

## Report of the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP)

### Actions requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to:

- a) take note of the report of the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP); and
- b) consider ways to encourage Contracting Parties to support STRP National Focal Points (NFPs) in tangible ways.

### Introduction

1. This report from the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) focuses on progress on the STRP work plan (2016-2018) and STRP activities since the 53rd meeting of the Standing Committee.

### 21st Meeting of the STRP (STRP21)

2. STRP21 was held from 15 to 19 January 2018 at the Ramsar Secretariat headquarters. 16 STRP members and 20 observers attended. Included in these figures were 10 STRP NFPs from Austria, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Oman, Senegal and the United Kingdom.

### Update on high priority tasks

3. The Standing Committee designated the *State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People report* (now to be entitled the *Global Wetland Outlook: State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People*) and eight other tasks in the STRP work plan as high priorities.

### Global Wetland Outlook: State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People

4. The *Global Wetland Outlook* is on track to be launched prior to or at COP13. A first draft was provided to STRP NFPs for comments in May 2017. The Secretariat facilitated a small writing workshop in September 2017, at which the lead authors and editor considered the comments that had been received and worked on a second draft. That draft was released to seven external reviewers in early December 2017. At STRP21, the Panel considered the comments received and identified the next steps for finalizing the *Global Wetland Outlook* and accompanying technical notes.

5. The UN Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre has conducted an updated analysis of the global extent (area) of wetlands that now extends to all Ramsar regions, which will be incorporated into the *Global Wetland Outlook*. The Wetland Extent Trends (WET) Index found a decline of about 35% in both coastal and inland wetland areas studied between 1970 and 2015. Regional declines varied: Africa (42%); Asia (32%); Europe (35%); Latin America and the Caribbean (59%); North America (17%); and Oceania (12%). Note that the WET Index indicates changes to those wetlands studied and should not necessarily be taken as an indication of the total change in each region. Nevertheless, the updated analysis confirms that wetland losses continue.

Task 1.1: Earth observation as a “best practice” tool for inventorying, mapping and monitoring wetlands, including Ramsar Sites

6. A first draft of a Ramsar Technical Report on *Best practice guidelines for the use of Earth Observation for wetland inventory, assessment and monitoring* was provided to STRP NFPs in July 2017. STRP21 made significant progress on finalizing the draft, which is expected to be delivered to the Secretariat in the first quarter of 2018.

Task 1.2: Development of guidelines for inventories of peatlands for possible designation as Wetlands of International Importance

7. At STRP21, the STRP finalized the draft resolution on *Guidance on identifying Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) for global climate change regulation as an additional argument to existing Ramsar criteria* and submitted it to the Secretariat. The Panel provided additional comments to the draft Scientific and Technical Briefing Note on tropical peatland inventories, being drafted by Greifswald Mire Center, which is expected to be finalized in 2018.

Task 2.1: Ramsar wetland Sites management toolkit

8. After soliciting input from STRP NFPs, the STRP and the Secretariat Communications Team developed an online Ramsar Sites management toolkit, which is available at <https://www.ramsar.org/resources/ramsar-sites-management-toolkit>. The toolkit includes the Ramsar Regional Center – East Asia’s practitioner’s guide on the *Designation and management of Ramsar Sites*.

Task 3.1: Wetland ecosystem services assessment and valuation Policy Brief with toolkit

9. The STRP produced a Policy Brief on *Integrating multiple wetland values into decision making*, with an annexed protocol for assessing multiple values of wetlands. The annex adapted the IPBES six-step guide for diverse conceptualization of nature and its benefits into a Ramsar context. The Ramsar Convention Secretariat coordinated a launch with the Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) on 19 September 2017, which resulted in 15,500 Twitter impressions and 511 downloads from the Ramsar website. The Policy Brief was shared with key partners and collaborators including: UN Environment, the Global Water Partnership, the Secretariats of IPBES, UN-Water, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and the Convention on Migratory Species, and BirdLife International, IUCN Global Water Programme, the International Water Management Institute, Wetlands International and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. The IPBES Secretariat shared the Policy Brief with its network of 13,000 subscribers and featured it on its webpage.

### Task 3.2: Wetland Ecosystems and Disaster Risk Reduction

10. A Policy Brief on *Wetlands for disaster risk reduction—Effective choices for resilient communities* was drafted by Wetlands International, with STRP member Ritesh Kumar as the lead. Its launch on 13 October 2017 for the International Day for Disaster Reduction, in conjunction with the Partnership for Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction (PEDRR) and Wetlands International, resulted in 376 downloads, earning approximately 20,000 impressions on social media. A web article on the links between wetland loss, migration and conflict was prepared with Wetlands International and PEDRR.

### Task 4.1: Water requirements for wetlands

11. A final draft Policy Brief on *Implementing environmental flows with benefits for society and different wetland ecosystems in the river system*, derived from a more comprehensive technical report on environmental flows issued by WWF-UK at the 20th International Rivers symposium in 2017 in Brisbane, Australia, entitled *Listen to the river: Lessons from a global review of environmental flow success stories*, was delivered to the Secretariat for production at the end of STRP21.

### Task 4.2: Review and analysis of Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs) Reports

12. WWF has provided CHF 22,000 for this task. Two consultants, Tim Jones and Dave Pritchard, were engaged to conduct a review and analysis of the reports of RAMs. The final report was submitted to the Secretariat in January 2018. A draft Policy Brief and draft Briefing Note have been derived from the comprehensive analysis. The draft Briefing Note will be circulated to STRP NFPs for feedback. It is expected that both drafts will be published in the first quarter of 2018.

### Task 5.1: Promoting best practices in wetland restoration

13. A draft Briefing Note on *The potential and rationale for wetland restoration in a climate change context*, which has been shared with STRP NFPs, was refined during STRP21. The draft is expected to be delivered to the Secretariat by mid-February 2018.

### **Update on lower priority tasks**

14. In light of the progress made with high priority tasks, a number of low priority tasks, requiring limited time and resources, have been progressed voluntarily, including:
  - *Task 2.2, Wetland management to reduce the risk of waterborne and aquatic-vector borne diseases*: A draft Policy Brief was refined during STRP21 and should be available online for STRP consultation in February 2018. A final draft is expected to be submitted to the Secretariat in the first quarter of 2018.
  - *Task 2.6, Montreux Record: A report on Change in ecological character of wetland sites – Ramsar guidance and mechanisms*, produced in 2014 as part of the STRP 2013-2015 work plan, has been uploaded to the Convention’s website, as part as the Ramsar Sites management toolkit (see Task 2.1) and can be downloaded here: <https://www.ramsar.org/resources/recognising-and-assessing-threats-to-the-site>.
  - *Task 5.3, Advice for the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties on practical methods for rewetting and restoring peatlands*: During STRP21, the Panel further refined a Draft

Resolution on *Restoration of degraded peatlands to mitigate and adapt to climate change and enhance biodiversity*. The Draft Resolution has been submitted to the Secretariat. The Panel also progressed a draft Ramsar Technical Report on *Peatland restoration and rewetting methodologies*, which will be delivered to the Secretariat in the second quarter of 2018.

### **Update on ad-hoc advisory tasks**

#### Draft resolutions prepared by Contracting Parties

15. At STRP21, the Secretariat reported that Contracting Parties are preparing several draft resolutions that have scientific and technical components and/or contemplate STRP action. STRP point persons were designated for each draft resolution. Once each draft resolution has been formally submitted to the Secretariat by the 22 February 2018 deadline, the relevant STRP point person will lead the (online) discussions to develop STRP comments. The STRP Chair will provide these comments at SC54.

#### Emerging issues

16. STRP20 discussed the ongoing infection of a range of highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses. It was recalled that Ramsar had adopted a comprehensive guidance on appropriate responses to avian influenza through Resolution IX.23 on *Highly pathogenic avian influenza and its consequences for wetland and waterbird conservation and wise use*, and Resolution X.21 on *Guidance on responding to the continued spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza*, and that this Ramsar guidance was supported by complementary guidance by the Convention on Migratory Species and the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds Agreement. The Panel agreed that there would be value in reminding Contracting Parties of this guidance, which stresses the need to ensure that responses do not inadvertently compromise the wise use of wetlands. Furthermore, the Panel noted that lethal responses to wild birds are not supported by Ramsar guidance or by guidance by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Organization for Animal Health. Accordingly, after SC53 in June 2017, the STRP Chair sent a reminder to Contracting Parties via the Ramsar Forum and STRP Workspace.

#### IPBES

17. The STRP Chair attended the 9th meeting of the IPBES Multidisciplinary Expert Panel from 20 to 22 June 2017 in Bonn, Germany. IPBES-6 in March 2018 will consider the Land Degradation and Restoration Assessment, as well as regional assessments.
18. Resolution XII.2 on *The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024* requests the Secretariat “to submit to IPBES a request for a thematic assessment on the current status and trends of wetlands, including their condition”. It is anticipated that IPBES-6 in March 2018 will be asked to approve a call for proposals for the second work programme. If that schedule holds, then the formal call for proposals will be issued shortly thereafter. Under interim guidelines approved by the Standing Committee through Decision SC47-24, it is the Standing Committee that decides which proposals to submit to IPBES on behalf of the Ramsar Convention. As recognized in the interim guidelines and noted in previous STRP Chair reports, “Due to timing constraints, it is likely that the proposals will need to be presented to Standing Committee members virtually and approval or comments [will need to be] provided within a short period.”

### STRP participation in global assessments

19. The STRP, with the assistance of the Secretariat, participated in the external review processes, including where relevant data from the WET Index, for the following global environmental assessments:
  - IPBES Land Degradation and Restoration Assessment (Second Order Draft)
  - IPBES Global Biodiversity Assessment (First Order Draft)
  - IPBES Regional Assessments (Second Order Drafts)
  - Sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6) (Second Order Draft—Chapter 6 on Freshwater)
  - Global Land Outlook (Chapter 8 on Water Resources)

### Wetland City Accreditation

20. Under Resolution XII.10, an STRP member serves on the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC). At STRP21, the STRP member reported that the IAC process, while delayed, generally went smoothly. The review consisted of reading the proposals and supporting documentation and rating the proposals against each criterion as yes/no. As the programme is evaluated, the suggestions for improving the process, attached in Annex 1, should be considered.

### **Engagement by STRP National Focal Points**

21. With the notable exception of STRP NFPs who have attended meetings, engagement by STRP NFPs remains low. This triennium approximately 15 STRP NFPs (half of them representing European Contracting Parties) have participated in work related to an STRP task. The Chair of the STRP asked these active NFPs why they participate: is their STRP work formally recognized or supported by their employers, or do they participate simply because of their personal commitment?
22. The responses suggest that the STRP NFPs who participate in the work of the STRP do so primarily because of their personal commitment to contribute to wetland conservation and the work of the Ramsar Convention. These STRP NFPs also see personal benefits to their participation in the STRP's work: it can be a learning opportunity to expand one's knowledge and expertise, as well as an opportunity to be updated on international developments and to engage in networking. Generally, however, the STRP NFPs are not supported by the governments of the Contracting Parties to participate in the STRP's work. The NFPs' employers generally consider it to be of low priority, and some NFPs do their STRP-related work outside their work time. Often there is no budget for NFPs to attend meetings, and in one instance the NFP used personal leave to attend STRP meetings.

### Future priorities

23. After consultation with STRP members, during STRP21, and the Secretariat, the STRP Chair recommends keeping the current Thematic Work Areas, adopted by Contracting Parties in Resolution XII.5, with slight refinements (see doc. SC54-23 *Draft resolution on scientific and technical priorities of the Convention*). In addition, the STRP recommends consideration of the following list of priorities, each of which falls under a Thematic Work Area, based on the Strategic Plan of the Convention, international processes of relevance to the Convention and Contracting Parties' needs:

- Provide guidance to Contracting Parties relating to the national reporting on wetland inventories, which will contribute to reporting under Sustainable Development Goals indicator 6.6.1;
- Undertake a review of, and compilation of data and information from, national wetland inventories, so as to update the 1999 Global Review of Wetland Inventory (GRoWI), building on the information provided by Contracting Parties in their National Reports to COP13 and other sources such as the Global Mangrove Watch;
- Advise on how wetlands can act as natural capital to encourage investment on wetland restoration and wise use and to promote wetlands as natural solutions/ natural infrastructure;
- Provide guidance on carbon sequestration accounting methodologies, which would contribute, among other things, to the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) reporting under UNFCCC;
- Provide advice related to Resolution XII.2's request to submit a thematic assessment request to IPBES;
- Advise on the focus of future editions of the *Global Wetland Outlook*, taking into account the work of International Organization Partners and other organizations;
- Advise Contracting Parties on the review of the fourth Strategic Plan of the Convention to be presented at COP14 (per the terms of Resolution XII.2);
- Provide advice on applying integrated and landscape-management approaches; and
- Collaborate with regional centres to identify opportunities for capacity building workshops on wetland management.

## Annex 1

### Considerations for improving the Wetland City Accreditation process

1. *Time*: The time allocation for review by the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) was short especially given the long timespan provided for transmission of the IAC report to COP13. A more rigorous evaluation of the evidence underpinning a proposal would be advantageous, though site visits might be beyond the scope of the process.
2. *Review against criteria*: The simple binary yes/no approach to assessment against criteria leaves no room for consideration of the degree to which the criteria are satisfied in the assessment, and no opportunity for detailed commentary on the quality of the city's performance against each criterion. It would benefit future reviews of the accredited cities, as well as future accreditation rounds, if this were improved. For example, IAC members could write a commentary for each proposal against each criterion, even if this were qualitative. In addition, the accreditation requires complete satisfaction of all criteria. A less binary approach with a more transparent and nuanced rubric or scoring system would be beneficial to the quality of the accreditation.
3. *Interaction*: The opportunity for IAC members to interact over the process was limited, largely due to the short time allocated for the process. A more interactive and considered process would be beneficial, ideally with perhaps at least one face-to-face IAC meeting, budget and time permitting.
4. *IAC membership*: The nomination process for IAC membership and the IAC Chair should in the future be formalized to ensure the representation of IAC Member organizations is complete, updated and officially recognized.
5. *Languages*: The linguistic capacity of the IAC may need to be broadened to reflect the submitting countries.
6. *Feedback*: Frank feedback from all the IAC members on the quality of the 2017-2018 review and accreditation process should be sought.
7. *Executive support*: The Ramsar Regional Center – East Asia (RRC– EA) supported the accreditation process *pro bono*, and should be thanked for its helpful role. Such a role should in future be formalized and budgeted for, and formal processes for managing potential conflict of interest documented (noting that potential for conflict of interest was successfully handled by RRC– EA staff, who ensured that they were not involved in accreditation of submissions for the Republic of Korea).