

An den Staatssekretär
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Dear State Secretary

Re: Ecological character of the Ramsar site "Unterer Niederrhein", Nordrhein-Westfalen

On 11 May 1993, I took part, at the invitation of your Ministry, in an application of the Ramsar "Monitoring Procedure" at the Ramsar site of "Unterer Niederrhein" in Nordrhein Westfalen. The purpose of the present letter is to inform you of my conclusions after the visit.

I must apologize for the delay in submitting these conclusions, caused by the fact that in the interim, the Fifth Conference of the Contracting Parties has taken place at Kushiro in Japan, and has dominated the work of the Ramsar Bureau. I understand that a meeting to discuss the future of the site, and in particular the Bislicher Insel, is to be held in the very near future. I hope that my conclusions may be useful for this meeting. The original of my letter is written in English; I add an informal German translation which I myself have made, and request you to be indulgent with any linguistic errors.

The Unterer Niederrhein was designated by the Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit for the Ramsar "List of wetlands of international importance" on 28 October 1983. Since that date there have been regular contacts between the Ramsar Bureau, officials of your ministry and of the Ministerium für Umwelt, Raumordnung und Landwirtschaft des Landes Nordrhein Westfalen about maintaining of the ecological character of this site. I personally have had the opportunity to visit the site on five or six occasions over the last ten years at different times of the year.

Earlier this year, the Bundesministerium invited the Ramsar Bureau to apply the Ramsar Monitoring Procedure at the Unterer Niederrhein Ramsar site. The Ramsar Monitoring Procedure is a mechanism, formally adopted by the Conference of the Contracting Parties in 1990, which enables the Ramsar Bureau to visit Ramsar sites where difficulties in maintaining the ecological character of a Ramsar site have arisen, and offering advice and recommendations to the Contracting Party concerned. The programme organized on 11 May involved a presentation of the site and its current situation at the Kreishaus Wesel during the morning, with a visit to the site, and in particular Bislicher Insel and Orsoyer Rheinbogen, in the afternoon (see attached programme). Among the participants were representatives of your Ministry, of the Nordrhein Westfalen Ministry, of the Kreis Wesel and of a number of bodies responsible for the management of the area.

Since the physical characteristics of the area are well known to you and to your colleagues, I will not dwell on them. Perhaps I may however mention some particular characteristics of the Unter Niederrhein Ramsar site. The site is unusually large for a Ramsar site in the heavily

populated areas of Europe. It covers some 25,000 hectares, including agricultural land, areas where mining and gravel extraction is practised, and major recreation areas for the industrial area of the nearby Ruhrgebiet - as well as the Rhine which is here a major transport artery. The principal reason for the designation of the site under the Ramsar Convention was its growing importance as a wintering area for populations of wild geese (especially White-fronted and Bean Geese) which nest in the Russian tundra.

Very little of the area is in a "natural" state, and indeed much of the former floodplain of the Rhine has been enclosed within high dykes; the management of the site must therefore take account not only of the wintering goose populations, but also of the Ramsar concept of "wise use of wetlands"; priority must be given to preserving what few near-natural areas remain, to maintaining any near-natural functions (e.g., flooding) and, where appropriate and possible, to restoring lost functions. In this respect, I was very happy to see that a Gesamtkonzeption zur Erhaltung und Optimierung des Feuchtgebietes internationaler Bedeutung "Unterer Niederrhein" has been prepared by the Landesanstalt für Ökologie, Landschaftsentwicklung und Forstplanung of Nordrhein Westfalen.

On the basis of my visit on 11 May, reinforced by other previous visits, I should like to offer the following recommendations and conclusions:

1. Maintenance of near-natural areas by creation of nature reserves

While a number of nature reserves have already been established throughout the Ramsar site, certain unprotected sites still retain populations of waterfowl (e.g. breeding Black-tailed Godwits) or areas of botanical interest of high nature conservation value. Nature reserves should be established here as soon as possible.

2. Dike construction along the Rhine

Plans are in hand to realign the route of the Rhine dikes at a number of sections within the Ramsar site. At Orsoyer Rheinbogen, the realigned dikes will open extensive new areas to flooding and to recreation of the original riverine forest ("Auenlandschaft"). This process is greatly to be welcomed and encouraged. At Bislicher Insel, there is considerable discussion about the new dike-line. It would be highly regrettable if the new dike were to be built in a situation close to the bed of the Rhine. Bislicher Insel remains almost the only part of the Ramsar site where a major area is exposed to traditional flooding and immersion. This natural function should be jealously maintained as an integral part of the Ramsar site.

Conservation and/or restoration of riverine forest is a matter of particular international interest. The riverine forests of central Europe have been decreasing rapidly in recent years: there have been losses in Germany and France along the Upper Rhine; in Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia along the March and Thaya; and in Austria, Slovakia and Hungary along the Danube; not to mention the losses, as yet scarcely documented, along the Drava and Sava in former Yugoslavia. At the Kushiro Conference, references were made to riverine forest restoration projects in France and Germany and in Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. I understand that in the Netherlands, too, there are proposals for restoration of the former riverine forests along the lower Rhein; the maintenance and/or restoration of the riverine forest in the Niederrhein Ramsar site are therefore not merely of interest at Nordrhein Westfalen or even German national level, but at international level.

3. Effect on Bislicher Insel of mining below the site

This issue was a major matter of concern at the meeting of 11 May. The Bundesministerium has made federal subsidies available to Nordrhein Westfalen for conservation of the Ramsar site and in particular of Bislicher Insel. The federal authorities have recently called on the authorities in Dusseldorf to repay the grants, on the grounds that subsidence caused by salt extraction under the Ramsar site will exceed the prescribed limit of two metres and will therefore render conservation measures ineffective. I was particularly requested to comment on the effect on Bislicher Insel of a subsidence of more than two metres.

I have already referred in 1 and 2 above to broader, more general considerations, which are in my opinion of major concern in this matter. The greater part of the Ramsar site is not in a natural state, and therefore any remaining near-natural sites should be given high priority. The conservation of Bislicher Insel should be seen in the wider context of the restoration of the original Auenlandschaft along the Rhine. The maintenance of an opening to the Rhein which would allow periodic immersion is therefore of vital importance.

Similarly, the major efforts undertaken by the Nordrhein Westfalen authorities with support from the federal ministry to restore the site - by removing undesirable tourist facilities, by restricting tourist access, by acquisition of large areas of land in the Bislicher Insel area and by restoration of their former land use in order to recreate the original flora and fauna - should be seen in the wider context and not be endangered by discussions of the possible impact of subsidence greater than two metres.

In my view, a subsidence of more than two metres would not compromise the efforts to restore near-natural riverine forest:

Deepening of the Rhine bed is occurring whether or not subsidence is caused by mining operations. This means that it is extremely difficult to calculate the precise effects of a two metre subsidence caused by mining, which may well compensate for the river deepening.

The effects of sedimentation within the Bislicher Insel area will provide compensation for the subsidence caused by mining.

The higher water level in old arms of the Rhine would further mitigate the effect of the subsidence.

Above all, it appears undesirable to put at risk an imaginative restoration project of international interest (carried out entirely in the spirit of the recommendation on wetland restoration, approved by the previous Ramsar Conference in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1990) on rather narrow technical grounds which are difficult if not impossible to quantify in advance.

I therefore hope that it will be possible for your Ministry to continue its support for the Unterer Niederrhein restoration project. I am naturally at your disposal for any further comments.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely
Michael Smart
Assistant Secretary General
cc: Dr. Dieterich
Dr. Neiss

[German version available in hardcopy from the Bureau]