

World Wetlands Day 1998

A message from Delmar Blasco, Secretary General of the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

Water for wetlands, wetlands for water. This could be the motto for the 1998 World Wetlands Day, a year when the international community has moved, through an accumulation of initiatives, to focus on the water crisis that could easily be with us throughout the 21st century if we do not move decisively and intelligently towards the new paradigm of integrated water resources management – a paradigm that in order to be effective has to bring together all the stakeholders: communities, governments, businesses and those, such as our Convention, that can bring the ecosystems perspective to the table of water users.

The Bureau of the Convention has issued a statement on this matter that we hope will assist the wetlands network made up of government agencies, NGOs, academia and businesses to make the water and wetlands issue the focus of this year's WWD celebrations. Yet we very much welcome the many other initiatives we already know of that are focusing on other important questions related to wetland conservation and sustainable use. We are impressed and encouraged by the number of activities being planned around the world to mark WWD, in spite of the fact that in the far North February is not the ideal time of the year for outdoor activities, while in the far South people are only just coming back from their summer holidays!

World Wetlands Day is the time to celebrate the bounty and beauty of these special places that are the shallow marine waters, coral reefs, coastal lagoons, intertidal forests and mangroves, not to mention the inland deltas, lakes, marshes, peatlands and oases, to name just a few of the natural wetland types in the Convention's classification system, which also includes human-made wetlands such as irrigation channels, rice fields and wastewater treatment areas.

On 2 February 1997, the Ramsar Convention had 98 Contracting Parties. Today they are 106, and the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance has grown to include 896 sites, covering 67,495,424 hectares (over 670,000 km², more than the area of France or Kenya). I have had the privilege of visiting in recent months countries such as the Russian Federation, Viet Nam and the Philippines, Zambia and Malawi, Costa Rica, Brazil and Peru, the USA and France. I was impressed, without exception, by the level of activity that is going on in each one of them on many fronts concerning wetlands: national wetland policies, management plans for wetlands sites, important research initiatives, public awareness and education programmes, private sector involvement, new legislation. Much more than we suspect.

I very much hope that World Wetlands Day will be the occasion, everywhere, to celebrate our achievements and the commitments that we have taken for the future. This does not mean that we can relax: nowhere on Earth have we accomplished the task of ensuring the long-term conservation and sustainable use of remaining wetlands, and the restoration when still possible of those lost in the past. But I am persuaded that there is room to be hopeful and to use our accomplishments as our main leverage for further and even more decisive action.