



Speech on behalf of WWF at the first session of 25th Meeting of the Ramsar Standing committee

Dear Chairman, standing committee members, partners and other observers.

On behalf of the WWF network I thank you for the opportunity to explain our contribution to the Ramsar process. Our common goal is to conserve the biodiversity of freshwater ecosystems and manage them wisely for the benefit of nature and people. WWF continues to make that commitment having supported the Ramsar Convention right from the start. Conservation of rivers, lakes, marshes and their catchment areas is an integral part of WWF's mission. Last year WWF spent between CHF 30-35 million on freshwater conservation projects in more than 70 countries. But this is just a 'drop in the ocean'. Conservation and wise management of wetlands and rivers is a major challenge and cannot be done by organisations or governments acting alone. Global effort is needed to save fast-declining freshwater ecosystems.

WWF's Living Planet Index clearly shows that, we are losing freshwater species (and thus ecosystems) much faster than terrestrial and marine species. This has serious implications for people as well as for biodiversity. It is already clear that the freshwater crisis is real, not only in developing countries but in rich countries as well. Indiscriminate use of water coupled with climate change is already causing serious economic, social and ecological damage. This year floods and droughts have caused devastating effects in many parts of the world. In India for example, drought and floods hit hard within a matter of months. As you are aware, the conservation of wetlands and freshwater biodiversity needs to be more widely recognised for its critical role in addressing these threats and supporting social and economic development. The Ramsar Convention must increasingly play a leading part in this.

Living Waters Campaign

As most of you know, WWF launched its 'Living Waters' Campaign in May 1999 during the Ramsar COP-7 in Costa Rica. The choice to launch it there was clear to us. The Ramsar Convention is the key global instrument that governments can use in conserving and using freshwater resources sustainably. The campaign has two specific targets related to the strategic plan of Ramsar. One is aligned with the current thinking of wetland conservation - conserving river ecosystems as part of catchment management approaches. Working with partners, we are making significant progress in integrating biodiversity thinking into the management of five large rivers – the Mekong, Orinoco, Vistula, Niger and Yangtze. The other is to secure over 25 million ha of wetlands that are newly committed for conservation and sustainable use. Our efforts focus on large-scale designations (at least 500,000 ha/country) of new wetlands of International importance mainly in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Projects undertaken so far in 14 countries cover a total of about 15 million ha of wetlands of which close to 10 million ha have already been committed. Some of you have contributed significantly to this success. The campaign is looking way beyond large scale designations by planting seeds for the logical following steps- preparation of management plans and ultimately actual implementation of these in the field. Regarding site designations we would like to request the countries that pledged sites at COP7 (398 sites) to fulfil their commitment by COP8 (since so far only 30 sites have been designated).

Some recent highlights include:

- The 'Lake Chad Heads of State Summit' in July 2000- where member countries of the Lake Chad Basin committed to designate the entire lake as a transboundary Ramsar site (2.5 million ha)
- Danube Ministers establishing a 700,000 Ha 'Green Corridor' of wetlands and floodplains
- India, China and Cameroon committing more than 3 million Ha of protected wetlands on World Wetlands Day
- Colombia designating the Lake La Cocha and its "Paramo" (unique type of high altitude Andean wetland) in April 2000

These are your achievements. WWF is there to assist and in some cases provide financial support. Our Living Waters Campaign is only part of the total effort required. Major initiatives are needed at the regional, national and local levels. WWF is also active through its regional and national programmes.

Europe

Lower Danube Green Corridor: Commitments made on World Environment Day in June 2000 by the governments of Romania, Ukraine, Moldova and Bulgaria towards a "Lower Danube Green Corridor", representing the largest cross-border wetland protection and restoration initiative in Europe.

Transboundary Prespa Lakes Park: Commitments made by the governments of Greece, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) on World Wetlands Day, 2000 to form a transboundary Prespa Park in the Balkans to "maintain and protect the unique ecological values of the area through peaceful collaboration".

Doñana National Park : WWF played a major role in bringing the responsible authorities together which has led to significant improvements in the ecological restoration schemes in Doñana region in response to the toxic spill of 1998 and the impacts of agriculture and tourism.

Vistula and Odra Rivers. mobilisation of Polish NGOs and international pressure (including from the Ramsar Bureau and IUCN) to prevent the funding of further dams and river engineering schemes affecting the Vistula and Odra rivers in Poland and to secure funding options for the development of sustainable alternative.

Water Pricing in Europe: development position on water pricing policy as applied to the European region and inputs to the European Commission Communication on water pricing, ensuring that environmental and resource costs are addressed

WWF has also been involved in developing guidelines for sustainable waterways; identifying the best practices and policy/economic instruments needed to facilitate restoration of rivers and floodplains; development of a European wide "Water and Wetland Index" concerning government performance; and lobbying to gain EU commitments for regulations and actions to prevent pollution from Metal mining.

Africa

In addition to the Lake Chad summit WWF is having several on the ground projects for conserving some of the most unique wetland ecosystems, for example:

- "Partners for Wetlands" initiative (Zambia)
- WWF-Madagascar involvement in preparing wetland strategy.

Asia/Pacific

WWF- Australia was actively involved at having Lake Narran listed last year. However, the catchment area of this lake in Queensland has had an increase in water extraction, which is a major problem. WWF has been pressing the federal government to take firm action to encourage Queensland to reduce the water extractions. Possible suggestion is to have the site listed as a Montreux record site. WWF is also actively involved in the investigation on possible activation of Australia's new national legislation which specifies impacts on Ramsar sites.

WWF-India is closely working with Government of India to implement the pledge at COP-7 to include 25 more Ramsar sites.

As mentioned before, these are small efforts. The challenge is great. We are losing some of the most interesting ecosystems faster than we are repairing others. WWF does have some serious concerns.

Listing of sites is not enough:

Listing wetlands as Ramsar sites is a starting point. Unfortunately too often there is no significant improvement after designation. Countries should invest and take more serious systematic measures at all levels to conserve and manage wetlands while using them wisely.

Montreux Record:

There are 59 sites on Montreux record. Some of them have been on the list since its creation. This is defeating the very purpose of creating the list. Only a few sites have so far been removed. SC needs to seriously take note of this and consider recommendations on how to deal with this situation.

For the Future:

As part of the 30th Anniversary of Ramsar WWF would like to:

- actively promote the designation of under-represented wetland types such as gueltas, oases, crater lakes, aquifers and high altitude wetlands including paramos and glaciers.
- make a call to governments to help reaching a total 100 million Ha of actually designated Ramsar sites by COP-8. The "Living Waters" campaign will continue to support large scale designation towards this objective.

And also make the following suggestions to the CPs with support of the Bureau:

- Propose a timeframe to improve management of Montreux record sites and announce a target to remove at least half of these before COP-8.
- Undertake a major review of the status of Ramsar sites and propose specific suggestions to improve them. Again I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address the SC. WWF will continue to be an active and interested partner that assists the Convention to reach our common goals.