

The Ramsar Culture Network and its contribution to the implementation of the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024

Summary

1. This Information Document updates previous reports to the Standing Committee on the culture-related work of the Convention (Documents SC35-5, SC36-5, SC46-10 and SC47-20), and describes in particular the relationship between activities of the Ramsar Culture Network and the goals adopted in the Ramsar 4th Strategic Plan. It provides a summary of a more detailed table on the Ramsar website which shows how the culture-related activities being undertaken between 2015 and 2018 contribute to the implementation of the targets in the Plan. This is set in a context of the development of this area of work in recent years.
2. Ramsar's current activities related to the cultural aspects of wetlands are developed, guided, coordinated and partly executed by a three-person team, with the support of a small number of working groups being established within the volunteer Ramsar Culture Network (RCN). A project to undertake "rapid cultural inventories for wetlands" will feature prominently in the RCN's work in the coming year, and attention will be given to issues including wetland livelihoods, cultural ecosystem services, intangible heritage, youth engagement, sacred natural sites and gender equality. Strategic partnerships, notably with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, are an important part of the overall approach.
3. For a three-year period (March 2015-March 2018), specific funds are being provided by the MAVA Foundation for the implementation of the activities listed in the Annex to this Document. This funding however covers only 42% of the costs of the agreed activities, and it will need to be supplemented rapidly by additional resources.

Culture in the Ramsar Convention

4. The preamble to the Convention noted over 45 years ago that "wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value". Although the principle of integrating culture has therefore always been a part of the Convention, and these aspects of value are all closely intertwined, less attention was paid to the cultural aspect in the early years.
5. Efforts to formalize and more explicitly incorporate cultural aspects in the Convention's work did not begin in earnest until the late 1990s. The Contracting Parties adopted Resolution VIII.19 *Guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites* in 2002 and Resolution IX.21 *Taking into account the cultural values of wetlands* in 2005.
6. Definitions of "culture" vary according to the context. For Ramsar purposes it is interpreted as a property of human groups or societies which expresses aspects of their identity, shared values, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge systems, creativity and other practices. It conditions the ways in

which people interact with each other and with their environment. Culture can be exhibited in both material and non-material ways, and it is constantly evolving.

7. Material examples would include protection and management of wetland habitats in ways designed to maintain a particular human social structure or uphold faith-based principles; use of wetland products for purposes that maintain cultural identities and represent place-specific skills; and heritage values associated with the co-evolution of particular societies and the ecosystems with which they have interacted. Non-material examples would include sense of belonging; sense of continuity; aesthetic inspirations; and ecological ethics.
8. Culture in many of these forms contributes directly to the maintenance of wetlands. It also represents a set of benefits provided by wetlands to people; and this is recognized in the concept of cultural ecosystem services, which can be either tangible or intangible. The Ramsar Convention has in turn formally incorporated cultural ecosystem services within its definition of wetland ecological character¹, and Parties commit to maintaining this character (and hence the relevant cultural services) as part of their obligation to promote the wise use of wetlands².
9. There are close relationships between the integrity of the functioning of water environments and the cohesion of human societies. Understanding key aspects of this, such as the specific roles of women or religious leaders in the wise use of water resources, is fundamental to achieving the Convention's mission of contributing to sustainable development throughout the world. In this respect Ramsar's strategy and its Resolutions on culture also support other intergovernmentally agreed aims, such as the reference in the Aichi Biodiversity Targets to "taking account of the needs of women, indigenous and local communities, the poor and vulnerable"; and the references in the UN Sustainable Development Goals to gender equality and the empowerment of women.
10. Ramsar's Programme on communication, capacity building, education, participation and awareness (CEPA) has some connections with the Convention's agenda on culture, but these are two distinctly defined and managed areas of activity.

The Ramsar Culture Network

11. The Contracting Parties in Resolution IX.21 (2005) requested the establishment of a "multi-disciplinary working group on the cultural values of wetlands, with a balanced geographic representation, under the supervision of Standing Committee, [and] appropriate input from the STRP". The Culture Working Group was duly created that same year, and the continuation of its work was endorsed by the Standing Committee at its 46th meeting in 2013 (Decision SC46-12³).
12. Most of the work on this subject in the Convention has been resourced through volunteer time, but from 2011 to 2013 it was supported in part by a funding contribution from the MAVA Foundation. The Foundation has subsequently increased its support (see the following section below).
13. Further to the discussion at SC46, the Culture Working Group evolved into the Ramsar Culture Network (RCN), operating in cooperation with UNESCO's World Heritage Centre and continuing

¹ Ramsar Convention (2005). *A Conceptual Framework for the wise use of wetlands and the maintenance of their ecological character*. Resolution IX.1 Annex A, Kampala, Uganda, November 2005. (See para 15).

² Ramsar Convention (2005) *op. cit.* (See para 22; and also Article 3.1 of the Ramsar Convention text itself).

³ See also the tabled agenda paper DOC. SC46-10: *Governance, planning and funding of activities on culture and wetlands in the framework of the Ramsar Convention*.

to report to the Standing Committee through the Secretariat. Standing Committee further expressed support for its work in Decision SC47-25⁴.

14. The RCN is a voluntary community of interest currently comprising around 150 members (both young and old, women and men) in over 50 countries. It has a mission to “bring together and create synergy among individuals, groups and organizations who can contribute to an approach to the conservation and wise use of wetlands which integrates cultural and natural aspects, and thereby achieves greater effectiveness in the implementation of the Ramsar Convention”. There are four key objectives:
 - i. To nurture a global community of organizations and individuals recognizing, celebrating and safeguarding the cultural values of wetlands and the role these values play in supporting the conservation and wise use of wetlands.
 - ii. To compile and disseminate useful knowledge (and related tools) concerning the interactions between culture, livelihoods and wetlands.
 - iii. To develop improved partnerships covering culture, conservation, sustainable development and other fields, which can result in better outcomes for wetlands and people.
 - iv. To encourage and contribute to updated international policy and guidance on culture relating to wetlands.
15. A number of RCN sub-groups are developing in order to take the lead on particular thematic areas of interest. Currently five such areas have been defined, namely Bio-Cultural Diversity (lead: Peter Bridgewater); Agriculture and Food Heritage (lead: Parviz Koochafkan); Youth Engagement (lead to be appointed); Tourism (lead: Jackie Kariithi); and Art (lead: Chris Fremantle). Groups may also form on a geographical basis; for example, the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), has already launched a MedWet Culture Network which is in the process of aligning its planning and coordination with the RCN.

Funding support from the MAVA Foundation for 2015-2018

16. After many years of relying primarily on volunteer efforts, work on culture and wetlands in the Ramsar Convention received a major boost in 2015 with the signing of an agreement between the Ramsar Secretariat and the MAVA Foundation. The agreement secures part-funding from MAVA for a series of linked activities to be delivered primarily through the Ramsar Culture Network over three years up to March 2018, in a project entitled “Conservation of the natural and cultural heritage in wetlands: global leadership for an integrated approach through the Ramsar Convention”.
17. The MAVA grant amounts to approximately 389,000 Euros over the three years. This has allowed the Ramsar Secretariat to appoint a part-time staff member as Manager, Culture and Livelihoods. This staff member (Mariam Ali), a consultant and an honorary special adviser (Dave Pritchard and Thymio Papayannis, both of whom were previously joint founding coordinators of the Ramsar Culture Network, and who jointly developed the MAVA project) make up the core team delivering the priority activities and results, with the support of the volunteer Network.

⁴ Following discussion of a progress report in DOC. SC47-20: *Ramsar Culture Network - report on activities*.

18. The figure for MAVA support mentioned in the paragraph above represents less than 42% of the overall project budget, meaning that there is a significant target to meet for additional fundraising as a condition of the agreement. Efforts to raise the necessary funds will intensify through 2016, and Contracting Parties and others with an interest in supporting any aspect of this work are invited to discuss opportunities with the Secretariat.
19. The 18 activities defined for 2015-2018 (see Annex 1) are organized into the following four key result areas:
 - i. updated international policy on culture and wetlands;
 - ii. well documented knowledge on the links that exist between culture and wetlands;
 - iii. the establishment of a global community of organizations and individuals (the Ramsar Culture Network) who recognize, celebrate and safeguard the cultural value and importance of wetlands;
 - iv. improved partnerships between culture, conservation, sustainable development and other fields.
20. The RCN has its own Action Plan⁵, which sets out the priorities and opportunities for the Network to contribute substantially to the delivery of many of the activities listed in Annex 1. A key area of work in the coming year will focus on project activities to undertake “Rapid Cultural Inventories for Wetlands” at different scales around the world. Details of this are contained in a guidance document, which is available on request from the Secretariat⁶.

Links to the goals and targets in the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024

21. In paragraph 13 of Resolution XII.2 *The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024*, the Parties noted the need for additional intersessional work to further develop materials, including guidance to Parties, supporting the implementation of the Plan. In paragraph 16 they also invite a range of different types of stakeholders to contribute to its implementation. The culture-related work of the Convention (particularly the 2015-2018 priority activities described above) constitutes an important part of the response to these two demands. It also supports others including the contribution of wetlands to global Sustainable Development Goals covering (for example) food and nutrition, healthy living, gender equality, water security, sustainable human settlements, adaptation to climate change, and sustainable use of ecosystems (paragraph 3).
22. Paragraphs 19 and 20 of Resolution XII.2 further emphasize the role of indigenous peoples and local communities in the conservation and wise use of wetlands in the context of the Plan; the Convention’s culture work provides an important focus of attention to this crucial issue.
23. The Convention’s culture work will contribute in some way to most of the 14 “priority areas of focus for the Convention in the next nine years” listed in the introduction to the Plan, but the following three can perhaps be particularly highlighted:

⁵ *Action Plan for the Ramsar Culture Network*. Produced by the Ramsar Culture Team, with input from Network members, January 2016.

⁶ *Guidance: Rapid Cultural Inventories for Wetlands*. Produced by the Ramsar Culture Team and available from culture@ramsar.org.

- i. (Resolution XII.2 paragraph 24) “Information about ecosystem functions and the ecosystem services they provide to people and nature: The services, benefits, values, functions, goods and products that wetlands provide have not yet been integrated in national development plans. The lack of recognition of the role of wetlands to be able to exercise fully the human right to water and poverty reduction, is an important factor in its reduction as well as in the modesty of the efforts invested in restoring wetlands. The integral values and benefits, both material or non-material for people and nature, in a non-consumptive approach include spiritual, existential and future-oriented values.”
 - ii. (paragraph 31) “Strengthen and support the full and effective participation and the collective actions of stakeholders, including indigenous peoples and local communities, for the existence of sustainable, comprehensive and wise use of wetlands.”
 - iii. (paragraph 32) “Synergies: Enhancing efforts to streamline procedures and processes including reporting and to facilitate data sharing amongst parties responsible for - or cooperating in - the implementation of this and other MEAs and related agreements. Through cooperation, aim to increase the identification of synergies with collaborating MEAs and other international processes at national and global levels.”
24. A table matching culture-related activities to the individual targets in the Strategic Plan in greater detail can be found on the Ramsar website at:
www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/culture_contributions_to_sp4.pdf.

Annex 1: Activities for 2015-2018, as defined in the MAVA project agreement

(As reported previously to the Standing Committee in Document SC47-20 and subsequently updated in January 2016).

A: Policy - Strengthened international policy.

Global and regional policymaking reflects where necessary the best current knowledge and thinking on culture and wetlands, including ways of taking account of cultural values in decision-making, and ways of increasing understanding of the cultural ecosystem services of wetlands.

Activity A1: Develop a short summary report that explains current policies, targets and financing of wetlands, culture and livelihoods related issues within the Ramsar Convention, and other Multilateral Environmental Agreements (and associated financing vehicles), derived from existing Resolutions and Guidance, and addressing emerging issues as necessary in conjunction with activities A2 and A3 below.

Activity A2: Keep the Ramsar Resolutions VIII.19 and IX.21 and the Ramsar Culture Guidance document under review, and develop proposals as necessary for their further updating; taking account inter alia of lessons arising from the implementation of activities C1 and C2 below.

Activity A3: Prepare and manage an event at Ramsar COP13, to celebrate wetlands, culture and livelihoods.

B: Knowledge - Well documented knowledge of the link that exists between culture and wetlands.

Cultural values associated with wetlands are more completely identified, understood and documented at national and site level.

Activity B1: (a) Develop and disseminate 'Rapid Cultural Inventories for Wetlands' to facilitate the integration of cultural values and practices in wetland conservation and wise use; (b) Organize a capacity building workshop for Rapid Cultural Inventories, together with a partner organization, e.g. Ramsar Regional Initiative; (c) support three Rapid Cultural Inventories together with regional partner organizations; and (d) publish a Global Report on culture and wetlands, including case studies from the Ramsar Culture Network, the Ramsar Information Sheets, and Rapid Cultural Inventories for Wetlands.

Activity B2: Analyse, synthesize, report and extract lessons and recommendations from information provided on cultural values and services in the database of Ramsar Sites Information Sheets and Ramsar Contracting Party national reports to Conferences of the Parties.

Activity B3: Develop analysis that can be useful from Ramsar Convention's perspective for advancing the IUCN-led project 'Towards Integrated Management of Sites with multiple designations', especially in light of findings from Activity B2.

Activity B4: Prepare an options paper for how culture and wetlands (and thematic areas) can be positioned to appeal more strongly within the Ramsar Regions, based both on traditional and modern interests of people in those regions.

C: Appreciation - A community of organizations and individuals, globally, more deeply appreciating the cultural value and importance of wetlands.

Good practices, experiences and lessons learned in wetland planning and management that integrates cultural aspects are investigated, shared, promoted and applied more widely and successfully, with a particular emphasis in five areas: i) Bio-cultural diversity ii) Agriculture and food heritage iii) Tourism iv) Arts v) Youth engagement.

Activity C1: Propose, catalyse and undertake specific projects or events defined on the initiative of the five Ramsar Culture Network Thematic Groups, which include i) Bio-cultural diversity ii) Agriculture and food heritage iii) tourism iv) Arts and v) Youth engagement.

Activity C2: On the basis of C.1, conduct surveys and carry out joint brainstorming with current and potential future RCN members. Use the results to develop the agenda for celebrating wetlands, culture and livelihoods within a forum, and via events, that are geared towards expanding the activities and funding for Wetlands, Culture and Livelihoods within the framework of the Ramsar Convention.

Activity C3: Engage Ramsar Regional Initiatives in the project.

D: Partnerships - Well managed and effective partnerships

Partnerships are developed and maintained, in order to serve the outcomes sought through policy, increased understanding and sharing of knowledge, resulting in better outcomes for wetlands and for people.

Activity D1: Enhance co-operation with existing Ramsar Convention partners, in order to more strongly represent the importance of cultural ecosystem services, via the following actions:

D1.1 Seek to engage and co-operate with relevant parts of IUCN (e.g. World Commission for Protected Areas and IUCN Specialist Group on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas).

D1.2 Build and strengthen the relationship between Ramsar Convention and UNESCO, including via liaison, co-ordination and updating partnership agreements.

D1.3 Develop joint external communications between the World Heritage Centre and Ramsar Secretariat, in order to draw the public's attention to the combined force of these two organizations (e.g. including via mainstream media).

Activity D2: Develop new Ramsar Convention partnerships that are relevant to the five thematic areas of RCN.

Activity D3: Investigate and assess systematically the scope and opportunities for cooperation with the other bodies and processes named in paragraph 13 of Resolution VIII.19, and produce recommendations.

E: Engagement - A vibrant and strong 'Ramsar Culture Network', creating impact over the long term.

Overall, this programme and relevant associated activities are efficiently coordinated, seen to be aligned with the direction and intent for implementing Ramsar Resolutions VII.19 and IX.21, and preparing for the long term financing and maintenance of vibrant activities of the Ramsar Culture Network.

Activity E1: Report on progress, including via the Ramsar Standing Committee, to COP, and to the MAVA Foundation.

Activity E2: Streamline and ensure the effective operation of all aspects of the Ramsar Culture Network; including both formal reporting on progress, membership and responding to ad hoc opportunities or needs that arise.

Activity E3: Develop and update content of websites and lists.

Activity E4: Develop and disseminate materials in relation to Thematic Group activities.

Activity E5: Prepare a plan for securing funding, commitments and support in kind, and implement it efficiently with the goal of reaching a total equivalent to at least 372,000 EUR during the three-year project period).equivalent to 372,000 EUR during the three-year project period.