

Wetland City Accreditation: Guidance for the 2019-2021 triennium

Actions requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to:

- i. take note of the Secretariat report on progress of the Wetland City Accreditation scheme;
- ii. provide guidance for the accreditation process for the 2019-2021 triennium, including:
 - membership of the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC);
 - the role of the Secretariat;
 - the process and timeline for the 2019-2021 triennium; and
 - management of the scheme should the number of applications significantly increase; and
- iii. consider requesting the IAC to review the process.

Background: the 2016-2018 triennium

1. Resolution XII.10 on *Wetland City Accreditation of the Ramsar Convention* underlines the importance of wetlands in urban and peri-urban environments (as defined in Resolution X.27 on *Wetlands and urbanization*) and approves the establishment of the voluntary Wetland City Accreditation scheme to recognize municipal authorities that demonstrate strong and positive relationships with wetlands (as outlined in the Annex of Resolution XII.10).
2. Following Decision SC53-14, the Secretariat launched the call for applications for Wetland City Accreditation on 14 June 2017. Following the deadline for receipt of applications of 31 October 2017, the Secretariat verified the endorsement of applications by the Administrative Authority of the Contracting Parties concerned, and forwarded the applications to the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) on 8 November 2017.
3. The IAC produced a formal methodology and timeframe for assessing the applications on 10 October 2017, consistent with the criteria established by Resolution XII.10.
4. A total of 23 applications from nine countries were initially received. Subsequently a Contracting Party withdrew its nomination. Of the resulting 22 applications from eight countries considered by the IAC for accreditation, 18 cities were recommended. The Standing Committee reviewed these recommendations at SC54 and “decided that the report of the Independent Advisory Committee on Wetland City Accreditation would be taken forward for further consideration and announcement at COP13”. The following 18 cities were accredited by COP13:

- China: Changde City, Changshu City, Dongying City, Haerbin City, Haikou City, Yinchuan City;
 - France: Amiens, Courteranges, Pont-Audemer, Saint-Omer;
 - Hungary: Tata;
 - Madagascar: Mitsinjo;
 - Republic of Korea: Changnyeong County, Inje County, Jeju City, Suncheon City;
 - Sri Lanka: Colombo;
 - Tunisia: Ghar el Melh.
5. The accreditation ceremony at COP13 was well received and appreciated by Contracting Parties. A total of 81 representatives from the accredited cities, including mayors and representatives of cities, attended and were recognized. More than 1,000 media stories, primarily local, were tracked globally. This high level of media interest demonstrates that the Wetland City Accreditation scheme is delivering on the objective noted in Resolution XII.10 paragraph 3, to “provide positive branding opportunities for cities that demonstrate strong and proactive relationships with wetlands”.
 6. Following COP13, a webpage providing an overview of the Wetland City Accreditation scheme and the network of 18 accredited cities was posted by the Ramsar Secretariat in the three official languages of the Convention: <https://www.ramsar.org/activity/wetland-city-accreditation>.
 7. The Ramsar Secretariat has been informed that the Steering Committee of the Ramsar Regional Center – East Asia (RRC-EA) plans to organize a meeting of the accredited cities in the Republic of Korea in the later part of 2019. The RRC-EA is also planning to organize a workshop of the IAC.

Challenges experienced during the 2016-2018 triennium

8. Resolution XII.10 does not provide clear operational guidance on a number of matters relating to the administration of the Wetland City Accreditation scheme. This lack of clarity resulted in some confusion and lack of efficiency in the administration of the accreditation process during the 2016-2018 triennium, as noted below.

Membership of the Independent Advisory Committee

9. Resolution XII.10 states that the composition of the IAC shall be determined by the Standing Committee, but there is no procedure to review its membership from one triennium to another. Decision SC53-14 revised the membership after UN-Habitat informed the Secretariat that it could not chair the IAC as directed by Resolution XII.10. The Standing Committee is requested to identify the composition of the IAC for the current triennium at SC57. A proposed composition for consideration is provided in paragraph 18 of the present document.

Role of the Secretariat

10. Through Decision SC53-14, the Standing Committee agreed that the administrative role of the Secretariat should be minimal, limited to receiving applications and forwarding them to the IAC, without any impact on core budget funding. However, during the 2016-2018 triennium, the Wetland City Accreditation process required Secretariat staff involvement in various administrative activities, as detailed below:

- preparation of application forms and guidance for cities and Heads of Administrative Authorities;
- drafting and publishing the call for applications;
- receiving applications, checking their endorsement and forwarding to the IAC, replying to any queries;
- preparation of accreditation certificates, publishing of a web article and development of a web page for the accredited cities;
- communication, preparation and holding of the accreditation ceremony; and
- preparing ongoing reports for Standing Committee and COP, and seeking clarification when needed.

These activities are broader than what Resolution XII.10 provided for, and guidance is sought as to the services that the Secretariat should provide.

Process and timeline for approving nominated cities

11. Currently Wetland City Accreditation certificates are valid for six years. Resolution XII.10 does not provide a means by which cities may be recertified or a process for reviewing accredited cities over time. The Standing Committee needs to be aware that the accreditation for the cities recognized at COP13 is valid only until 2024.
12. The SC decided in Decision SC54-14 “that the report of the Independent Advisory Committee on Wetland City Accreditation would be taken forward for further consideration and announcement at COP13, and that the Wetland City Accreditation list would be under embargo until then.” Ahead of COP13, some Contracting Parties proposed to invite the mayors of the cities recommended for accreditation and asked support from the Secretariat to organize their participation and the award ceremony. This proved problematic, as the decision of COP13 was still pending and thus there was no certainty that the COP would approve all nominated cities. The Secretariat consulted with the Executive Team and was authorized to issue invitations through the National Focal Points in accordance with Resolution XII.10, making explicit that the mayors would be invited as nominees without guarantee about the final COP13 decision. Guidance is needed to have clarity on how to involve city representatives in the future.

Management of the scheme should the number of applications significantly increase

13. The number of applications for the current triennium may greatly exceed the number received in the last triennium. If so, the current structure and process for reviewing applications and recognizing accredited cities may not be suitable.

Challenges and recommendations provided by the Independent Advisory Committee and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel

14. In addition, during the 2016-2018 triennium both the report of the IAC to SC54 (restricted document SC54-28.2) and the Report of the Chair of the STRP (document SC54-22, Annex 1) identified the following challenges and recommendations to improve the Wetland City Accreditation process.
15. The IAC reported that:
 - the designated time period for IAC members to review applications was too short and may prove limiting in the future if the quantity of applications increases;

- IAC members did not have the needed language skills to review applications in Spanish and French. Additional capacity in French and Spanish is needed in order to appropriately review applications in these languages;
- the nomination process should be formalized to make sure that the list of representatives of IAC Member organizations is complete, updated and officially recognized by the Ramsar Contracting Parties.

16. The STRP reported that:

- 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;
- the time allocated for review by the 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;
- the opportunity for IAC members to interact during the process was limited, largely due to the short time allocated. A more interactive and considered process would be beneficial, ideally with perhaps at least one face-to-face IAC meeting, budget and time permitting.
- the linguistic capacity of the IAC may need to be broadened to reflect the submitting countries;
- the RRC-EA supported the accreditation process *pro bono*. Such a role in future should be formalized and budgeted for, and formal processes for managing potential conflict of interest documented.

Proposed guidance for the accreditation process for the triennium 2019-2021

17. The Secretariat requests that the Standing Committee at SC57 provide guidance on the following areas for the operation of the scheme during the triennium taking into account the issues identified above.

Membership of the Independent Advisory Committee

18. The Secretariat proposes that Standing Committee review and approve the composition of the IAC, encouraging all the six Ramsar regions to nominate a representative to the IAC according to the composition proposed by Resolution XII.10 and modified by Decision SC53-14 as follows:

- A representative of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat);
- A representative of the Convention's International Organization Partners;
- A Standing Committee member representing each of the six Ramsar regions, selected by the regions;
- A representative of the STRP;
- A representative of the Communication, Education, Participation and Awareness (CEPA) Oversight Panel of the Convention;
- The coordinators of any concerned Ramsar Regional Initiatives; and
- A representative of the Secretary General. (Decision SC53-14 confirmed that the involvement of the Secretary General should be symbolic and that the administrative role of the Secretariat should be minimal.)

Role of the Secretariat

19. Taking into account the experience of the last triennium and considering the success of the celebration of the first edition of the Wetland City Accreditation at COP13, the Secretariat proposes that SC57 approve the responsibilities of the Ramsar Secretariat as identified in paragraph 12 above, recognizing that some core budget is required to support the nomination process, organize an accreditation ceremony at COP14 and provide communications support for the scheme.

Proposed timeline for the 2019-2021 triennium

20. In paragraph 15 b. of its Annex, Resolution XII.10 states: "Any proposals from Contracting Parties shall be submitted to the Independent Advisory Committee within one year of the closing of the previous meeting of the Conference of the Parties." It is suggested that the IAC:
- receive proposals from 1 September 2019 to 15 January 2020;
 - assess applications from 15 February 2020 until SC58 and provide a progress report to SC58; and
 - provide a final report including the list of nominated cities to SC59 in 2021.
- This proposed timeline will leave adequate time for the IAC to review applications, and complete and transmit its report to SC59 in advance of COP14.

Table 1: Proposed timeline for the Wetland City Accreditation for the 2019-2021 triennium

Dates	Actions
July 2019	Secretariat to facilitate a conference call for the IAC to discuss updating the application form
1 September 2019	Secretariat to launch the call for applications
1 September 2019 to 15 January 2020	Interested cities to prepare and send applications to Head of Ramsar Administrative Authority (AA)
September 2019 (tentative)	Face-to-face meeting of IAC in Republic of Korea (hosted by RRC-EA)
October 2019 (tentative)	Meeting of the COP13 accredited cities in Republic of Korea (hosted by RRC-EA)
By 15 January 2020	Heads of AA to submit applications to the Ramsar Secretariat through the online submission
By 15 February 2020	Ramsar Secretariat to forward applications to the IAC
From 15 February 2020 to SC58 (2020)	IAC to provide a progress report to SC58
At SC59 (2021)	IAC to review applications and determine which cities to accredit, and report its decision to SC59 SC59 to review the IAC recommended cities
COP14 (2021)	COP14 to recognize accredited cities

Management of the scheme should the number of applications significantly increase

21. The Secretariat proposes that SC57 request the IAC to give consideration as the implications of management of the scheme should there be a significant increase in applications. Should

applications increase significantly it will require additional time from Secretariat staff and IAC members to complete the nomination process and may have implications as to how a large number of accredited cities are recognized at COP14.

Review process

22. Resolution XII.10 “decides to review implementation progress and financing of the framework and the voluntary accreditation system at COP13.” This was not done. The Standing Committee may consider requesting the IAC to prepare a proposal to carry out this review for consideration at SC58, including a proposal if needed to prepare a draft resolution for submission to COP14.