

Ramsar Convention Monitoring Procedure

Report No. 26: Preliminary mission to Egypt (4-15 October 1991)

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» (Art. 2.1). The Contracting Parties «shall designate at least one wetland to be included in the List» (Art. 2.4) and «shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List» (Art. 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» (Art. 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 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 (Canada 1987) «Review of national reports submitted by Contracting Parties and Review of implementation of the Convention since the 2nd 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 recalled that it was «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 ecological character" is fundamental to the Ramsar Convention.»

4. During the discussion of these paragraphs, several delegates emphasized the importance of avoiding changes of this kind and the Conference approved a Recommendation (C.3.9) on this matter. The Recommendation urged 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 requested Parties in whose territory were located the sites identified as having incurred or being threatened by damage, to report to the Convention Bureau the actions undertaken to safeguard these sites.

5. At the 4th meeting of the Ramsar Convention Standing Committee, the members and observers considered the best way of promoting the implementation of Recommendation C.3.9. A "Monitoring Procedure" was adopted by the Standing Committee to find a solution to possible change of ecological character at Ramsar Sites, and has been used since February 1988 by the Convention Bureau. The 4th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, held at Montreux in 1990 approved a Recommendation (C.4.7) which «endorses the measures taken by the Standing Committee to establish a Ramsar Monitoring Procedure»; the Conference made a number of amendments to the text of the Procedure (Annex I to this report). Recommendation C.4.7 also «instructs the Bureau to continue to operate this procedure when it receives information on adverse or likely adverse changes in ecological

character at Ramsar sites». Recommendation C.4.7 finally «determines that Monitoring Procedure reports shall be public documents once the Contracting Party concerned has had an opportunity to study the reports and comment on them».

6. The Montreux Conference also approved a Recommendation (C.4.8) on «Change in ecological character of Ramsar sites». This Recommendation referred back to Regina Document C.3.6 and to the similar Document presented at Montreux (Document INF C.4.18) which lists Ramsar sites which appear likely to have undergone, to be undergoing, or to be likely to undergo a change in ecological character. Recommendation C.4.8 requested the Contracting Parties concerned to take swift and effective action to prevent or remedy such changes, it instructed the Bureau to maintain a record of such sites and to give priority to application of the Monitoring Procedure at sites included in this record.

7. The Montreux Conference Document INF C.4.18 (paragraph 194) stated «EGYPT: The national report echoes the statements made about the Lake Burullus Ramsar site at the time of designation: the surface of the lake has decreased from 588 km² in 1913 to 574 in 1956 and 462 in 1974 (the latter figure is given as the area of the Ramsar site). The decrease is due to continuous land reclamation along the southern shore. The national report notes that Ramsar sites are considered a protected area after designation and managed by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA); however, some other organizations, such as fishing and governorate authorities, have influence on the management. The national report does not mention any potential problems at Egypt's second Ramsar site, Lake Bardawil, but the Bureau understands that only a small sector of this large site is managed for conservation purposes. The national report notes that despite positive development in the field of wetland protection in Egypt, it cannot be denied that some wetlands are under pressure and threats from human and industrial activities. Legislation is not the main weapon to counteract this pressure, but financial support, contributions and management projects in wetlands aid much, specially with respect to developing countries. The Egyptian report calls for assistance from international organizations to establish an integrated wetland management plan. It appears clear that Lake Burullus - and perhaps Lake Bardawil too - should be regarded as a Ramsar site likely to undergo major change.»

8. This provided sufficient reason to plan to apply the Ramsar Convention Monitoring Procedure to Egypt's two listed sites as a priority for the triennium between the 4th and 5th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (1990-1993). Because participation of the Ramsar Convention Bureau at the mission to Egypt from 4 to 15 October 1991 (cf. Annex II) was unfortunately not possible at the last moment, and because of the limited time available to contact Egyptian authorities other than those directly involved with the Ramsar Convention, we consider this report to be of a preliminary nature, which can hopefully be followed up in due course by a complementary report. Two international NGO partners of the Ramsar Convention Bureau, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) provided the funding and experts (Dr Tobias Salathé, ICBP and Dr Luigi Guarrera, WWF) to undertake this preliminary mission.

General Comments and Recommendations

9. In addition to the information on Egyptian institutional and legal arrangements relating to the Ramsar Convention provided in the «Directory of Wetlands of International Importance» (Ramsar Convention Bureau 1990, pages 177-184) we learned during our mission that the

Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (under the Minister of Cabinet Affairs and Minister of State for Administrative Development, Dr Atef Mohamed Abeid) has recently been restructured in a more centralized way. It is headed by a new director, Mr Salah Hafez (formerly with the Ministry of Petroleum). Its provincial offices have been reorganised in a way to keep only few people in the provinces employed by EEAA while other staff of the governorate environmental offices are now depending entirely on the provincial authorities (i.e. the Governor). The EEAA is now effectively providing finances for the management of protected areas, and is working on the preparation of an Environmental Master Plan for the whole country. The Egyptian Wildlife Service (EWS) (under the Minister of Agriculture, Dr Youssef Wali) is now headed by Dr Fohda (Undersecretary of State for Zoos and Wildlife, replacing Dr Amer). We were assured that the Ministry of Agriculture is providing the financment for Egypt's Ramsar contributions, and that EWS is the government body responsible for the Ramsar Convention. Nevertheless, it was obvious, that increased collaboration and coordination between EWS and EEAA is an urgent requirement to improve administrative efficiency and to ensure better conservation and wise use of Egypt's Ramsar sites and other wetlands.

10. Ramsar Liaison Office: Dr Fohda expressed his wish to receive an official request from the Ramsar Convention Bureau expressing the Bureau's desire for the establishment of a Ramsar Convention liaison office in Egypt. Such a letter would be a good means to present the arguments necessary to convince the Minister of Agriculture about the usefulness and necessity to create such an office. The task of this office would be to increase contact and cooperation with the Ramsar Convention Bureau in Gland, to promote the Convention's aims in Egypt, and to coordinate and supervise interventions at Egyptian Ramsar Sites and other wetlands. Dr Gamil Atta (currently with EWS) offered to help with translations of Ramsar documents and brochures into Arabic to promote the Convention and its aims in Egypt and neighbouring countries.

11. Protection Status: There reigns some confusion about the obligations of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention, especially in the provinces with Ramsar sites, which are supposed to be protected areas in their entirety (cf. paragraph 7). Nevertheless both sites, Lake Burullus and Lake Bardawil, provide fisheries resources of substantial regional socio-economic importance. Legally, it seems yet unclear how to accommodate the concept of wise use of Ramsar Sites (and all other wetlands) with the concept of strictly protected areas in Egypt. Given the mandate of the EEAA (cf. Varty & Baha El Din 1991, Appendix 11; and EEAA 1991) to prepare draft environmental laws, it seems appropriate for this agency to undertake a legal study to clear this matter. Additionally the aims and obligations of the Convention should be promoted more widely by the EEAA and EWS (cf. paragraph 10). An outline of the respective tasks and organisation of EEAA and EWS is given by Varty & Baha El Din 1991), again there is scope for much closer collaboration on Ramsar related matters.

12. Wetland Conservation Fund: In view of necessary external support to draw up integrated management plans for Egyptian Ramsar Sites (see below), and to facilitate an Egyptian application for support from the Ramsar Convention Wetland Conservation Fund established at the Montreux Conference, it was suggested that the Ramsar Convention Bureau should send the guidelines on the procedure to be followed to EWS.

13. The national, as well as the provincial authorities contacted by the mission expressed their wish to receive a delegation of the Ramsar Convention Bureau in the near future to pursue

and increase the contacts and collaboration with the Convention Bureau. It was unfortunate that the Egyptian delegation to the 4th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties at Montreux in 1990 did not have sufficient credentials to participate in votes. A visit by a member of the Bureau in Egypt before the next meeting of the Contracting Parties in 1993 may prove to be helpful.

Lake Bardawil

14. Protection status: In alteration to the information provided in the «Directory of Wetlands of International Importance» (pages 179-181) the mission was told that, although the whole of Lake Bardawil (covering some 595 km²) is designated as a Ramsar site (and was designated a protected area under Israeli occupation), the lake essentially consists of two lagoons, Bardawil (595 km²) and Zaranik (9 km²) of which, under Egyptian law, only the latter is designated as a protected area, covering approximately 14,7 km² (the area between the coast and the main El Arish to El Qantara road between kms 25 and 42 west of El Arish, Varty & Baha El Din 1991, p 29 and Figures 3 & 4). Protection laws and their enforcement are inadequate, although the environmental officers of El Arish do now enforce the ban on bird (mainly quail) catching within the reserve successfully since the 1990 season (Baha El Din & Salama 1991).

15. Resource use: Fishing on Lake Bardawil is regulated by a fisheries management plan which limits the number of fishing boats and the horsepower of their outboard engines (introduced by the Israeli administration). Activities related to fishing on Lake Bardawil create income for about 15 per cent of the province's population (Varty & Baha El Din 1991). Still the environmental officers of El Arish expressed their wish to enforce the fishing ban within the Zaranik protected area to avoid disturbance to resting birds and sea turtles created by the 15 boats of fishermen that are fishing within the protected area, despite the fact that their licence only mentions «Lake Bardawil» which would (*sensu strictu*) exclude the Zaranik lagoon.

16. Changes in Ecological Character: The closing of the channels (called "bhugaz") connecting the lagoons with the sea is creating the danger of drying up of the lagoon and subsequent loss of its biological and economic value (habitat for resting migratory birds, spawning grounds for fish that are commercially exploited in Lake Bardawil). The charge of keeping the connections to the sea mechanically open has now been given to the governmental saltworks under construction in the heart of the reserve. The current creation of evaporation ponds, salt washing, drying and storage facilities, access roads for large trucks, and a large pumping station to pump seawater into newly created concentration ponds surrounded by artificial embankments has clearly created substantial ecological change to the area and will create further change in the near future. Not all of these changes will be detrimental to the biodiversity of the area, as the newly created semi-natural concentration ponds retain water during times when natural mudflats would dry out, thus providing important refueling habitat for many shorebirds and waterfowl. There is also the potential to create conditions suitable for the establishment of breeding colonies of flamingos or avocets within these embankments (cf. Varty & Baha El Din 1991).

17. Integrated Management for Zaranik: The ICBP report (Varty & Baha El Din 1991) makes several management recommendations for the protected area, which have been discussed in detail with the reserve manager and the local authorities during our mission. Clearly a

coordinated and integrated approach to manage this biologically very rich area is urgently needed to preserve its ecological character, its strategic role as a stop-over and refueling site for about 500,000 migratory birds each autumn and its potential for the development of ecotourism. The ICBP report contains a number of management recommendations addressing also the issues of settlements of saline workers at the border of the reserve, access to the reserve, hunting and grazing within the reserve, wardening of the reserve, and the potential for conservation education, promotion of wildlife ecology and training (Varty & Baha El Din 1991).

18. Management support for the Reserve: During our mission we elaborated a project providing technical and financial support to the Zaranik protected area, plus training for the reserve manager and wardens. It is hoped that WWF and ICBP, and potentially other donors can find the funds necessary in the short term to establish a functioning nature reserve that will serve as a showcase and catalyst for other regions of Egypt (cf. draft proposal attached as Annex IV).

19. Integrated Management of Lake Bardawil: The North Sinai Agricultural Development Project with plans to divert Nile water through a tunnel underneath the Suez canal to irrigate reclaimed areas south of Lake Bardawil will inevitably provoke major changes of the ecological character of the Ramsar site; e.g. 200,000-300,000 people are to be settled in the area, and at the current stage of planning, most of the industrial, domestic and agricultural run-off waters draining from the eastern section of the proposed development would flow into the Bardawil lagoon. ICBP has recently assessed positive and negative impacts of the project on birds and their habitats, contracted by the World Bank (Varty et al. 1990). An overall ecological impact assessment is currently underway by the Dutch consultancy firm Euroconsult. Again, there exists an urgent need to tackle management, resource use and waste problems in an integrated way, rather than through a single agency approach, to ensure the sustainable management of the natural resources and the maintenance of the ecological character of the Ramsar site.

Lake Burullus

20. Protection and Fisheries: Lake Burullus does not have any protected area except of the protection its designation as a Ramsar site provides (on paper to its entirety). Again is an important fisheries resource in the northwestern part of the Nile Delta for several thousand fishermen. Unlike at Lake Bardawil they move on the lake in traditional sailing boats (feluccas) due to the shallowness of the lake and the abundant submerged vegetation which makes movements with motor propellers difficult. Only the water police force has inflatable and rigid boats with outboard motors and air propelled boats. There is a fisheries institute in Baltim on the northeastern shore of Lake Burullus which is managing the extent of fishing. Unlike Lake Bardawil which has a closed season for fishing, fishing occurs throughout the year on Lake Burullus, but different mesh sizes of fishing nets are prescribed during different seasons. The provincial authorities expressed their wish to create protected areas covering at least part of the about 50 islands and islets in the lake which provide nesting and resting habitat for many waterbirds, especially the Whiskered Tern for which Lake Burullus is one of the most important wintering sites in the Western Palearctic.

21. In its southern and eastern parts, reed beds (mainly *Phragmites* and *Juncus*) cover large parts of Lake Burullus creating a uniquely rich habitat for many different breeding birds (e.g.

Purple Gallinule, Little Bittern, Pied Kingfisher, etc) and other animals (amphibians, Odonata, water invertebrates etc). The fishermen in turn are complaining that the extent of the reed beds is increasing (currently covering about 25 per cent of the lake surface) thus reducing the open water surface which allows easy access and installation of fishing nets. They try to reduce the reed growth by letting domestic buffalos graze the more accessible parts. Although, this was not very efficient yet in reducing the cover of emergent vegetation, as it is not feasible in the deeper parts of the lake, and the buffalos are becoming quickly wild and get lost. Advice on mechanical means of reed cutting (or rhizom cutting) is sought by the mayor and environmental officers of Baltim.

22. Ecological Changes of Lake Burullus: The reason for the expansion of reeds in Lake Burullus are twofold; in the north, the connection (bughaz) with the Mediterranean tends to clog with drifting sands from the active coastal dunes and silt from the lake. Dredgers were working to open the channel during our visit to allow easy access of marine fishing boats to the harbour of El Burg at the northern shore of the lake and to ensure free seawater inflow to maintain brackish conditions in the lake and allow free movement of coastal fish between the lake and the sea. On the southern shore several drainage channels are bringing large masses of drainage water with heavy fertilizer and pesticide loads into the lake. This contributes significantly to the eutrophication and pollution of the lake and turns its water more fresh. All these factors are blamed to be responsible for the serious decline in fish catch experienced during the last years.

23. Though the environmental officers of Kafr El Sheikh do not consider water pollution as an important problem, as, unlike Lake Manzala in the eastern part of the Nile Delta, there is no major industrial or domestic sewage run-off entering Lake Burullus. Apparently, plans exist to use Lake Burullus as a storage tank for Nile water. Dr Barbara Parmenter (Department of Geography, University of Texas, Austin TX 78712, U.S.A.) was undertaking a socio-economic study in the late eighties on the fisheries of Lake Burullus. The Ramsar Bureau and the provincial authorities should try to obtain a copy of her final report.

24. Reclamation: As already stated in the information provided by the Egyptian authorities at the time of accession to the Ramsar Convention, and reiterated since (cf. paragraph 7), the surface of Lake Burullus was reduced by over 20 per cent during this century due to large scale land reclamation for agriculture and aquaculture. We were told that the reclamation programmes have now been stopped, and that no further surfaces would be reclaimed. Still, we visited recently reclaimed areas south of Baltim which will be turned into a large, government run combined fish and geese farm soon providing much needed protein to a rapidly increasing population of Egypt. The fish mongers on the market in Baltim were selling mainly fish providing from farms and not from the lake.

25. Integrated Management: Clearly, despite the relative healthiness of Lake Burullus compared with Lake Manzala, once the largest and most important wetland of the Nile Delta, but now used as Cairo's sewage recipient, for large scale land reclamation for agriculture, aquaculture, housing and transport, and heavily overfished, similar problems exist at Lake Burullus. They need to be studied in detail and in an integrated way, involving all the Ministries concerned. The administrative situation is relatively easy at Lake Burullus, which lays entirely in the Kafr El Sheikh province, compared to Lake Manzala, which is part of four different provinces. The assistant secretary general of the governor and the head of the environmental office of Kafr El Sheikh province were expressing their desire to receive

technical and financial support from the Ramsar Convention Bureau to address these problems and to propose applicable solutions. It was concluded that Lake Burullus is a suitable Ramsar site for which an application to the Wetland Conservation Fund should be prepared to provide the necessary funds to undertake the most urgent surveys and management studies.

References

Baha El Din, S. & W. Salama (1991) The catching of birds in North Sinai, autumn 1990. Cambridge, U.K.: International Council for Bird Preservation, Study Report no. 45, 45 p.

EEAA (1991) The Egyptian Activities within the framework of the Mediterranean Sea Action Plan. Report by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency submitted to the 7th Ordinary Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution, 24 p.

Ramsar Convention Bureau (1990) Directory of Wetlands of International Importance. Gland, Switzerland, 796 p.

Varty, N. & S. Baha El Din (1991) A review of the status and conservation of the Zaranik protected area, North Sinai, Arab Republic of Egypt, and recommendations for its protection. Cambridge, U.K.: International Council for Bird Preservation, 78 p.

Varty, N., S. Baha El Din & W. Salama (1990) Assessment of the importance of Lake Bardawil for birds and the likely impact of the North Sinai Agricultural Development Project on the region's bird populations and their habitats. Cambridge, U.K.: International Council for Bird Preservation, Final Report to the World Bank, 94 p.

Annex I:

Monitoring Procedure (REC. C.4.7 Annex 1) [omitted]

Annex II:

Itinerary and people contacted

4/5 October 1991 arrival of Luigi Guarrera and Tobias Salathé in Heliopolis/Cairo

5-7 October 1991 mission to Lake Bardawil

8-11 October 1991 participation at meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention in Cairo

12-14 October 1991 mission to Lake Burullus

15 October 1991 departure of TS and LG from Heliopolis/Cairo

Visit to North Sinai province and Lake Bardawil

5 October 1991 Waheed Salama, the General Manager for the Zaranik protected area (EEAA) met TS and LG at Cairo airport and drove them to El Arish for a discussion with the Governor, H.E. General Monir Shash, and the provincial Environmental Director, Mr Abed Allah El-Higawi in the Governor's office. Subjects of discussion were the Ramsar Convention, the management of Lake Bardawil, and possible management support for the Zaranik protected area.

6 October 1991 Visit of the Zaranik protected area with Abed Allah and Waheed Salama, visit of the coastal protected area (SPA Barcelona Convention) between El Arish and Rafah (sanddunes), and discussion of the recommendations made for the management of the Zaranik protected area by ICBP (Varty & Baha El Din 1991) with above in El Arish.

7 October 1991 Travel of W. Salama, TS and LG by car to different access points and fisheries centres at the southern shore of Lake Bardawil, and to Port Said. In Port Said we were met by the people of the Environmental Office of Port Said governorate and had a brief look at the Ashtum El-Gamil protected area on Lake Manzala (which TS visited three years earlier, cf. photo in IWRB News 6:4, 1991).

Additionally we visited briefly the bird markets in El Arish and Port Said selling Quails and protected Purple Gallinules, White Pelicans and raptors (Kestrels, Red-footed Falcons, Harriers, etc).

Visit to Kafr El Sheikh province and Lake Burullus

12 October 1991 Drive in rental car with Drs Gamil Atta and Mohammed El Dalil (of the EWS-ICBP Conservation Education Programme) to the governorate offices at Kafr El Sheikh. As the Governor of this province had been replaced at short notice two days before our visit, we were unable to meet with the new Governor, but discussed Ramsar matters with the Assistant General Secretary of the Governor, Mr Mohamed Mohamed El Khouly, the head of the environmental office, Mr Fayed El Shamily, and his colleagues. In the afternoon we drove on to Baltim and had a first look at Lake Burullus and the dune area on the coast north of Baltim.

13 October 1991 Met by the Water Police Force at Baltim who take us, including Mr Fayed El Shamily, on a trip on the lake with an inflatable boat with outboard motor, we crossed parts of the impressive reed-beds, visited one of the islands and had a look at the area reclaimed for agriculture, fish and fowl farming in the southeastern corner of Lake Burullus. After the field visit discussion with the Mayor of Baltim, Emad El Din Mahmoud and different people of the Baltim fisheries institute.

14 October 1991 Stop-over at the governorate offices in Kafr El Sheikh on our way to Cairo and discussion with environmental staff about the findings of our field visit. In Cairo we had a final discussion with Dr Fohda at Giza Zoo re Ramsar matters (cf. paragraphs 10 to 13).

Annex III:

Information sheet for Lake Bardawil of the Inventory of Mediterranean Special Protection Areas (Barcelona Convention) [omitted]

Annex IV:

Draft proposal for management support for the Zaranik protected area [omitted]