

Opening Statement by IUCN Deputy Director General / Managing Director, Poul Engberg-Pedersen

Mr Chair, Madame Vice Chair, Secretary General, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to have the honour to again welcome you, on behalf of IUCN, to the Ramsar Standing Committee – and to say welcome back to the IUCN Conservation Centre in Gland.

At your last meeting, IUCN encouraged the Contracting Parties to use the current triennium to go beyond oversight of the administration of the Convention to push for results on the ground.

You – the Parties – have succeeded in previous triennia in putting in place a strategic framework for policies on wetlands and water that can be – and should be – used as a catalyst for delivering results for biodiversity conservation, water security and sustainable development.

IUCN believes that by using the Resolutions adopted under Ramsar as a basis for action, the Convention will make vital contributions to the Aichi targets, the post-2015 development agenda and to future Sustainable Development Goals.

Our wish is that your negotiations at the 12th Conference of the Parties next year in Uruguay and the Ramsar Strategic Plan you will adopt there should produce a results agenda. We hope this will commit Parties to using wetland conservation as nature-based solutions in sustainable development – including, most directly, water security.

The demand for nature-based solutions is increasing out there. In global dialogues on water policy, an echo of the Ramsar Convention is growing louder. Policy-makers in water are speaking more and more frequently about nature's role as water infrastructure. They are asking how they can make natural infrastructure a higher priority in water policies – for example as solutions for water storage, filtration and regulation of flooding.

As Parties, you have already adopted the description of wetlands as natural infrastructure into the Ramsar Convention. In Resolution XI.21, from Bucharest, wetlands were recognised as:

“the Earth’s primary natural infrastructure for storing and – directly or indirectly – providing water for nearly seven billion inhabitants of the planet,”

and Parties were invited *“to promote action that recognizes the importance of wetlands as a natural infrastructure that stores and delivers water.”*

With a new global agenda on sustainable development to be concluded in 2015, I think it will benefit the Convention for Parties to consider how it should respond. The opportunity to be grasped is for Parties to implement the Convention alongside other water-related, national and regional policies and strategies. Ramsar in effect gives an entry point for Parties to introduce natural infrastructure into national water policies and – in line with Ramsar’s own Resolutions – into related policies in for example agriculture, climate change, energy and health.

What results could be achieved? Including natural infrastructure in national agendas for water resources and development would raise the priority given to implementation of action on wetland conservation. Most importantly, perhaps, it would open the potential for other sectors to start delivering results for wetland conservation and restoration.

What is stopping us?

There are gaps in the capacities needed at national level. The Convention’s national administrative authorities need to be able work with engineers, economists and planners in key development-related sectors to implement Ramsar Resolutions.

There are gaps in management effectiveness. Better results are needed for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development from river basin management, supported by better wetland information.

There are gaps in financing and investment. The case for investment in wetlands as natural infrastructure needs to be justified in economic terms.

Critically, there are gaps in national consensus. For wetland conservation to achieve results for poverty reduction, water security, climate change adaptation and food security, there needs to be a shared understanding across sectors of the role of wetlands as natural infrastructure.

I am happy to inform you that IUCN and our fellow IOP, the International Water Management Institute, are working with a consortium of partners to close these gaps. The 'WISE-UP to Climate' project, generously supported by the Federal Government of Germany, is undertaking performance assessments for natural infrastructure in the Volta and Tana river basins in Africa. The lessons we are learning are changing old assumptions on how wetland conservation relates to poverty reduction, agriculture and energy – and opening dialogue on innovations that use wetlands as nature-based solutions.

The needs are much bigger, however, than one project. IUCN believes that the Ramsar Convention has a pivotal role to play in further building consensus, dialogue and innovation on wetlands as natural infrastructure – and that there are opportunities in doing so to deliver important results for the Convention's pillars of international cooperation, wetlands of international importance and the wise use of wetlands.

IUCN would like to suggest that overcoming the barriers to incorporating wetlands as natural infrastructure in national water policies and cross-sectoral strategies on water could be the basis for a 'Ramsar Water Initiative'.

Such an initiative would push implementation of the Convention toward fulfilling its potential role in a framework of multilateral agreements on water..

A Ramsar Water Initiative would work to support the implementation of water-relevant SDGs using the policy framework already built and adopted by Parties to catalyse action at global and national levels.

In doing so, it would contribute to the goal, clearly expressed by Contracting Parties, to raise the visibility of the Convention - while opening new avenues for partnerships and financing that will accelerate implementation of key Ramsar Resolutions.

IUCN stands ready to work with you, our fellow IOPs and our colleagues in the Secretariat to develop just such a strategic initiative for Ramsar implementation. The comparative legal analysis of Ramsar and the Helsinki and New York Water Conventions, currently underway and led by the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law, is a valuable step in that direction. I hope also that with project agency status provisionally granted to IUCN by the Global Environment Facility, we will soon be working with the Secretariat and you as Parties to identify opportunities for jointly developing projects through this new entry point to the GEF that will benefit the cause of wetland conservation and Ramsar implementation.

As I close, I want to report that, as you directed in Resolution X1.1, the Director General of IUCN, with support from other members of senior management here, are liaising closely with the Secretary General and his staff to ensure that administrative arrangement for the Convention run as smoothly as possible. Since Standing Committee 46, we have had two meetings of a management liaison group, which we have agreed should meet every 6 months. The Secretary General has reported on actions and suggestions from these meetings for improving the operations of the Secretariat in his report to you.

Finally, I extend to you all an invitation to the IUCN World Parks Congress, which will take place in Sydney, Australia, from 12 to 19 November 2014. This will fall just before you next return for Standing Committee 48. With the theme of 'Parks, People and Planet: Inspiring Solutions', it will offer an important opportunity for deepening discussion of the themes I have spoken about today – including how Ramsar sites and other wetlands deliver irreplaceable results for both sustainable development and biodiversity.

Mr. Chair, thank you.

I wish you all a successful Standing Committee.