

MISSION OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL AND TECHNICAL OFFICER TO INDIA

23 February - 1 March 1990

1. This visit was arranged at the request of conservation organizations in India so that we might promote the Convention with the officials of the new Indian government. In addition, we were able to participate in the Seminar on Wetland Ecology and Management at Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur (which was cosponsored by the Ramsar Bureau) and to undertake a follow-up "Monitoring Procedure" at the Bharatpur Ramsar site.

2. Our schedule comprised a series of meetings with government officials, including a lengthy session with the new Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Mrs. M. Gandhi, consultations with representatives of leading non-governmental organizations in New Delhi, participation in the Bharatpur Seminar, and field inspections at both Bharatpur and the Sultanpur wetland sites. Local coordination for our visit was provided by Thomas Mathew and his staff at WWF-India. We are deeply grateful for their many efforts on our behalf.

3. The following is a brief overview, in chronological order, of the key points of our visit, followed by a list of follow-up activities. Annexed to this report can be found a listing of persons contacted, copies of letters issued in New Delhi to government officials recapping the major points of our discussions and an updated entry for Monitoring Procedure Report No. 7 on Bharatpur.

4. Seminar on Wetland Ecology and Management

This event, organized by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) with sponsorship by the Ministry of Environment, Government of India, the Rajasthan State Forest Department, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Ramsar Convention Bureau, brought together some 200 Indian and Foreign experts. It provided an excellent opportunity to meet with those concerned with wetlands in India. In addition to having a broad focus, the meeting was very much concerned with a review of the research findings of the BNHS Ecological Research Centre at Bharatpur since the project for that work was now coming to an end.

It was evident to us that a very impressive research programme has now been completed at Bharatpur. In the keynote address of the Ramsar Secretary General to the Conference, the urgent need to apply this mass of research for effective management measures on the ground was stressed. Examples of "wise use" of wetland approaches in other countries were also provided. We had to return to New Delhi immediately after this presentation, but we understand that this point was taken up in the formal recommendations of the Conference..

5. Status of Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur

A report on this subject has been made within the context of the Ramsar "Monitoring Procedure".

Briefly, there is a shortage of water in the park due to poor monsoon rainfall and the late release of water from the canal which feeds the park. This condition, along with the absence of water buffalo from the park, due to government policy, has led to a renewed uncontrolled growth of the grass *Paspalum distichum*. In our discussions with the government authorities, we stressed the need for management measures to deal with this situation.

Despite these problems, the park remains a remarkable place. The numbers of bird species present and their proximity to the visiting public is truly outstanding. By its designation as a Ramsar site and a World Heritage site, the government of India has recognized the global importance of the park. Our discussions with the new Minister inspired confidence that decisive action will be taken to maintain the ecological character of the site.

6. Meetings with NGOs in New Delhi

A meeting of leading NGOs was convened at the office of Dr. T.N. Khoshoo to discuss the ways in which India might once again play a leading international role under the Convention, as was the case in the early 1980s, and ways in which the Convention might become better known and applied within the country.

Several points were agreed:

- 1) There should be a National NGO Ramsar Committee formed along the lines of that recently established in the United States. This would provide a focal point for discussion and could serve in an advisory capacity to the Ministry of the Environment.
- 2) There should be a special Ramsar Newsletter produced in 1990 on the wetlands situation in India. The model of the 1989 special issue for Greece was seen to be most appropriate for this purpose. The Newsletter would be compiled by the Indian Committee under the direction Prof. C. K. Varshney and Thomas Mathew. The Ramsar Bureau would arrange for production for international distribution (English, French and Spanish versions) and the Committee for national distribution, including a translation in Hindi. A "Flyer" on the Special issue will be prepared for distribution at the Montreux Conference.
- 3) The Government should be urged to undertake several measures, including management measures at Ramsar Sites, the listing of new Ramsar sites and the publication of the extensive data it holds on Indian wetlands.
- 4) The Ramsar Bureau would welcome project ideas for support under the community conservation of Biological Diversity Movement, spearheaded by WWF-India.

7. Meetings with Government Officials

We had a series of meetings with government officials and several points were agreed:

- 1) India will be fully and strongly represented at the Fourth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (Montreux 27 June - 4 July 1990).
- 2) India's National Report for the Conference will be provided soon to the Ramsar Bureau.
- 3) Additional sites will soon be listed soon under the Convention (in particular, four were mentioned: Wullar, Loktak, Pichola, and Harike).
- 4) Intensified management measures would be taken at the two sites presently listed under the Convention (Bharatpur and Chilka).
- 5) Project concepts for international support to address conservation and sustainable development requirements at Indian wetland sites would be provided to the Ramsar Bureau.
- 6) Support of the Government for the proposed NGO Ramsar Committee, including government involvement by observers on the Committee.
- 7) Support for the idea of the special Ramsar Newsletter on India including the provision of articles and other materials.
- 8) The publication of data on Indian wetlands collected by the Ministry of the Environment over the past several years.
- 9) India's acceptance of the 1987 amendments to the Convention.
- 10) The payment of India's 1990 contribution to the Convention budget at an early date.

It was clear that the government officials were knowledgeable about the Convention and wished to see it applied further in their country. It was equally evident that the government wishes to see India, once again, play a leading international role under the Convention.

Our meeting with the Minister Mrs. M. Gandhi was extremely encouraging. She let us know that there was no longer time for studies and Conferences on wetland problems in India but rather that decisive action must now be taken. No doubt there will be much activity which will require the advice and assistance of India's Conservation Community as represented on the new NGO Committee.

8. Visit to Sultanpur Wetland

We were taken to this site, only some 45km from New Delhi, by the Chief Conservator of Wildlife in Haryana, Mr. V.N.K. Pillai.

Sultanpur is a small site, but is visited by thousands of migratory birds, including many not present at Bharatpur. The site is well maintained, enjoys the support of the local community and has very great potential as an educational as well as a nature conservation area. A small museum and library are present in the park with a visitors centre planned for development in

the latter part of the year. This should be well utilized, given the proximity of the site to New Delhi.

9. Wrap-up Session with T. Mathew and C.K. Varshney

We held a final session with our NGO contacts to review our discussions with the Government officials and to consider follow-up actions.

We also discussed the Montreux Conference programme and the importance of expert participation from India. In regard to the workshops at Montreux, and particular the “Wise Use” workshop, it was agreed that it would be most desirable for the Indian Committee to be represented by Prof. Varshney. He gave us examples of community development activities at wetlands in India which might be presented at that workshop (e.g. at Sukhomajri in Haryana) and then pursued thereafter in the context of the Bureau’s “Wise Use” project with the Netherlands Foreign Ministry. We agreed to issue an invitation to the Indian Committee, subject to the Rules of Procedure for the Conference, and to secure support for Prof. Varshney’s participation.

10. Conclusions

We could not help but be overwhelmed by the generosity of our Indian hosts and the significance of the wetland areas we visited. Similarly we were delighted with the commitment of the government authorities and the NGOs to take action for the conservation and management of India’s wetlands,

We are looking forward to working with our Indian colleagues in pursuing our common objectives.

D. Navid
Secretary General

T. Jones
Technical Officer

March 1990

Annex I

Update to Monitoring Procedure Report No. 7
Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur.

Ramsar Convention Monitoring Procedure

Follow-up to Report No. 7

Keoladeo-Ghana National Park, Bharatpur, India

The Monitoring Procedure was initially applied at the world-renowned Bharatpur Ramsar Site in December 1988 during a mission to India undertaken by the Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention Bureau. A detailed report was compiled as a result of extensive discussions and field inspection of the wetland.

This paper summarizes the findings of the Secretary General and Technical Officer during a further mission to India between 23 February and 1 March 1990. We were able to inspect the National Park itself, participate in the Bombay Natural History Society's "Seminar on Wetland Ecology and Management" (held at Bharatpur, 23-25 February), and engage in extremely valuable discussions with the Ministry of Environment and Forests and a number of Non-Governmental Organizations. The following report is itemized accordingly.

1. Present status of the National Park

As in many recent years, the monsoon failed again in 1989. As a result of this, the area was extremely dry for the time of year with many of the normally flooded compartments containing little or no water. The situation had been aggravated by inadequate and delayed release of water from the canal which is used to supply the wetland. The canal also remains very heavily silted-up.

The population of feral cattle within the National Park continues to increase but these animals graze only in dry grassland, competing with the wild ungulates, but doing little to control the ongoing invasive growth of coarse vegetation in wet areas. Of particular concern is the growth of the grass *Paspalum distichum* which has changed the ecological character of large areas of the park, reducing its suitability for certain waterfowl species, notably Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus*. No buffaloes graze in the Park now, following the controversial exclusion of villagers' animals in the early 1980s.

The two factors noted above (water shortage and unbalanced grazing regime) are undoubtedly responsible for the clear invasion of formerly wet areas by "dryland" scrub vegetation which we noted during our visit.

Despite these changes, the park held impressive numbers and diversity of waterfowl, although the 1989 breeding season had been very poor and numbers of wintering birds were substantially down on many former years. The wintering flock of Siberian Cranes continues to decline with only 10 birds present during our visit (although up to 17 had been observed much earlier in the winter, perhaps suggesting that the ecological changes referred to above were the cause of their departure).

2. BNHS Seminar on Wetland Ecology and Management

More than 200 wetland Technicians and Scientists attended this seminar held in Bharatpur from 23-25 February. An overview of the Seminar as a whole is contained in the Secretary General and Technical Officer's trip report. However, the meeting provided numerous

opportunities for debating the management of Keoladeo National Park with many local and national experts. In particular, Technical Session No VIII of the Seminar dealt exclusively with the Park.

The following were the main points to emerge:

excellent and comprehensive research has been carried out in the wetland.

this research should be applied to restore the wetland's ecological character, notably by the urgent preparation and implementation of a better focused, integrated management plan.

our field observations of the wetland were confirmed and amplified by many speakers.

water pollution - especially with heavy metals and persistent pesticides such as DDT - is a potentially serious threat to the site.

A volume of abstracts of papers presented at the Seminar is on file with the Ramsar Bureau.

3. Discussions at the Ministry of Environment and Forestry

On 27 February we were able to discuss the present status of the National Park with the Ministry Secretary, Mr. Prasad and with the Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Mrs. M. Gandhi. The Minister expressed a strong desire to implement positive conservation action at the Ramsar site and we were able to explore a number of ways in which the Convention Bureau might be able to facilitate this; for example, through project support, provision of information and expert advice, or international publicity initiatives.

4- Discussions with Non-Governmental Organizations

With WWF-India kindly acting in a coordinating capacity, we were able to discuss the management of India's two existing Ramsar Sites with a number of NGO representatives. As a result of these very positive and worthwhile meetings, it is expected that a National NGO Wetland Committee will be established in India in the near future. The valuable role which such a committee might fulfill in advising Government in relation to action at Bharatpur is clear.

Conclusion

Although the ecological character of Keoladeo Ghana National Park has continued to deteriorate, a number of encouraging developments during our visit suggest reason for cautious optimism that remedial management actions will be undertaken in the near future. Cooperation between the Ministry of Environment and Forests and NGOs is to be especially welcomed and it is hoped that the impressive research so painstakingly conducted by BNHS can be used to implement a carefully constructed management plan.

Finally, we wish to thank the many people who made our visit possible, notably Dr. Thomas Mathew of WWF-India and Dr. and Mrs. Vijayan, organizers of the BNHS Seminar.

Follow-up letters to the Minister and to the Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Mrs. M. Gandhi
Minister of State for Environment and Forests
Ministry of Environment and Forests
Paryavaran Bhawan
CGO Complex
Lodi Road NEW DELHI - 110 003

27th February, 1990

Dear Minister,

Thank you for sparing us the time to meet with you this afternoon. As promised, we have provided below a summary of the various matters which were discussed.

We believe that under your leadership increased involvement of India in the Ramsar international wetlands treaty can lead to direct and tangible conservation gains. We fully support your view that there is an urgent need for site-based action. We can facilitate this through international support. This support can be readily adapted to be relevant to the circumstances unique to individual wetlands and may take the form of securing international project funding, provision of information and expert advice, or international publicity which can also be used internally.

It is far easier for us to secure international support relating to action at those wetlands which have been listed under the Convention and we share your concern that immediate attention should be paid to the two existing Indian Ramsar sites, especially at Bharatpur. As you know, we visited Keoladeo Ghana National Park last weekend in order to examine the present status of the wetland and to attend the BNHS seminar. From our personal observations and discussions with experts at Bharatpur, it is clear that there are two principal threats to the nature conservation value of the site:

(a) The uncontrolled growth of the grass *Paspalum distichum* in wet areas of the park, owing to the exclusion of grazing buffalo (the existing feral cattle graze only in dry areas). The changing vegetation has made the site much less suitable for the Siberian Crane (although this species is more seriously threatened on its migration route) as well as for many other wetland birds.

(b) The insufficient quantity of canal water released into the park and the delayed timing of this release in recent years of poor Monsoon rainfall has dramatically reduced the numbers of breeding waterfowl and caused much of the wetland to dry out far earlier than usual, thus allowing invasion of scrub and other “dryland” vegetation.

Because Bharatpur is a totally artificial wetland, it must be intensively managed if it is to recover its former conservation status. A management plan - with clear goals in terms of the habitats and, therefore, species to be maintained as well as the needs of the local community - should be implemented. We suggest that tackling points (a) and (b) above should be priority actions at the site. The Ramsar Bureau would be delighted to assist in whatever capacity we can be of most value in achieving this action.

Because we can help more readily and more efficiently in the case of a listed wetland, we are anxious that India should designate further Ramsar sites at the earliest possible opportunity. We were encouraged to hear that four sites (Wullar, Loktak, Pichola and Harike) are under consideration for listing. We would urge swift designation of these and other examples of your country's rich diversity of wetlands.

We were also encouraged by your support for the setting up of a small national NGO committee which would be able to act in an advisory capacity with respect to implementation of wetland conservation measures. We also welcome your positive attitude to publishing the extensive material which your Ministry has gathered on the status of Indian wetlands.

We talked earlier in the afternoon with Secretary Prasad about a number of administrative matters and we will be writing to him to follow up on these points.

We greatly enjoyed meeting you and having the all-too-rare opportunity for frank and open discussion. We are delighted to reaffirm that we are ready and willing to work with you at any time and that you shouldn't hesitate to contact us whenever we may be of assistance. With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel Navid, Secretary General
Tim Jones, Technical Officer

Mr. M. Prasad
Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests
Paryavaran Bhawan
CGO Complex
Lodi Road
NEW DELHI - 110 003

27th February, 1990
New Delhi

Dear Mr. Prasad,

Thank you for finding the time to discuss India's involvement with the Ramsar International Wetlands Treaty during our visit to your Ministry this afternoon. As you know, we very much

hope that India may once more play a leading role in the convention and we have outlined below the various matters which we discussed in this connection during our meeting with you.

First of all, we are extremely anxious that India should be fully and strongly represented at the forthcoming Conference of Contracting Parties to be held at Montreux, Switzerland from June 27th - July 4th. The meeting will provide numerous opportunities for India's voice to be heard and will constitute a major forum for the exchange of technical expertise which may be translated into direct conservation action. We were delighted by your positive reaction to the Conference and we were also pleased to note that India's National Report will be sent to us as soon as possible.

The Ramsar Bureau is able to coordinate international support for wetland conservation efforts in a number of ways. These may include the securing of project funds from governmental and non- governmental sources, the provision of technical advice and expertise, or various international publicity initiatives. The special issue of the Ramsar Newsletter dealing exclusively with Indian Wetlands, which we discussed with you this afternoon, would be one example from the latter category, and we were delighted that this proposal received your warm support. We look forward to a fruitful cooperation between your Ministry and the NGOs who have kindly agreed to coordinate the project. We were also encouraged by your backing of the proposal to publish the wetland inventory material which has been assembled by your Ministry.

We enjoyed a most stimulating discussion with the Minister after our meeting with you and we explored further the opportunities which exist for government-NGO cooperation. The Minister expressed strong support for the formation of a small national NGO committee which would act in an advisory capacity with regard to wetland conservation measures. We very much hope that such a committee will be formed in the near future.

The Minister expressed concern that further sites should be listed soon under the Convention and that management problems at India's two existing Ramsar sites should be tackled as a matter of urgency. With regard to the listing of new sites, we would urge further designations at the earliest possible opportunity and we were pleased to learn from Mr. Narayanan that a number of wetlands are actively being considered. We were able to report to the Minister our understanding of Bharatpur's problems during our recent visit there and she asked us to provide written details, which we have done.

In conclusion, we wish to raise two administrative matters. First of all, we were gratified to receive your confirmation that India's 1990 annual contribution to the Ramsar Convention will be paid at an early date. Secondly, we look forward to receiving confirmation of India's acceptance of the amendments made to the Convention at the 1987 Conference of Contracting Parties held at Regina, Canada.

We should like to take this opportunity to reaffirm our willingness to assist in any capacity whenever we may be of value. With thanks once again for your time and considerate attention this afternoon.

Your sincerely,

Daniel Navid, Secretary General
Tim Jones, Technical Officer