

Ramsar Advisory Missions: Operational guidance

Actions requested:

Standing Committee is invited to:

- i. take note of and adopt the attached operational guidance for Ramsar Advisory Missions; and
- ii. instruct the Secretariat to publish the operational guidance on the Convention website to be used when preparing future Ramsar Advisory Missions.

Introduction

1. Paragraph 15 of Resolution XIII.11 on *Ramsar Advisory Missions* (RAMs), adopted by the 13th meeting of the Conference of Contracting Parties (COP13, Dubai, 2018), “instructs the Secretariat, in consultation with the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), to prepare operational guidance for RAMs, addressing *inter alia* the issues listed in Annex 1 to the present Resolution and giving due consideration to the briefing note and policy brief on RAMs published in 2018, to be submitted for adoption by the Standing Committee at its 57th meeting”.
2. Annex 1 of the present document includes proposed operational guidance for RAMs that addresses *inter alia* the topics listed in Annex 1 of Resolution XIII.11. The guidance aims to provide a simple step-by-step manual for the Convention Secretariat, Contracting Parties and other stakeholders.
3. The STRP during its 22nd meeting (18-22 March 2019) reviewed a first draft text of operational guidance for RAMs prepared by the Secretariat, and made a number of clarifications and improvements. The text provided in Annex 1 takes account of the proposed amendments provided by the STRP and of the Briefing Note and Policy Brief on Ramsar Advisory Missions prepared as part of its work plan for 2016-2018.
4. The Standing Committee is invited to take note of and adopt this operational guidance, and to instruct the Secretariat to make it available to Contracting Parties and publish it on the Convention’s website, to be used when preparing future RAMs.

Annex 1

Operational Guidance for Ramsar Advisory Missions

- A. Context and process to initiate a Ramsar Advisory Mission
- B. Preparing a RAM
- C. Implementing and following up a RAM

A. Context and process to initiate a Ramsar Advisory Mission

1. This section provides guidance on the context in which to initiate a Ramsar Advisory Mission (RAM), and describes what a RAM is, who can request one, and how it links with other Convention tools. It addresses how the RAMs are undertaken, and whether a RAM can address several Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) or wetlands that are not designated as Ramsar Sites.

Circumstances that trigger the proposed use of a RAM

2. Contracting Parties are encouraged to maintain the ecological character of all wetlands and are required by Article 3.2 of the Convention to report any actual or potential adverse human-induced changes in a Ramsar Site, notably as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference, to the Secretariat. The RAM is an independent technical advisory mechanism through which a Contracting Party may request expert advice on how to respond to such changes and associated wetland issues (as explained in paragraphs 1 and 9 of Resolution XIII.11 on *Ramsar Advisory Missions*).
3. The procedure was established by the Standing Committee in 1988 and later endorsed by the Conference of Contracting Parties in 1990 in Recommendation 4.7 *Mechanisms for improved application of the Ramsar Convention*, which instructs the Secretariat to continue to operate RAMs (originally named the “Monitoring Procedure”) when it receives information on adverse or likely adverse changes in ecological character at Ramsar Sites. In order to implement the mechanism, the Contracting Party concerned has to report any such change and officially request that the Secretariat implement a RAM. When such information comes to the attention of the Secretariat, it may suggest to the Party concerned to consider using the RAM mechanism.

RAMs to candidate Ramsar Sites and other undesignated wetlands

4. Priority is given to address change in the ecological character of designated Ramsar Sites including Sites on the Montreux Record (pursuant to Recommendation 4.8 on *Change in ecological character of Ramsar sites*). However, a RAM may also address such issues at more than one Ramsar Site and at undesignated candidate Ramsar Sites or other wetlands. COP13 instructed the Secretariat (Resolution XIII.11, paragraph 11), to prioritize the application of a RAM:
 - i. for sites that are facing problems similar to those at many other Ramsar Sites;
 - ii. where the RAM report may be of use for many other wetlands; or
 - iii. where the RAM can add value to existing knowledge on how to address the described challenges.

Nature of the RAM tool and its links with Article 3.2

5. The RAM is an operational and advisory mechanism. It is not a compliance mechanism or in any sense a “negative” or disciplinary procedure. On the contrary, the RAM offers significant opportunities to find sustainable solutions to the problems that cause change in the ecological character of a Ramsar Site.
6. In Resolution XIII.10 on *Status of Sites in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance*, Contracting Parties are requested to submit information to the Secretariat in response to reports of change or likely change in ecological character, and submit as appropriate information to the Standing Committee on the steps taken or to be taken to address such changes. Contracting Parties should also provide such an “Article 3.2 report” if they do not intend to request a RAM. However, their efforts to respond to threats to the ecological character of a Ramsar Site may well include the application of the RAM tool where this is considered useful, feasible and effective.

Links with the Montreux Record

7. According to the Annex to Resolution VI.1 on *Working definitions of ecological character, guidelines for describing and maintaining the ecological character of listed Sites, and guidelines for operation of the Montreux Record*, “The Montreux Record is the principal tool of the Convention for highlighting those Ramsar Sites where an adverse change in ecological character has occurred, is occurring, or is likely to occur, and which are therefore in need of priority conservation attention. It shall be maintained as part of the Ramsar Database and shall be subject to continuous review.”
8. A Site can only be included in the Montreux Record with the approval of the Contracting Party concerned. To do so, the Party must submit relevant information to the Secretariat, according to the format provided in Annex 1 of Resolution XIII.10. This gives the Site increased international visibility and signals firstly that the Party accepts that the ecological character of a Site is changing or likely to change, and secondly that the situation needs to be addressed through involvement of international expertise to find a sustainable solution for the issues highlighted in the Party’s Article 3.2 report.
9. Listing the Ramsar Site in the Montreux Record is not a precondition for requesting a RAM. However, when a RAM covers a Site that is listed in the Record, the Mission report must spell out the conditions or recommended actions required to remove the Site from the Record. A wetland may be removed from the Record following a request of the Contracting Party using the format provided in Annex 1 of Resolution XIII.10, and after consideration of advice and/or comment from the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). The final decision will be made by the Contracting Party.

Initiating a RAM and approving its terms of reference

10. The Ramsar Administrative Authority (AA) of the Contracting Party concerned initiates the process by sending a letter requesting a RAM to the Secretariat, which works with the AA to determine the terms of reference (TORs) and the expertise needed for the mission. Without an official request and the approval by the AA of its TORs, a RAM cannot take place.

Application in a transboundary context

11. The RAM procedure can be applied to a wetland ecosystem shared between two or more Contracting Parties, which may consist of several Ramsar Sites in neighbouring countries that together form a Transboundary Ramsar Site. In this case, the Secretariat interacts with the AAs of all the Contracting Parties concerned and seeks their common approval for the TORs and other aspects of the RAM.

Role of the Secretariat

12. The Secretariat plays a critical role prior to, during and after the RAM. Its functions include initial consultations with the Contracting Party and regular interaction with its AA on all aspects of the mission; compiling background information; preparing the TORs; and coordinating the Mission. The Secretariat also hires independent consultant experts needed for the Mission, as agreed with the AA; participates in the Mission; contributes to and coordinates the preparation and submission of the report to the AA for approval; publishes the approved report on the Convention's website (Resolution XIII.11 paragraph 14); and liaises with the Contracting Party during the implementation phase and when following up to collect information on progress in implementing the recommendations formulated in the Mission report.
13. The Secretariat reviews and reports progress to the Standing Committee on the conservation status of Sites to which its attention has been drawn through a Ramsar Advisory Mission, and maintains a register of activities undertaken in this regard (Recommendation 4.7).

Role of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel

14. Paragraph 12 v) of Annex 1 of Resolution XII.5 on *Proposed new framework for delivery of scientific and technical advice and guidance on the Convention* cites among the main collective responsibilities of the STRP to assist the Secretariat with scientific and technical issues upon request and on Ramsar Advisory Missions, as appropriate and subject to the availability of resources.
15. The STRP through its work plan for 2016-2018 conducted a comprehensive review and analysis of RAM reports, and with the Secretariat produced Briefing Note No.8 *Ramsar Advisory Missions: Technical advice on Ramsar Sites* to help Ramsar Site managers understand the use of the RAM process and to highlight selected case studies, and Policy Brief No.3 *Ramsar Advisory Missions - A mechanism to respond to change in ecological character of Ramsar Sites* to help policy makers within AAs understand the RAM concept, the values of RAMs, and lessons learned on their effective application. Both usefully complement the present Operational Guidance. They are available at: <https://www.ramsar.org/resources/publications>. The STRP is also a source of scientific and technical expertise that may be useful in the context of developing and implementing a RAM.

Role of International Organization Partners and other stakeholders

16. Stakeholders including International Organization Partners (IOPs), and national or local NGOs which have expressed an interest in issues to be addressed by a RAM, may have an opportunity to meet the Mission team and present their views with the agreement of the concerned Contracting Party. It is the prerogative of the AA to organize meetings and consultations with stakeholders, and lead press conferences and interactions with media.

17. Experts from IOPs, other international organizations or UN agencies may be considered as appropriate on issues to be addressed by the RAM.
18. In the past, IOPs have provided substantial support to specific RAMs, including financial support, which has been highly appreciated. Financial support is welcome, as long as it is not conditional and does not limit in any way the independence of the Mission team and the preparation of its advice.

Joint Missions with mechanisms of other international agreements

19. Where a Ramsar Site is also designated under another multilateral environmental agreement (MEA) such as the World Heritage Convention or the Convention on Migratory Species and its Agreements, or another international agreement (e.g. the European Union's Natura 2000 network, the Council of Europe's Emerald Network) the Secretariat will seek to organize a joint Mission, particularly in situations where the other agreements have established similar procedures, such as the Reactive Monitoring Missions of the World Heritage Convention, or the On-the-Spot Appraisal of the Bern Convention. Undertaking joint Missions based on common TORs, and producing a common report, is cost-effective and ensures coordinated advice to the Contracting Party concerned.

B. Preparing a RAM

20. Once the context has been clarified, and the Secretariat has received a written request from the AA to organize a RAM, it prepares the full RAM operational cycle, taking the following points into account.

Pre-RAM investigations and advice

21. The Secretariat compiles the background information needed to analyse and address single or multiple issues related to actual or potential change in the ecological character of the Ramsar Site to make relevant recommendations as part the RAM report. The AA and National Focal Points may provide the relevant information on the Site. STRP members and other experts may also be invited to provide relevant information as appropriate.

Developing terms of reference

22. The Secretariat prepares TORs for the RAM to guide the Mission and to enable the assessment of progress during the Mission and its follow-up phase. The TORs need to be agreed between the Secretariat and the AA prior to the RAM and the possible hiring of Mission experts. The agreed TORs are published as part of the Mission report.
23. RAM TORs should cover the following aspects:
 - An introduction, summarizing the RAM mechanism;
 - The objective and scope of the Mission, including the list of the issues to be addressed;
 - A description of the local situation that triggered the RAM;
 - Basic information about the Ramsar Site concerned;
 - The composition of the RAM team;
 - The planned timetable and schedule of the RAM and its meetings (on-site, field visits), including the list of the stakeholders to be met ; and

- An outline of the Mission follow-up, including the process of finalizing the Mission report and the implementation of its recommendations.

Scope of the RAM

24. The scope of the RAM, including the objectives and the list of the concrete issues to be addressed by the RAM team during the Mission and in its subsequent report, needs to be agreed beforehand between the Secretariat and the AA. The list of issues will be included in the TORs and the Mission report. The scope of the RAM also makes reference to the need to implement the Convention at all levels, as outlined in its Strategic Plan.

Coordination and composition of the Mission team

25. The Ramsar Secretariat leads and coordinates the RAM. The Secretariat ensures complete neutrality and transparency in accordance with its competencies and mandates, and guarantees that rules, decisions and Resolutions adopted by the Convention are applied. The Secretariat is independent from the AA or any other stakeholder position.
26. The Mission team includes, besides a coordinator designated by the Secretariat, one or more additional experts as needed to address the issues to be covered. The Secretariat will liaise with the STRP, Intergovernmental and International Organizations, and the scientific bodies and networks of MEAs to identify technically qualified and independent experts. The AA also appoints national experts to be part of the Mission.
27. The expert(s) need to be qualified to assess the issues listed in the TORs. They have to develop recommendations based on their own assessment, independent of possible positions of the AA or any other stakeholder, as an important function of the RAM is to provide a neutral, external and independent perspective.
28. The experts hired by the Secretariat must be fluent in writing and speaking the official languages of the Convention used in the country where the RAM is taking place.
29. Expert members of the Mission team, other than the Secretariat and AA representatives, are hired by the Secretariat through a process that ensures their technical expertise and independence. COP13 through Resolution XIII.11 paragraph 16 instructed the Secretariat to ensure that regional expertise is included in RAM teams in order to leverage the knowledge and experience of national and regional experts, including from IOPs, research and educational institutions, and civil society where relevant.

Timeframe considerations

30. Once the preparation for a RAM has started, the dates and timing of the Mission are set with the AA. In order to contain costs, the average duration of the on-site Mission is approximately six days including international travel.
31. After the Mission, the draft report is prepared and coordinated by the Secretariat with the experts, normally within three months.
32. A draft of the report will be submitted by the Secretariat to the AA for comment and approval. This may require further exchanges between the Secretariat and the AA. However, the report should be approved within three months of its submission. After its approval by the AA, the

Mission report will be published by the Secretariat on the Convention website (Resolution XIII.11 paragraph 14).

Resourcing the RAM

33. The cost of a RAM usually includes transport, accommodation and subsistence of the Mission team and the fees of the consultant experts hired. As indicated in Resolution XIII.11, there has since COP7 in 1999 been no allocation from the core budget to support implementation of the RAM process. If a Contracting Party is unable to cover the costs of a RAM itself it will fall within the priorities of the non-core budget of the Convention for the triennium, as agreed by the COP (Annex 3 of Resolution XIII.2 *Financial and budgetary matters*) or the Standing Committee. The Secretariat aims to raise necessary funds from specific donors with the help of the AA.

C. Implementing and following up a RAM

34. The points listed above allow a structured and straightforward planning for a RAM and its implementation. During and after the RAM, the following issues need to be considered

Structure and contents of RAM reports

35. RAM reports are structured according to a common concept, as outlined below. When joint Missions with other Conventions or institutions result in a common report, it may be necessary to adapt the structure slightly. However, it is important that Mission reports contain all the elements listed.
36. As a general rule, RAM reports should be as short as possible (and as long as necessary) with an average length of 12 pages (ranging from two to 46 pages). RAM reports are written in one of the Convention's official languages and should contain a concise Executive Summary. The AA is encouraged to translate the Executive Summary into its national language, where this is different.
37. RAM reports should be structured as follows:
- An **executive summary**, providing a brief overview of the objectives of the Mission, issues addressed and the ecological character of the Ramsar Site concerned, date and duration of the RAM, composition of the Mission team, principal conclusions and recommendations of the RAM, and a statement how they should be followed up;
 - An **introduction** to the Convention and the Mission, with a brief summary of the official request by the AA and the threats to the ecological character of a Ramsar Site, objectives, programme and composition of the Mission.
 - A **brief description of the wetland site**, including a location and site map; baseline (former and current ecological character) with technical descriptions of direct relevance to the specific issues being addressed by the RAM (e.g Ramsar Information Sheet).
 - A **description of the current situation of the site** as assessed by the RAM team, focusing on findings on changes in the ecological character and conclusions that apply to the core issues of the Mission;
 - A list of **recommendations and conclusions**;
 - A **bibliography**; and
 - **Annexes** covering:
 - the terms of reference for the RAM;
 - the composition of the RAM team;

- the programme of the on-site Mission; and
 - the list of stakeholders consulted and other contributors.
38. The members of the Mission team draw up the RAM report and its recommendations, based on their independent assessment of the situation and the issues at stake. Advice provided by the RAM team will support well-informed processes to prepare the best possible decisions by the AA or by any other part of the government of the Contracting Party concerned.
39. Recommendations listed in the RAM report should be linked to the findings and conclusions of the Mission team, and these in turn should be linked to the issues listed in the terms of reference for the Mission. Related recommendations may be grouped under corresponding sub-headings. Each recommendation should clearly identify the action to be taken; it may be helpful to distinguish between short-term, medium-term and long-term actions to be undertaken.

The process for following up a RAM report

40. COP13 urged diligent follow-up by Contracting Parties hosting RAMs, to foster implementation of the recommendations made in the RAM report and to evaluate and report on the outcomes (Resolution XIII.11 paragraph 13). The report is not an end in itself, but should be a step in a longer-term process. For example, the recommendations, if implemented, could facilitate a Site's removal from the Montreux Record or the submission of an updated Ramsar Information Sheet for the Site concerned. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Contracting Party to follow up and decide whether and how to implement recommendations addressed to it. An effective response to RAM reports depends on engendering national-level ownership of that response and engaging stakeholders. One means of achieving this might be to follow up with a national workshop or process that might still have participation from international Ramsar experts, to translate RAM recommendations into an action plan within the country.
41. As part of the regular reporting process to Standing Committee and the COP on the status of Ramsar Sites, after the RAM the Secretariat asks the Party concerned to provide a short update on progress in implementing the recommendations. Through this process, Ramsar Sites subject to a RAM will remain in the list of Sites with an "open Article 3.2 file" until the AA reports to the Secretariat that the Mission Recommendations have been satisfactorily implemented, or for Sites that are on the Montreux Record that the process to remove the Ramsar Site from the Record (according to Annex 1 of Resolution XIII.10) was successfully completed.

Reporting on the activities of the RAM including a review of outcomes

42. The Secretariat reports regularly to the Standing Committee and the COP on the Status of Ramsar Sites in accordance with Article 8.2 of the Convention, Recommendation 4.7 and Standing Committee Decision SC35-28. The reports include the status of Article 3.2 cases, and an update on RAMs and Sites in the Montreux Record.
43. After the RAM, a short online news article reporting on the activities of the Mission may be published with the agreement of the AA, and the main outcomes included in the Ramsar Newsletter.
44. The Secretariat then follows up with the AA on the recommendations of the RAM and will report accordingly to the Standing Committee and the COP on the status of the site. A further news article may be published by the AA and the Secretariat, once the Recommendations of the

RAM are fully implemented, the Ramsar Site has been successfully removed from the Montreux Record, and/or the “Article 3.2 file” of the Site has been successfully closed. This successful conclusion of a RAM should typically occur within six years of the Mission.