

SC42: Secretary General's Opening Statement

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

Honorable members of the Ramsar Standing Committee and Ramsar Partners,
Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all in Gland for the 42th Session of our Standing Committee. I wish to express our thanks and appreciation to Mr. Kim Chan Woo, Former Director General, International Cooperation Office, Ministry of Environment of Korea.

Mr. Kim has chaired our Standing Committee since COP10 and is now appointed as Ambassador to the Republic of Kenya. We congratulate H.E. Mr. Kim and wish him a successful career.

We are happy to welcome Mr. Yeon-Chul Yoo, as our new Chairman of the Ramsar Standing Committee.

Let me also welcome four staff members who are attending their first Standing Committee meeting: Kati, Marian, Claudia and Paul

This is a great opportunity for me to renew the appreciation and the gratitude of the whole Ramsar Secretariat for your continued support, your guidance and the actions you are taking to enhance the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

2011 is a particular year for the Ramsar Convention, since it commemorates 40 years of strategic planning and operational actions for the wise use of wetlands all over the world.

Over the last 12 months my work as Secretary General has paid a particular attention to the following facets of the Convention's work:

Wetlands and Forests

- The vital linkages between Forests and wetlands, and quite often, their interdependence.
- Right after the Standing Committee meeting, together with the Senior Regional Advisor for Africa, we will attend the Summit of the three key Tropical Forest Basins from 31 May to 3 June 2011: the Congo Basin, the Amazon Basin and the Mekong Basin of Borneo. This is an opportunity to draw attention and remind people that for instance, the Amazon Forest is supported by a vital network of wetlands, including the Amazon River and its more than 1,100 tributaries, 17 of which are over 1,500 kilometers (930 mi) long.

Special attention to a particular wetland type: Mangroves

For the Ramsar Secretary General, 2011 is the Year of mangroves: 'World Mangrove Atlas' highlights the importance of and threats to mangroves.

The first global assessment of mangroves in over a decade reveals that rare and critically important mangrove forests continue to be lost at a rate three to four times higher than land-based global forests, despite positive restoration efforts by some countries.

Any further destruction due to shrimp farming and coastal development will cause significant economic and ecological decline.

Economic assessments provide some of the most powerful arguments in favor of mangrove management, protection or restoration. Studies estimate that mangroves generate between US\$2000-9000 per hectare annually, considerably more than alternative uses such as aquaculture, agriculture or insensitive tourism.

The new atlas also underscores positive trends. Restoration efforts now cover some 400,000 hectares, as foresighted countries make the link between these coastal forests and economically-important services from flood defenses and fish nurseries to carbon storage to combat climate change.

The Ramsar secretariat encourages Ramsar Contracting Parties and partners to work together to draw attention on mangroves and put them into their priority actions to stop the immense costs due to losses and increase the ecosystem services they provide. The preparation of a proposal is underway with the MAVA Foundation and we are hopeful that we will be able to promote mangrove conservation and wise use.

Wetlands and Climate Change: Our collaborative work is increasingly raising awareness about the role of wetlands in climate change adaptation and mitigation

Many organizations are increasingly recognizing the important role of wetlands in climate change adaptation & mitigation: For instance,

- Joint efforts on peatlands between UNEP, GEF, Wetlands International and national NGOs inform us that managing and maintaining the values of peatlands are quick and cost-effective measures to reduce as much as 10% of greenhouse emissions.
- A new World Bank report, written in partnership with IUCN and other wetland specialists, shows that drainage and degradation of coastal wetlands emit significant amounts of carbon dioxide directly to the atmosphere and lead to decreased carbon sequestration. The report confirms the fact that mangroves, tidal marshes and sea-grass meadows remove carbon from the atmosphere and lock it into the soil, where it can remain for millennia. Unlike terrestrial forests, these marine ecosystems are continuously building carbon pools, storing large amounts of “blue carbon” in the sediment below them. When these systems are degraded due to drainage or conversion for agriculture and aquaculture, they can release huge and continuous amounts of CO₂ to the atmosphere.
- Through the partnership between Ramsar, IUCN and the Danone Group, a methodology on “Afforestation and reforestation of degraded
- tidal forest habitats” has been developed and submitted to the CDM of the UN FCCC. I am happy to let you know the report of the Working Group has just confirmed the approval of the methodology. If this methodology is approved and certified by the UNFCCC, it will

open opportunities for business sector to invest in wetland management and restoration to mitigate Climate change and provide them with carbon credits.

The secretariat is also working on:

Wetlands and Biodiversity

Wetlands and Water Security, especially Wetlands and Livelihoods: Maybe it is time to review the Ramsar criteria for designation of Ramsar sites to recognize the importance of wetlands for human life.

The current criteria are based on the role of wetlands for biodiversity. It is time to consider the role of wetlands for human livelihoods, for climate change adaptation and mitigation and other vital ecosystems services provided by wetlands.

With the current Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance, a wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 20,000 or more waterbirds. But a wetland that supports human life and provides freshwater to 15 million people cannot be recognized as a wetland of International Importance!

Article 2 of the Ramsar Convention Text states: *“Wetlands should be selected for the List on account of their international significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology. In the first instance wetlands of international importance to waterfowl at any season should be included.”*

I think “Ecology” is broad enough to include human life since it is *“The science of the relation of living organisms with each other and their surroundings. It also includes the study of the detrimental effects of modern civilization on the environment, with a view toward prevention or reversal through conservation.”*

Taking into account the important lessons we have learned over the last 40 years, I wish to recommend to the Ramsar Contracting Parties, the Ramsar STRP and Ramsar Partners to consider these ideas.

Wetlands and Tourism

Wetlands and urban development

Wetlands and Human Health.

Organization of COP11

Ramsar Advisory Missions are becoming one of the key approaches to assist Contracting Parties in addressing challenges. However, there is no provision in the Secretariat core budget for these important actions. The Secretariat is expecting Contracting Parties and partners to pay more attention and provide financial support.

I thank you for your attention and for your continued support.