

Standing Committee 26

Opening Statement by BirdLife International

David Pritchard, 5 December 2001

Thank you, Mr Chairman, and greetings to you all, once again, from BirdLife International.

We always say things at the beginning of these meetings about how significant they are. This one might be uniquely significant – not just because it's the one before a COP that will crown three decades of activities for wetlands under this Convention, but also because of the milestone which next year represents, in global attention to environmental treaties in general. In the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the position and role of all these conventions, in effect, is up for review. That's a responsibility on all of us to be extremely clear and committed about the "make-a-difference" impact of everything we do under the Convention.

Once again, some of what is in front of you in your agenda this week is the result of work done by BirdLife. As Partners to the Convention, which means partners also in Contracting Parties' efforts at national level, we continue to strive to make serious high-quality professional and technical inputs to Ramsar, for the most part voluntarily, with our own resources.

One of our lead areas of activity continues to be the identification and protection of wetlands of international importance. During this year we published a landmark report, documenting candidate Ramsar sites in Europe, and based on BirdLife's Important Bird Areas inventory. A new IBA inventory for Africa has just been launched, and in due course that will be used in the same way. The conservation and wise use of sites once they're designated is a high priority, hence our participation in and help with the funding of Ramsar Advisory Missions, work on legal interpretation aspects, and mechanisms for dealing with change in ecological character under Article 3.2 of the Convention. We welcome the determination signaled in the draft Bureau Work Plan to follow up all instances of concern under Article 3.2, and we welcome the open reporting of these issues, for example in the Secretary General's report. We note, though, that nearly all the instances reported there are initiated by NGOs and not by Parties. That is further evidence that Article 3.2 is not working as it was intended, and we urge you to support the proposals in Agenda item 12.3 for addressing that.

You might think that the emphasis we're putting on sites is a bit old-fashioned, or elitist, compared with things like the wider water resources management and human welfare issues that come into Ramsar's agenda. Obviously those things are vital. But if 2002 is to be a "calling to account", we need to look closely at the core basics, things distinctive to Ramsar, and our indicators of the wider scene. If we're not succeeding there, we can't succeed with the rest.

The agenda paper for the item on the World Summit refers to the Ramsar Site List as a tool for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation, and mentions the benefits of things like demonstration sites for coordinated implementation of different conventions. We agree, and we look for good capitalising on the tried and tested long-term consistent efforts, and all the wealth of lessons that are being learned, from the Ramsar List.

I am sure you will be struck this time, Mr Chairman, by the enormous depth and breadth of high quality materials forming the basis of proposed COP decisions coming from the Scientific and Technical Review Panel. BirdLife pays tribute to the Chair of the Panel, and we strongly urge the Committee to support the proposals before you for realistic resourcing of this fundamental area of the Convention's activities in future.

Finally, in the environmental world generally there is now a huge burgeoning industry of global data tools, assessments and analysis. Ramsar and the STRP are doing a very good job on that. What's much less developed, so far, is the whole area of what to do with the results: advice to decision-makers and policy-developers on options for responses to the driving pressures on ecosystems. Ramsar, we think, is one of the best able to give a lead on that – we'll support it in doing so, and we hope you will, too.

We wish you all well in your efforts.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.