bottom is disturbed and plants developing from seed cannot take root. Development of the plants is also limited by intensive wave action. The problem is under intensive investigation and we hope to obtain the final results on these questions next year. If these hypotheses are confirmed it will be necessary to raise the water level". On the basis of this extract from the Polish national report, Siedem Wysp was mentioned in the section of the Regina Conference Document (C.3.6) devoted to 'Changes in the ecological character of listed wetlands'; paragraph 94 of the document condenses the comments in the national report quoted above.

10. During a visit to Poland by M Smart, Conservation Coordinator of the Ramsar Bureau, from 28 July - 1 August [1989], the Polish authorities arranged a visit to Siedem Wysp. They felt that such a visit was particularly appropriate because of the reference to possible changes in ecological character in Regina Document C.3.6, and agreed that it would be appropriate to prepare a report under the Monitoring Procedure. (Poland is a member of the Standing Committee and took part in the deliberations in Costa Rica which led to adoption of the procedure).

Current situation

Programme

11. I visited Siedem Wysp on 29 July [1989], after driving in the morning from Warsaw to Wegorzewo. In the company of officials of the Ministry of the Voivodship of Suwalki, I visited the reserve that afternoon. We were guided by the warden of the reserve, who took us by rowing-boat across the lake and down the River Oswinka. Although the visit was short we were able to get an excellent general impression of the site.

Features of the site

12. It seems appropriate at this juncture to expatiate on the features of the site. As previously noted in descriptions provided by the Polish authorities, the lake is very isolated and inaccessible; the northern edge is in fact only a few hundred metres from the Polish/Soviet border, and the River Oswinka flows out of Poland into the USSR. (For this reason it may be appropriate to invoke Article 5 of the Ramsar Convention which indicates that 'Contracting Parties shall consult with each other about implementing obligations arising from the Convention especially in the case of a wetland extending over the territories of more than one Contracting Party or where a water system is shared by Contracting Parties'. Both Poland and the USSR are Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention). There is at present little or no cross-border traffic, which means that the area suffers little or no disturbance: there is little or no human settlement around the reserve and several former villages and houses have been abandoned in recent years.

13. Lake Oswin is one of the Masurian Lakes, an area of great popularity for summer tourists. I was told that the region receives three million visitors in summer, and this is easy to believe when one sees the large number of camp sites, nearly all of them situated on lake shores. In the general area of Masuria, therefore, there is considerable pressure on the lakes, many of which are reported to be heavily affected by pollution coming from domestic and urban wastes. It seems likely that run-off of agricultural chemicals also affects many of the lakes. Though the lakes and forests are referred to as the "green lungs" of Poland, and are less affected by environmental pollution than sites in other parts of Poland, environmental pollution (notably acid rain) is a major factor throughout Poland and undoubtedly affects the general area.

14. Lake Oswin is in a small wetland basin, situated in a glacial moraine area. In the bed of the lake are several moraine deposits which emerge quite steeply from the lake (to a height of 8 metres above the water) and form the "Seven islands" from which the reserve takes its name. There are several small lakes of this kind in the Masurian region, but very few have remained

largely pollution-free. (Nearby Lake Luknajno, also a Ramsar site which has its own major wetland research station, is another). Both Siedem Wysp and Luknajno clearly merit designation on the Ramsar List under Criterion 1: they are both "a particularly good example of a specific type of wetland characteristic of its region".

15. A hot afternoon in late July is clearly not the best time to appreciate the waterfowl populations - too late for breeding birds, too early for autumn passage migrants. Nevertheless we saw a variety of species of waterfowl including Little Tern as well as the several birds of prey (notably Honey Buzzard) which are a feature of the surrounding forests. We also saw extensive traces of the presence of beavers and had excellent views of one very obliging animal in the River Oswinka. The extremely low flow in this river, which was largely choked with water plants, particularly floating Potamogeton, was very striking. In the shallower marshy parts of the reserve, it did appear that reeds and other aquatic plants were encroaching into the lake.

16. The general impression given by the reserve is of a largely untouched, near natural site, though with potential problems of encroaching vegetation.

17. I understand that, even before the nature reserve was formally established by publication of a notice in the Polish Monitor in 1963, the former owner had managed the site as a reserve. The present reserve of 1000 hectares is state-owned. The Polish authorities are currently negotiating the inclusion of a further 600 hectares in the reserve. The land concerned is round the edge of the reserve and belongs to a state farm, but cultivation has been more or less abandoned.

18. The warden's main task is policing the reserve, and trying to control illegal fishing and shooting. This suggests that local people are (still!) not entirely in sympathy with the aims of the reserve.

Recent research findings at Siedem Wysp

19. I was informed that in order to find a solution to the problems outlined in the Polish national report (see paragraph 9 above) a series of studies had been carried out by Polish wetland specialists between 1984 and 1986. Their conclusions have not been published. I understand that studies indicate that the basic cause of the changing ecological character was the drainage work carried out on the lower reaches of the River Oswinka in the territory of the USSR. The studies suggest that these problems could be overcome in Poland by the construction of a water control structure on the River Oswinka in Polish territory. This would enable the water level to be raised by half a metre, and would enable excess water to run off in the spring thaw.

20. The raising of the water level would flood, at least partly, the extra 600 hectares whose inclusion in the reserve is under negotiation. Thus an area of lost wetland would be restored.

21. I understand that the cost of the studies and the remedial work would be in all of the order of 50 million zlotys (just over US \$60,000 at current exchange rates). The research work cost 15 million zlotys; the cost of the sluice is estimated at 35-40 million zlotys (about US \$50,000 at current exchange rates). It has not yet been possible to proceed with the building of the sluice because of a lack of available funds.

22. I was told that, if some outside financial support could be provided to cover part of the costs - perhaps \$10,000 - this would be a great encouragement to the Polish authorities to find the rest from national sources.

Recommendations

23. On the basis of my short visit, I put forward the following suggestions:

- (a) The results of the research carried out at Siedem Wysp should be published. It would be very valuable to have a summarized version in English
- (b) The Polish authorities should go ahead with negotiations to add 1600 hectares to the reserve
- (c) The Polish authorities should go ahead with the building of the water control structure (sluice)
- (d) The Ramsar Bureau should attempt to find financial support for the construction of this sluice
- (e) The Polish and Soviet authorities should consider holding consultations with the authorities of the Soviet Union on implementing obligations arising from the Convention in the case of Siedem Wysp, given that the River Oswinka is a water system shared by the two countries
- (f) The Polish authorities, taking account of the various measures mentioned above, should draw up a management plan for the Siedem Wysp; the plan should incorporate the Ramsar concept of 'wise use' and should consider the role played by local people.

M Smart
August 1989