

## STANDING COMMITTEE 25: OPENING STATEMENT BY BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL

Thank you Mr Chairman and good morning everyone..

BirdLife International is delighted, as always, to be here at the Standing Committee. We congratulate the Bureau on their comprehensive preparations for the meeting, and on their achievements over the past year.

I hope it will be helpful to you to find some contributions from BirdLife in the documents before you. For example, the agenda item on conservation of Listed sites is something we have been associated with for a long time, and appended to the agenda paper are two reviews (the second one is the most relevant) of the whole business of how this Convention (and others) respond to changes in the ecological character of special sites.

BirdLife has also developed views on the legal interpretation questions surrounding changes to Ramsar site boundaries and compensation for lost wetlands, and we'll hear more about that later today.

In the paper on the next Conference of Parties you'll find an annex we have provided on the question of the cultural values of wetlands and how they feature in the Convention. This is not just an extra aspect of wetland interest that we should be more aware of, but one that's also sometimes intimately bound up with the ecological management issues at sites as well.

Our written submission on the draft Strategic Plan is reproduced in the documents too, and I'm looking forward to further discussions on some of the fundamental issues raised there. I'd like to make three points about strategy.

First, the Ramsar Convention stands at a significant moment in its history. It has become a superlative global forum for evolving wisdom on wetland issues, and we want to see that continue. But we would also like to restore a higher awareness that Ramsar is also a treaty, and under the treaty Parties have accepted certain formal commitments that need to be honoured with really serious intent. Some of those commitments could bear more pointed attention in the period of the new Strategic Plan. For example Article 3.2 on ecological change has in our view been an under-appreciated provision. If basic treaty obligations on safeguards for the most important sites still need attention, then the rest of the sophisticated development of technical and other agendas will not be enough in themselves to make the Convention a success.

That's why BirdLife has been putting the emphasis we have on things like national policy, national legislation, environmental impact assessment, statutory systems of protected areas, and mechanisms for responding to threat. These might be "old-fashioned" or not very exciting aspects of conservation according to some people, but in our view they are the strong foundations we need to support a lot of the rest of what we are trying to do.

Secondly, in the coming Plan period the Convention should be ready to think about significantly

more development of qualitative measures of wetland status. The increasing number of Contracting Parties and the number and hectarage of sites are great achievements, but they are not a complete indicator of the extent to which the Convention's aims are being achieved. Maybe the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment initiative that's on our agenda this week will help with this, or maybe we need something else, but in the next few years I think the world will expect us to be able to have our finger on the pulse of what's really happening with wetland resources in a qualitative sense.

Finally Mr Chairman, it's to be hoped that our agenda will be shared by a broader and broader range of people, in local communities but also at higher political levels in national governments and international institutions. As an aside I would mention that every day we continue to be impressed by the enormous difference being made to these "outreach" efforts by the superb website that the Bureau operates, and we'd like to pay a special tribute to the heroic efforts made by Dwight Peck in the quiet revolution that he has achieved in this area. Since he also writes the minutes of these meetings, and is very modest, that kind of comment doesn't always get included in the report; but I hope it will be this time!

At a technical level, in our opinion, Ramsar is second to none. We all still have a big challenge in making it count where it needs to, at political level, and I hope we'll give some thought to that, this week, as well.

Thank you very much.

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