

42nd meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

**Statement by IUCN Director-General Julia Marton-Lefèvre
17 May 2011, Gland, Switzerland**

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Thank you, Mr. Chair,
Distinguished Members of the Standing Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, I want to warmly welcome the Ramsar Standing Committee back to Gland. In fact, given that the 41st meeting was generously hosted by the Republic of Georgia, this is the first Standing Committee meeting to be held in our new Conservation Centre.

Our vision for the Conservation Centre is to provide a home not only for IUCN, but also for the growing family of organizations working towards the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Today, in addition to our long-standing colleagues from the Ramsar Secretariat, we host the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the MAVA Foundation and La Fondation Internationale du Banc d'Arguin – FIBA.

The atmosphere here in our 'conservation campus' is vibrant! We are seeing an increasing number of visitors attracted to our award-winning green headquarters, as well as the many and varied activities carried out by its inhabitants.

Indeed, the question of the future "home" of the Ramsar Secretariat has been the focus of the Standing Committee's *Ad Hoc* Working Group on Administrative Reform over the last two years. I want to thank members of the Working Group for the care and thoroughness they have brought to their deliberations, and the Co-Chairs for their openness in enabling IUCN to participate.

IUCN is honoured to have hosted the Ramsar Secretariat since its inception. While we are well aware that the decision on the future hosting arrangements for the Ramsar Secretariat rests solely with the Parties, something that IUCN respects and has stressed throughout the process, we would like to reiterate our strong commitment to continuing to host the Ramsar Secretariat here in Gland.

We are pleased to note that the discussions on future hosting arrangements have not questioned the quality of the administrative services or the intellectual environment provided by IUCN. As several Contracting Parties rightly pointed out, the heart of the matter is what other, tangible or intangible, benefits there may be for the Convention from a possible shift in its administration.

As you well know, this year marks the 40th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance in the city of Ramsar, Iran by the original 18 signatories. We have been celebrating this important milestone since the actual birthday in February.

But it did not start there. In fact it all started nearly 10 years earlier, when at a conference organized by Dr. Luc Hoffman, then Director of the International Wildfowl Research Bureau, which later became Wetlands International, some 80 experts recommended, and I quote, that "...IUCN compile a list... of European and North African wetlands of international importance... and that this list may be considered as a foundation for an international convention on wetlands."

As IUCN Director General half a century later, I am proud to see how the Convention has flourished – with its 160 contracting parties and 1,929 listed wetlands with a total area that is almost the size of Mexico. Indeed, Ramsar is a more globally ratified Convention than some UN-administered multilateral environmental agreements. We also see that from the very germ of the idea for an international treaty on wetlands, it was rooted in partnership and collaboration. Success in conserving wetlands would come from the joint work of governments, civil society and scientists.

This reflects the unique nature of IUCN. We are not a traditional intergovernmental organization, nor are we a traditional NGO. IUCN is a Union of governments, NGOs and volunteer scientists. Conserving wetlands – and implementing the Ramsar Convention – is, we believe, more successful when these groups work in partnership. They can do so through IUCN.

Yet, despite major successes, our planet has lost perhaps as much as 50% of its wetlands over the past century, and we know that their loss is continuing. But let us be clear, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is not a crisis of administration that we face. We face a crisis of biodiversity loss.

In response to the urgent need to halt biodiversity loss, last October in Nagoya, Japan, Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted the landmark Strategic Plan with 20 targets for 2020.

What is also remarkable is that four of the global biodiversity-related conventions, including Ramsar, delivered a joint statement to the CBD COP, and five of the biodiversity-related conventions, again including Ramsar, have agreed to work together on contributing towards this Strategic Plan. IUCN applauds this increased collaboration and has been recently requested by these Conventions to help them map their activities in support of the Strategic Plan.

In particular, Target 14 of the Strategic Plan says that: *“By 2020, ecosystems that provide essential services, including services related to water, and contribute to health, livelihoods and wellbeing, are restored and safeguarded, taking into account the needs of women, indigenous and local communities, and the poor and vulnerable.”*

Two things stand out from this commitment. First, that the Ramsar Convention is tailor-made to drive forward action on this target. Second, the target is for 2020 – just nine years from now. After 50 years of getting ready, we now have less than 10 to deliver solutions.

With this in mind, I respectfully encourage Parties to carefully consider the implications of a possible shift of the Ramsar Secretariat between now and 2020. Given the urgency of the biodiversity crisis, now may not be the best time to lose a triennium of the Convention's work to bureaucratic transition. In this regard, I am aware that our colleagues at UNEP are currently working towards resolving some financial and other issues in the relationship with the multilateral environmental agreements UNEP administers, something that the Governing Council addressed at its last meeting.

While some of the arguments in favour of Ramsar's transition under UNEP administration cite better synergies, it is IUCN's firm view that enhanced collaboration among biodiversity-related conventions, which holds the key for greater coherence in the international environmental governance system overall, can be achieved regardless of administrative arrangements. In fact it is already well underway, as is reflected in what I have mentioned previously.

For the Ramsar Convention, 2011 is rightly a year for looking back and celebrating its achievements with justifiable pride. But anniversaries are also a time for looking forward. As we contemplate the next chapter in the development of the Convention, all of us – governments, the scientific community, civil society, and increasingly the private sector – must step up to our shared responsibility.

It remains a privilege for IUCN to support the evolution and implementation of the Convention, and we look forward to working together with the Ramsar Convention, its Contracting Parties and partners to conserve wetlands – our planet's natural capital, to turn the tide on the biodiversity crisis, to help combat climate change, and to support sustainable development.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to participating in your discussions.