

WWF International statement to the Ramsar Convention's 26th Standing Committee Meeting, Gland, 5 December 2001

Mr Jamie Pittock, Director, WWF Living Waters Programme

WWF's wetlands conservation work with the Ramsar Convention

At CoP7 in 1999 WWF launched its Living Waters Campaign. I am pleased to report that in the subsequent two years we received commitments to designate more than 30 million ha of wetlands for conservation, including more than 20 million ha as Ramsar sites in 15 countries.

This work has been made possible by the close collaboration between WWF, staff of the Ramsar Bureau and with key Contracting Parties. Two of many deserving examples concern Algeria and Bolivia. The Algerian Government has designated 1.8 million ha in ten sites. We are particularly welcome Algeria's decision to place one site on the Montreux Record immediately, and WWF is helping finance the work by the Government to reduce the threat to its ecological character from encroaching sand dunes. In Bolivia the Government has designated 4.7 million ha of the Pantanal wetlands as a Ramsar site, part of South America's largest wetland, setting an example for neighbouring countries to emulate.

WWF has come to understand from our work with developing nations the importance placed on the cultural values of wetlands by these countries and their local and indigenous peoples. We welcome the discussion underway leading up to COP8 on the opportunities for recognizing and conserving these values through the Convention.

In June this year WWF commenced a new three year Living Waters Programme with ten year targets, which include:

1. Designation of more than 250 million ha of wetland protected areas;
2. Sustainable management of 50 river basins globally;
3. Sustainable use of water by industry and agriculture.

Wetland sites and the Convention

We invite the Contracting Parties to the Convention to share our target of conserving over 250 million hectares – around 20% of the world's wetlands - within ten years, and suggest we should aim to secure 100 million hectares by CoP8, an increase from 87 million hectares today.

WWF notes with concern, however, that of the 400 wetlands pledged for listing under the Convention at CoP7, less than 70 have been designated. We call on the Contracting Parties concerned to redouble their efforts to fulfil their pledges to designate the 400 sites by CoP8.

Position of the Convention in global debates

The next few years will be critical in the global debate on freshwater management. The September 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development will be followed by the 2003 International Year of Freshwater, including the March 2003 World Water Forum.

In WWF's view the Ramsar Convention must draw on its work of the last six years and carefully position itself at the forefront of this debate, as a Convention that contributes to solutions to poverty alleviation, and sustainable water and river basin management. COP8 in November 2002 is an important opportunity to engage a wider audience to demonstrate the relevance of the Convention's sustainable development and water management expertise.

The suggested appointment of an STRP support and freshwater officer would be a key initiative to enhance the Convention's capacity in this global debate.

In this context WWF notes with pleasure the applications from the Lake Chad Basin Commission and Niger Basin Authority to join the Ramsar Convention as partners. WWF and the Bureau have worked closely together with these river basin authorities to progress wetlands conservation and sustainable development. We consider their interest in a closer relationship an indication of the potential for the Convention to be recognized as a leader in sustainable development.

Bureau management and budget

WWF's successes in promoting Ramsar site designation and working with river basin authorities would not have been possible without a partnership with the Convention and the skill and dedication of the Bureau staff. WWF has worked particularly closely with the Convention's Regional Coordinators to ensure information and resources are focused to offer the most support to contracting parties.

We congratulate the Secretary General and the Bureau on their excellent management, producing yet another balanced budget.

No-one can doubt this is among the world's most efficient and effective Conventions. We only have to log onto the website to see the data change from week to week on the number of wetlands and contracting parties contributing to the Convention. Given the increasing workload on Bureau staff, with contracting parties increasing in number from 92 at COP7 in 1999 to 130 today, it is remarkable how much is achieved on the Convention's shoestring budget.

The budget of the Convention is a quarter to half of the size of other comparable conventions. For example, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, with 154 contracting parties, us a budget of US\$4.6 million and staff of 24 compared with Ramsar's meagre US\$1.8 million and 13 staff.

WWF calls on the contracting parties to better resource the Convention to a level comparable to similar treaties. At the very least, the Convention should be able to fund the core activities it needs to survive from its core budget, such as supporting the work of the STRP and holding Conferences of Contracting Parties.

We appreciate that many countries face difficult economic times. Yet we ask each of the contracting party representatives here to look into your hearts, go back to the cold places occupied by national finance departments, and do what you can to resource this most effective of conventions.

Summary

In summary, WWF calls on the Contracting Parties at this Standing Committee meeting to further advance wetlands conservation through the Convention by:

1. Enhancing our efforts to reserve and manage wetlands of international importance;
2. Positioning the Convention to best demonstrate its solutions to the global priorities of poverty alleviation, and sustainable water and river basin management;
3. Funding the Convention to an adequate extent, comparable to that of similar treaties.

Thank you.