

Agenda item 10.3

**Review and streamlining of procedures for describing Ramsar Sites at designation:**  
**updating the the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* and the format of the Ramsar Information Sheet**

*Important note.* The Standing Committee is urged to read the attached STRP briefing note provided below, which outlines the rationale, process of review, and issues addressed in developing the proposed streamlined procedures and documents concerning Ramsar Sites, *before* reviewing the Draft COP11 Resolution, revised RIS and revised *Strategic Framework* documents.

**Action requested:** The Standing Committee is invited to:

- i) consider the process and recommendations from the STRP;
- ii) approve for finalization by the STRP and Secretariat for consideration by COP11:
  - a) the Draft COP11 Resolution on these matters (DOC. SC42-18-01Add.1);
  - b) the Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands- 2012 revision (DOC. SC42-18-01Add.2), to be annexed to the Draft Resolution; and
  - c) the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) – 2012 revision (DOC. SC42-18-01 Add.3), to be annexed to the Draft Resolution; and
- iii) endorse the proposal from the STRP and Secretariat to prepare an implementation plan for the introduction of streamlined procedures for Ramsar Site data and information handling, covering the preparatory period to COP11, the transitional period following COP11, and the introduction of the new procedures in 2014.

**Note by the Secretariat**

1. At the 41<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee, the Committee was briefed by the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel on the processes adopted by the STRP for reviewing and streamlining procedures for Ramsar Site selection and designation and the data and information handling issues associated with those (DOC. SC41-26).
2. Since SC41 the Panel, led by thematic work area lead David Stroud, have made considerable further progress in finalizing its review and preparation of a revised, streamlined and consolidated Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) and its accompanying *Strategic Framework* for Ramsar Site selection and designation.
3. Although there remains some further work to be done by the STRP to finalise these draft COP11 materials, given the importance to all Contracting Parties of these core documents for a key Convention process, both the Panel and the Secretariat consider that they are

now sufficiently complete to seek Standing Committee review and approval for finalisation at the earliest opportunity.

4. In order to help the Standing Committee and all Parties understand the rationale and process followed for the proposed improvements to each of these materials, the STRP has prepared a briefing note on these matters. It is anticipated that this briefing note will also be available for use in the regional COP11 preparatory meetings and as an Information Paper to COP11.
5. There are some particularly important points in relation to the process and proposed COP11 draft materials that should be noted. These include:
  - i) The work has been a collaborative and iterative process between Contracting Parties, the Secretariat, International Organization Partners (IOPs), and the STRP. For example, a sample of Contracting Parties have provided advice (through a questionnaire survey) on current issues and problems with the existing RIS and *Strategic Framework* that needed to be addressed, and have and or testing the revised Ramsar Information Sheet using their existing Ramsar Site information;
  - ii) The revised *Strategic Framework* is largely a reorganization of existing text from the previous editions of the *Strategic Framework* and other, partly duplicative, guidance materials developed over the past years concerning RIS preparation and the Ramsar Site designation processes. The material has been restructured into a more logical and consistent sequence of sections, with clear cross-referencing from each part of the *Framework* guidance to the relevant field of the RIS.
  - iii) The revised *Ramsar Information Sheet* (RIS) likewise contains a similar number of fields to the current RIS, but these have been reorganized into a clearer sequence, and each field has been cross-referenced to the relevant section of the guidance in the revised *Strategic Framework*. In paper form, the revised RIS format is physically longer, but this is because the format moves from current 'free-text' descriptions to coded 'tick-boxes' or checklists. There are several important reasons for this, notably that:
    - a) this will avoid the current risks of incorrect coding by Secretariat staff when interpreting free-text fields for entry into the Ramsar Sites Database (RSDB), because the Parties will be coding this information themselves when preparing the RIS;
    - b) the revised format has been designed in such a way that all of the data and information can subsequently be automatically entered into a database (i.e., similar to the Secretariat's present system for handling Parties' National Report information); and
    - c) the revised RIS format has also been designed so that it can be readily developed as an 'on-line' form for Parties to compile and submit new designations and updates of existing sites. The future development of such an on-line system would finally respond to the request in Resolution VIII.13 (2002) for such a system to be established.

6. The part of the revised RIS dealing with ecological character of the wetland being designated has been designed to be consistent with the format for Ecological Character Description (as well as for baseline wetland inventory), in accordance with the intent of Resolution X.15 (2008). For those Parties that, prior to designation (or to updating), have made an ecological character description in line with the Resolution X.15 format this means that it should be straightforward to transfer the relevant data and information into the revised RIS format. More detailed ecological character descriptions may be annexed to the globally-standard RIS itself.
7. The Secretariat considers that these revised formats and updated mechanisms will significantly streamline the processes of compiling, checking, and entering data at all stages of the procedure, and they will also permit enhanced consistency and the availability of the full range of data and information contained in the RIS.
8. The STRP and the Secretariat consider that it will also be important to prepare and make available to the Parties a clear implementation plan and timelines covering the preparatory period to CO11, the transitional period following COP11, and the introduction of the new procedures and data handling mechanisms in 2014. This would include a set of answers to ‘frequently asked questions (FAQs)’ to help explain the processes and their implications.
9. It is hoped that an outline of this plan and its timelines will be available by the time of SC42, and that it can also be available for RIS/*Strategic Framework* discussions in the regional COP11 preparatory meetings, as well as as an Information Paper to COP11.

## **Background, rationale and issues for the 2012 revisions proposed for the Strategic Framework and Ramsar Site Information Sheet**

**Briefing paper prepared by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel**

### **BACKGROUND**

1. The organization and reporting of information about Ramsar Sites lies at the heart of the Convention’s activities. It informs diverse needs such as:
  - the international mapping of site locations;
  - knowledge of which wetland types occur within national and international networks of sites – and thus of the extent of these wetland types so conserved;
  - the reasons why Ramsar Sites have been designated by Contracting Parties;
  - the pressures and threats acting on individual sites, and thus, at international scales, knowledge about which issues should be priorities for the strategic attention of the Convention inasmuch as they affect multiple sites;
  - and indeed, all aspects of the effectiveness of the Convention with respect to Wetlands of International Importance.
2. The importance of this key need was specifically highlighted in the Final Act of the 1971 Conference in Ramsar, Islamic Republic of Iran, which stated that “the entries in the List of Wetlands of International Importance which is to be maintained under the Convention

could usefully be supplemented by descriptions of the biotopes involved and an enumeration of the bird species especially in need of protection therein.”

3. The particular emphasis given to this information requirement, before any consideration had been given to other processes supporting the Convention, was significant. However, it was not until COP4 in 1990 an Information Sheet was formally established as a means of collating this information.
4. The format of Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) was revised at subsequent meetings of the COP but at a frequency that balanced the need for stability in established processes with both the development of the Convention’s growing needs for better strategic overview of the List of Ramsar Sites and the technological abilities to disseminate this key information to the wide spectrum of users.
5. Most recently, COP10 (in Resolution X.10) requested the STRP to undertake a number of tasks related to the Convention’s guidance on selection of Ramsar Sites and its need for data and information at the point of designation. These tasks included:
  - a) undertaking a review of the consistency, logic and clarity of the targets and guidelines that support Ramsar’s site selection criteria;
  - b) seeking the views of users of this guidance;
  - c) undertaking a review of options for revising the format of the Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS), in an effort to ensure linkages and synergies with other Ramsar instruments for collecting and reporting data and information on listed sites; and
  - d) further considering the data and information needs related to the description of ecological character at the point of designation (and assessment of potential change to that ecological character following designation).

### **THE RATIONALE FOR STRP’S APPROACH TO THIS TASK**

6. In view of the significant linkages in the nature of these tasks, they have been undertaken together in an integrated manner so as to aim to harmonise the relevant technical guidances and to avoid as far as possible the risk of future changes.
7. The STRP has approached this work through the adoption of a number of principles that have helped inform approaches. These, in no priority order, are:
  - i) that the review requested by COP 10 should be sufficiently comprehensive to ensure no further changes to the RIS in the medium term<sup>1</sup>;
  - ii) that there should be clear needs and uses for the data and information that Contracting Parties are requested to provide;
  - iii) that information reported should be usable for informing multiple Convention processes – and indeed should potentially inform the needs and processes of other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs);

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is impossible to rule out further changes in the long-term because of ever changing needs and circumstances of Contracting Parties.

- iv) that all aspects of data and information reported by Contracting Parties, both currently and in the future, should be readily available to others through the Convention's Ramsar Sites Information Service. This is not the case at present – see below<sup>2</sup>;
  - v) that no significantly greater reporting for Contracting Parties should be created by the redesign of the RIS. Indeed, every opportunity should be taken to simplify reporting to facilitate the ease with which the RIS can be completed at designation and updated subsequently;
  - vi) that, accordingly, mechanisms for on-line data capture (and database-to-database information transfer) should be developed (as urged in Resolution VIII.13 (2002)), thus eliminating the costly and inefficient re-entry of RIS information to the Ramsar Sites Database by Secretariat staff;
  - vii) further to iii) above, that the Convention's information processes should be structured such that there is a technical capacity for information provided by Contracting Parties to be readily provided to other MEAs and relevant international bodies;
  - viii) that the approach adopted should draw on the practical experience of those responsible for the completion and use of data and information in RISs – accepting that there will never be unanimity of approaches and thus that there will always need to be compromises to achieve consensus;
  - ix) that, in compiling the RIS and in subsequent management of the data, there should be a clear separation between information provided at designation and its subsequent update, in order to provide a clear audit of changes at a site over time;
  - x) that proposals should clearly recognise and respond to the widely varying administrative capacity of Contracting Parties and the extent of available data and information about Ramsar Sites, and should respond to this both in terms of the scope and structure of relevant guidance and the expectations for information provision. There is no expectation that all fields will be completed for many Ramsar Sites; and
  - xi) that the description of the ecological character of the wetland should lie at the heart of the RIS, both with respect of its initial description and to facilitate the subsequent assessment of change.
8. With the assistance of Secretariat, the STRP has sought input from individuals in Contracting Parties and others with recent experience of compiling and submitting RISs. Learning from such experience has been important in avoiding potential ambiguities in new proposals. These inputs are gratefully acknowledged below and have been highly significant to the completion of this task.

## **APPROACH TO THE PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS**

### ***2012 Strategic Framework***

9. The approach adopted by the STRP has been to:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, reported information on species status is 'degraded' into categorical information related to higher taxonomic groups.

- i) ‘repackage’ the various existing agreed guidances which have been developed separately since the initial adoption of the RIS at COP4 and have accordingly accumulated a degree of unnecessary overlap and duplication. This revised *Strategic Framework* largely comprises existing adopted guidance, but it has been re-ordered, better structured, and its duplications removed so as to be more easily understood by Contracting Parties and other users. It also brings together a range of other guidance adopted by Ramsar into a single document and integrates the Ecological Character Description Sheet adopted by Resolution X.15;
  - ii) ensure that the guidances and proposals reflect the very variable extent of data and information on sites available in different countries. The ‘ideal’ extent may be impracticable in some developing countries owing to resource and other constraints. Some aspects of the guidance are presented as a hierarchical approach which recognises that some countries are less ‘data-rich’ than others;
  - iii) simplify the guidance and provide worked examples and illustrative case studies that may help those compiling (or revising) Ramsar Information Sheets (the latter through linked pages on the Ramsar website);
  - iv) provide a more consistent structuring for the guidance associated with each Criterion, drafting additional text as required;
  - v) provide a more consistent structuring for the guidance associated with under-represented wetland types, drafting additional text as required; and
  - vi) remove the ‘Long-term Target’ associated with each Criterion, given the many inconsistencies and ambiguities in the expression of these and the fact that some of them are merely elaborations of the criteria or rather general statements of intent, rather than specific ‘targets’.
10. Table 1 summarises the specific issues concerning the *Strategic Framework* that have been raised during the review and the responses to these issues.

### **2012 Ramsar Information Sheet**

11. The rationale behind the redesign of the RIS has been to:
- i) simplify the form;
  - ii) provide a logical structure for the different types of information required that will aid compilers in their task;
  - iii) better capture information on the ecological character of the Ramsar Site; and
  - iv) facilitate the development of on-line reporting and RIS submission.
12. Simplification has been undertaken by moving (where possible) from ‘free-text’ descriptions to a ‘tick-box’ or checklist approach. Wherever possible, the tick-box options adopt existing feature categories or definitions already used in the Ramsar Sites Database (RSDB). The difference is that Contracting Parties will categorise the information for their own Ramsar Site, rather than the Secretariat having to interpret and codify textual information provided by Parties.

13. Following STRP recommendation, a major part (Part 3) of the revised RIS form is drawn directly from (and relates to) Ecological Character Description (ECD) categories. This follows from the rationale of Resolution X.15, which tried to conceptually 'join-up' the Convention's different data and information instruments.
14. The result of incorporating the ECD categories as a central part of the RIS (especially a check-list of ecological services) is that a number of previous RIS sections can either be deleted or merged, resulting in an overall simplification of the form. Overall, the form should be significantly easier for Parties to complete, especially following the development of the check-box approach.
15. A central need, repeatedly expressed by Contracting Parties and others, is for an unambiguous description of ecological character at the point of designation which can subsequently act as a baseline description. The STRP's work has shown that a significant amount of the data and information used with the Ecological Character Description Sheet can be delivered by the Ramsar Information Sheet. Ensuring that the RIS delivers the necessary information on ecological character has the advantage of:
  - i) reducing reporting burdens by collecting data just once that then can be used for several different international processes;
  - ii) ensuring that data collected at the time of a site's designation much better defines the ecological character of the site at that time, thus enabling future changes from this baseline to be assessed; and
  - iii) creating the potential for using data collected at the point of Ramsar Site designation (and updates thereof) for other MEA reporting processes. This has still to be explored in detail.
16. Table 2 summarises the specific issues concerning the RIS format that have been raised during the review and the responses to these issues.

#### **Future development of the Convention's information systems for Ramsar Sites**

17. Consultations have indicated a widespread desire for a major redevelopment of the Convention's information systems, especially in moving on from existing processes where Parties submit a 'paper' RIS and Secretariat staff manually re-enter that data into the Ramsar Sites Database.
18. Systems for on-line submission of RIS should be developed, and indeed such developments were specifically requested by COP8 in 2002. Resolution VIII.13:

REQUESTS the Ramsar Bureau and Wetlands International, working with interested Contracting Parties, to develop protocols for the electronic submission of RISs, where this is possible and desirable, so as to facilitate the supply of data from the information systems of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Sites Database.  
([www.ramsar.org/pdf/res/key\\_res\\_viii\\_13\\_e.pdf](http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/res/key_res_viii_13_e.pdf))

19. The revised RIS format has been designed to aid in this development of on-line information provision, particularly through the use of ‘drop-down’ menus and simple check-lists. There are now technical means by which much or all information in such a format can be directly captured from an RIS form and entered into the database without the need for any re-keying of data by staff.
20. Furthermore, the present Ramsar Sites Database, maintained for the Convention by Wetlands International, is in any case in urgent need of full redevelopment. Currently a) like the RIS itself, it has been progressively modified over time in a piecemeal fashion rather than under a strategic design framework; b) it does not accept all information provided in an RIS (e.g., species-level information); c) it employs seriously outdated software which has increasing limitations and difficulties in maintaining and further modifying the database structure and data management system; and d) it cannot accept data and information entry automatically from a ‘paper’ or on-line RIS.
21. With the introduction of the ‘2012 revised’ format of the RIS, it will thus be timely to redevelop the Ramsar Sites Database to increase the effectiveness of RIS data and information management. Such redevelopment may need additional short-term funding, but would subsequently release significant amounts of Secretariat staff time for more productive and useful tasks.
22. Given the varying capacities of Parties, it is anticipated that the *RIS – 2012 revision* format would be available as both a Web-based on-line submission system and a ‘paper’ instrument.

### **Under-represented wetland types**

23. Recent international assessments (see Beck *et al.* 2011) have highlighted the 85% global loss of bivalve (shellfish) reefs, a wetland type which provides a wide range of ecosystem services and is of significant economic benefit in the regions where reefs occur. Bivalve (shellfish) reefs are not listed as a specific wetland type in the adopted Classification of Ramsar Wetlands applied in the designation of Ramsar Sites, and although bivalve (shellfish) reefs undoubtedly do occur in a number of coastal and estuarine Ramsar Sites, their presence and importance appears not to be generally recognized.
24. To promote their consideration as an important and threatened wetland type, the STRP has drafted specific additional guidance to aid the designation of bivalve (shellfish) reefs as Ramsar Sites, and this is incorporated in the *Strategic Framework – 2012 revision*.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## References

Beck, M.W., Brumbaugh, R.D., Airoidi, L., Carranza, A., Coen, L.D., Crawford, C., Defeo, O., Edgar, G.J., Hancock, B., Kay, M.C., Lenihan, H.S., Luckenbach, M.W., Toropova, C.L. & Zhang, G. & Guo, X. 2011. Oyster reefs at risk and recommendations for conservation, restoration, and management. *Bioscience* 61(2):107-116.

**Table 1. Specific issues concerning the *Strategic Framework* raised during the review, and the STRP solutions to these issues.**

Issues raised	STRP solutions
Multiple sources of overlapping guidance as to how to complete RIS  Poorly structured as a consequence of past partial revisions: information on the same topic in various different places	All guidance consolidated in single document (2012 Strategic Framework), clearly cross-referenced to 2012 RIS  Guidance restructured to assist users, with multiple linkages to RIS and other sources of relevant information
Not all Parties have the same levels of available information/capacity	Guidance structured hierarchically: a) key messages first; then b) more detail for those Parties with more sophisticated national monitoring / capacity
Guidance related to Criteria poorly structured, incomplete and inconsistent	Reformatted to uniform structure: <b><i>Criterion X</i></b> What this criterion is seeking to achieve? How to interpret this criterion – what does it mean? What data and information is needed to apply this criterion? Potential ambiguities/pitfalls in applying this criterion Where to go for further help or information

**Table 2. Specific issues concerning the Ramsar Information Sheet raised during the review, and the STRP solutions to these issues.**

Issues raised	STRP solutions
RIS lacking logical organization	RIS given a clear and logical structure: <b>Part 1:</b> Administrative and locational details <b>Part 2:</b> Why is the site internationally important? (Criteria for designation) <b>Part 3:</b> What is the site like? (Ecological character description) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Ecological components</li> <li>b) Ecological processes</li> <li>c) Ecosystem services</li> </ol> <b>Part 4:</b> How is the site managed? (Conservation and management) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Land tenure and management ('about managers')</li> <li>b) Conservation threats and responses ('about management')</li> </ol>
RIS should include unambiguous description of ecological character at the point of designation which can act as a baseline description. Current RIS does this poorly.	Ecological Character Description moved to the structural centre of the RIS with fields drawn from the Ecological Character Description Sheet (adopted by Resolution X.15)
Unclear separation of data and data handling process in relation to description of site at the time of designation and subsequent updates of that description	Clearly distinguishable update fields specifically linked to specified time periods Anticipated delivery through use of drop-down fields in proposed on-line system Any enhanced information system to be able to clearly manage data relating to different periods (in contrast to status quo)
Multiple sources of overlapping guidance as to how to complete RIS	All guidance consolidated in single document ( <i>Strategic Framework – 2012 revision</i> ), clearly cross-referenced to 2012 RIS
Existing RIS largely descriptive and textual, resulting in the need for further interpretation by Secretariat staff and difficult to directly computerise RIS format not well-designed for handling by modern information systems	Move to more 'categorical' data – yes/no or presence/absence type fields <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• simpler for Parties</li> <li>• easier to input to database</li> <li>• easier database-to-database RIS submissions</li> <li>• helpful for development of on-line RIS submission</li> <li>• categories proposed are those already used in current Ramsar Sites Database, which will continue to be compatible with existing data summaries</li> </ul>
Information on species presence at Ramsar Sites reported by Parties but not recorded or made available through the Ramsar Sites Database	Clear fields to capture information about plant and animal species and their status Adoption of CITES taxonomy as standard for completion of species information in RIS
Lack of clarity as to how to report Invasive Alien Species at Ramsar Sites (as requested by Resolution VIII.18)	Specific sub-fields for reporting of Invasive Alien Species in relevant plant and animal fields.