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Review of the utility of COP scientific and technical Resolutions and guidelines, and their availability – key messages

This information paper has been prepared by the CEPA thematic lead member, Christine Prietto, of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) with input from the STRP Chair and Secretariat (Edgar Kaeslin).

1) Introduction

1. The STRP's Working Group 8 on Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) represents a new and innovative commitment from the Ramsar Convention to developing mechanisms to integrate CEPA at every level of the Convention's work. In the 2006-2008 triennium the major focus of the CEPA Working Group was an evaluation of the utility and relevance of the Convention's scientific and technical guidance for their target audiences (STRP priority task 3 in its 2005-2008 Work Plan).
2. This information paper provides a summary of the findings of this evaluation as well as initial findings from related work, including from a review of the case studies contained in the 1993 Ramsar publication *Towards the wise use of wetlands*. The results will contribute to STRP's recommendations to Standing Committee and the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) concerning the type and style of any further guidance it may be asked to prepare. The results will also be incorporated into a plan for ongoing development of guidance to take through to the next triennium and will help inform the STRP and the Secretariat in their preparation and dissemination of scientific and technical guidance in the future.
3. Note. Throughout this paper the use of the word “guidance” refers to the overall suite of Ramsar “guidance”, including all Resolutions and Recommendations, guidance annexed to those decisions of the COP, and the set of Ramsar Wise Use Handbooks which provide a thematically-organised consolidation of COP-adopted guidance with supporting materials. Where the word “guidance” refers to a specific type of product, this is further explained.

2) STRP's review of scientific and technical guidance

4. In pursuance of aspects of Ramsar Resolution VIII.45, the STRP was instructed by Ramsar COP9 (2005) in Resolution IX.2, as an Immediate Priority in the STRP's 2006-2008 Work

Plan, to undertake a review of the uptake, use and perceived usefulness of the guidance documents it has prepared for the Convention.

5. Specifically, STRP 2006-2008 Task 3 is described as follows: “Conduct an overview of progress with scientific and technical aspects of the implementation of COP Resolutions, focusing on the suite of substantive guidance materials prepared by the STRP for Parties (as compiled in Ramsar Wise Use Handbooks), through a structured review and assessment”.
6. The overall purpose of the review was to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of different forms of guidance for a range of end users, identified as “implementers” of the Ramsar Convention. The work under STRP Task 3 was undertaken through the STRP’s CEPA Working Group (Working Group 8).
7. The delivery of this work was undertaken through the development, dissemination and analysis of a questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of different forms of guidance for different end users, including Government Focal Points, Wetland Site Managers, National Ramsar Committee Members, STRP National Focal Points, CEPA National Focal Points, and IOPs.
8. The questionnaire was designed to gain specific information on:
 - the needs of implementers;
 - the style and format of guidance documents;
 - the delivery and uptake process; and
 - the use of guidance documents for implementation of the Convention.
9. It was also hoped that the questionnaire would provide information on the systems and practices for distributing guidance documents. Distribution of guidance documents is achieved in a number of ways through national and international convention mechanisms, and it is normally assumed that the relevant guidance documents are accessible and are indeed reaching and being used by their audiences. The questionnaire aimed to test this assumption.

2.1) Methodology

10. The STRP engaged an expert consultant in CEPA, Ms Gwen van Boven of SPAN Consultants, to develop, administer and analyse the questionnaire, in close liaison with the lead for STRP Working Group 8, Christine Prietto, the Secretariat’s CEPA Programme Officer, Sandra Hails, and the Scientific and Technical Officer, Edgar Kaeslin. Advice on the questionnaire was also provided by STRP members and Ramsar Senior Regional Advisors.
11. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail to Ramsar Administrative Authority National Focal Points, Wetland Site Managers, National Ramsar or Wetland Committee members, Ramsar STRP National Focal Points, Ramsar CEPA National Focal Points (Government and NGO), and Ramsar International Organisation Partners (IOPs) and their networks.

12. Importantly, so as to ensure confidentiality of those responding and of their responses, all completed questionnaires were returned only to the STRP's consultant, and individual identities and responses have been held only by the consultant.
13. The questionnaire focused on COP Recommendations and Resolutions and the 2nd edition of the Wise Use Handbooks, which was the version available during the period of the survey and which consists of 14 individual handbooks. The questionnaire was made available in the three official Convention languages (English, French and Spanish).
14. The consultant has prepared a detailed report on the results of the survey, and this will be made available in the near future through the STRP pages of the Ramsar Web site.

2.2) Overview of results of the questionnaire

15. The key findings of the questionnaire analysis are summarised in Annex 1. The design and scope of the questionnaire yielded a rich set of responses that are informative with regard to its main aims.
16. This section provides an overview of the conclusions arising from a first analysis of the results. Some questions arising from the analysis are cited, and we have suggested specific areas for further analysis and potentially useful directions for additional enquiries.

- **Overall utility of Ramsar's guidance**

17. Although it is worrying that some one-third of all questionnaire respondents said that they do not use Ramsar guidance products, of the two-thirds responding who do use the guidance, 80% found the Handbooks useful or very useful. In general, the consolidation of guidance thematically in Handbooks was recognised as more useful than its provision in the original individual Resolutions and Recommendations.
18. Overall, the most frequently used Handbooks are those on the *Wise Use of wetlands*, *Managing wetlands*, and *Designating Ramsar sites*. Some other Handbooks are widely used by one or another user group: for example, the *National Wetland Policies* is extensively used by Administrative Authority focal points, and the *Wetland CEPA Handbook* by CEPA National Focal Points.
19. Handbooks representing relatively 'new' areas of work under the Convention were not as well known or used, and this included those dealing with cross-sectoral issues such as river basin and water resource management and integrated coastal zone management.
20. Whilst respondents generally reported that the guidance was useful, they made a number of suggestions for improvements to Resolution annexes and Handbooks, including that the Resolution annexes should be more practical and results-oriented, that the current range of topics is too broad and diffuse, and in particular that the language style should be simpler and tailored more to practitioners.

- **Identifying the needs of implementers**

21. There is a strong imperative for better consideration of how the audience for various Ramsar products is segmented and what their needs are. Analysis of the profiles of respondents provided in Annex 1 indicates that we may not have a clear appreciation of the diversity of the target audience as represented by the cohorts approached in the questionnaire.
22. Overall the cohort whose responses raised the most significant issues and questions is that group of respondents who classified themselves as “Wetland Site Managers”. Responses from this important cohort revealed that the variety of levels at which they work and the imperatives under which they work result in a group that is more disparate and less homogeneous than other cohorts within the target audience.
23. A significant proportion of the guidance adopted by the Convention has been focussed on providing tools for Contracting Parties and their Administrative Authorities to engage in Convention implementation, whilst other guidance has been prepared with the aim of supporting wetland management at the site level, so these results need further exploration in order to better understand the profile of the group of wetland site managers, clarify their needs, and provide advice for potential revision of existing guidance and the development of further guidance to improve its usefulness for their work.
24. The Convention does not currently have the resources to deliver a wide range of different products simultaneously to suit all parts of a highly segmented target audience. In developing future guidance, however, the profiles of questionnaire respondents could be used to design products to better meet the needs of specific end users, and thus help the STRP focus on the most useful style and type of guidances to prepare. The STRP’s CEPA Working Group will need to provide advice and assistance to the Panel as it develops future guidance in order to identify approaches for differentiating products for different target user groups, as far as is possible within resource constraints.

- **Style and format of guidance documents**

25. The questionnaire analysis reveals that some respondents do not seem to understand the relationship between COP-adopted Resolutions/Recommendations and the consolidated guidances provided in the Wise Use Handbooks. This apparent lack of understanding needs to be further tested to guide the *labelling* and *promotion* of Ramsar guidance.
26. There has been frequent discussion about how much priority should be given to providing guidance in as many local languages as possible, so as to maximise within-country access and use of Ramsar guidance. Language issues were, however, mentioned relatively infrequently by respondents, and when they were, more people (mainly wetland site managers) asked to be better served in the three Convention languages rather than provided with additional language versions. This result may provide some positive assurance against the ongoing concern within the Convention that languages are a barrier to access to the guidance.
27. One clear message on how the Handbooks could be improved was to tailor the language style better to suit particular practitioners.

28. Some Wise Use Handbooks were much better known and used than others. Further investigation into why some Handbooks are more useful than others would be valuable, given that Contracting Parties requested all such guidance to be prepared for them in the first place. Whilst some preferences by different user groups were to be expected – e.g., wetland site managers used the wetland management planning Handbooks – it is a matter of concern that other key guidance designed to assist government implementers in addressing cross-sectoral issues affecting wetlands, such as that on river basin and water resource management, does not seem to be widely used.

- **Improving the delivery and uptake of guidance**

29. Some important logistical issues emerged during the distribution of the questionnaire regarding communication mechanisms and practices, in particular the high percentage of non-functional e-mail addresses for key Ramsar contacts, including daily AA focal points, STRP National Focal Points, and CEPA National Focal Points. This is a key issue to resolve, since if key focal points change, or the contact details change, it is impossible for the Secretariat and the STRP to establish even basic contact to ensure that Convention materials are reaching those who need them.
30. These issues need to be reviewed to identify strategies for improving dissemination and uptake of guidance. Developing mechanisms to provide more regular updating of the Secretariat's e-lists is clearly important in this respect. However, a key to this is that Ramsar focal points must advise the Secretariat without delay when focal points change, or their contact details change, and it is clear that this is not happening consistently at present.
31. The Ramsar Web site is important to the questionnaire respondents. Since the Web site, in general, is the main source of access to Ramsar guidance, improvements to enhance functionality and accessibility of the Web site should be given a high priority. [Secretariat note: Since this questionnaire survey was undertaken, a major redevelopment of the Ramsar Web site has been initiated that is anticipated to increase accessibility and ease of use.] The questionnaire results do provide some recommendations for ongoing development of the Web site, which, given its importance for so many users, are valuable.
32. There also appear to be some problems with distribution processes within countries as there is some indication that the Handbooks are not being disseminated adequately by Administrative Authorities to site managers and others (including in other sectors) for whom they could be useful or by whom they should be used. The implication is that access to guidance by individuals needs to be facilitated in different ways, without relying upon internal distribution within countries or regions.

- **Use and non-use of Ramsar guidance**

33. Respondents provided some views on preferences for specific features in the Wise Use Handbooks they used most often. In nine of the 10 Handbooks that had enough responses to be further analysed, the technical information is the most appreciated feature of the series. They are also well appreciated for bringing structure to the Ramsar guidance.

34. Regarding possible improvements, respondents regularly suggested that the language could be simplified. Further exploration of these results, perhaps through more detailed interviews with selected respondents, would be useful.
35. It will be most important to gain additional information from those respondents who say that they do **not** use the guidance, especially as wetland site managers represented approximately 50% of these non-users. The main reasons cited for not using the guidance were that respondents were either not aware of the guidance or did not have access to it (see Annex 1). This is of serious concern and requires further analysis as to why such a situation exists.
36. Another question for investigation arising from the large number of non-users is whether the labelling of guidance documents as “Ramsar guidance” could be discouraging wider uptake of the guidance. It would be useful to find a way to explore this question further in order to inform the promotion of Ramsar guidance.

3) Initial findings on guidance utility arising from a review of the case studies contained in *Towards the wise use of wetlands*

37. In a related task (STRP Task 14 in Wise Use Working Group 2), STRP consultants have initiated a review of the case studies contained in the book *Towards the wise use of wetlands* (1993), in order to update the studies where possible and extract lessons regarding the achievement of wise use. While this task will be continued into the 2009-2012 cycle, early results of the study have provided additional very useful ideas and recommendations regarding the utility, uptake and dissemination of the Convention’s guidance.
38. Preliminary conclusions drawn from a first review of this work show some significant parallels with the Working Group 8 review of guidance described above, as follows:
 - There may be a distinction required between guidance that is aimed at use by administrators at policy level and guidance that is really useful at field/site level.
 - Overall, the current Ramsar guidance is possibly too generic to be useful for addressing specific management issues at the local/site-based level. The guidance may also be presented in a way that is unlikely to engage local site managers/stakeholders.
 - On the other hand, the Ramsar guidance is widely seen as being of value in capacity-building initiatives and has been a valuable resource for those organizing and running training courses at international and national levels.
 - There were several cases involving Ramsar sites (including some from the original *Towards the Wise Use of Wetlands* publication and even sites that have been included in the Montreux Record) where respondents admitted to being completely unaware of the existence of the Ramsar *Wise Use Handbooks*.
39. Suggestions put forward in the review for further consideration include:
 - Dissemination of Ramsar guidance within countries is not uniform.

- There is a weak connection between the purpose and intended audience behind the guidance and its perceived usefulness at the site level.
- It may be timely for the Ramsar Convention to review how it provides guidance for those individuals and organisations working in wetlands. Is the current approach the best approach for the purpose? Are there alternative approaches or alternative mechanisms that could be considered?

4) Summary of the results of the Neotropics questionnaire on Ramsar guidance

40. In 2005 a questionnaire was developed and delivered by CREHO, the Regional Ramsar Centre located in Panamá, with funding from the government of the USA. All 136 respondents were drawn from individuals attending training courses given by CREHO. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire at the time of their participation in a CREHO training course. Respondents included Ramsar national focal points, Administrative Authority officers, decision-makers, National Ramsar committee members, and NGOs. All respondents were from the Neotropics region.
41. Although this questionnaire was not as extensive, some of the questions were similar to those included in the STRP Working Group 8 questionnaire. The results of the survey potentially reinforce some of the findings from the two more recent reviews described above. Regarding Ramsar guidance, approximately 15% of respondents in the Neotropics survey were not aware of the guidance and approximately 41% were not using the guidance. Of those who were using the guidance, 91% rated Ramsar guidance as somewhat useful, useful or very useful.

5. Using the results to guide what STRP does in the future

42. The Panel will continue to work on this issue in the next triennium through its CEPA Thematic Work Area. The 2007/8 questionnaire-based review of guidance represented a major component of the work programme for the CEPA Working Group in the 2006-2008 triennium. During the next triennium, the Working Group will use the questionnaire results as the basis for continuing development of further recommendations regarding Ramsar guidance for consideration by STRP and Standing Committee.
43. There is clearly a need to take a more strategic view of the development, dissemination and utilization of scientific and technical guidance within the Convention, in order to utilize optimally the scientific and financial resources available to the Convention and the Contracting Parties, both for development of new guidance and for support in implementing existing guidance. There is also a need to consider how to prepare guidance in styles appropriate for different end users in their implementation of different aspects of the Convention.
44. While there are many important issues emerging from the review, there are some issues that stand out and should be prominent in the future work of the STRP's CEPA Working Group:

- a) The results of the review show clearly that if we wish to design guidance that is most useful, a better understanding of the end users is needed so that guidance can achieve a better fit for user. The profiles of different cohorts provided through the questionnaire should be used early in the next triennium to provide an opportunity to study first-hand the individuals who make up those cohorts. This is perhaps most important for those working at the site level. It is clear that we need a better understanding of the cohort we refer to as Wetland Site Managers.
- b) While it would be ideal to be able to more clearly distinguish STRP products for different audiences, it is clear that the limited available resources will present a barrier, since the Convention caters for many audiences/user-groups. The CEPA Working Group will work with the STRP to identify possible approaches for differentiating products, within resource constraints. When investigating this issue the suggestions raised in the preliminary findings from the review of the case studies in *Towards the Wise use of Wetlands* will be considered.
- c) Issues related to the *labelling* and *promotion* of Ramsar guidance need to be addressed. The questionnaire results indicate that some respondents do not seem to have understood the difference (and relationship) between the COP-adopted Resolutions and Recommendations and the Wise Use Handbooks. Likewise it will be worthwhile to investigate whether the labelling of guidance as “Ramsar guidance” rather than “wetlands guidance” may be limiting the uptake of the guidance by some potential users.
- d) There is evidence that access to guidance at an individual level is critical to effective uptake. For this goal, the Web site is critical. Hence the current work to redevelop the Web site so as to improve functionality and accessibility is of great importance. The questionnaire does provide some advice for ongoing development of the Web site, which, given its importance for so many users, is valuable.
- e) A major challenge for the STRP’s CEPA Working Group will be to develop a mechanism to gain additional information from those respondents who do not use the guidance, especially as wetland site managers represented approximately 50% of the non-users. It is important to better understand why they do not use the guidance.

6. Towards further integration of CEPA processes

- 45. During the last triennium the CEPA Working Group contributed to the work of other STRP working groups as much as possible given that the tasks had been predetermined. Early in the next triennium the CEPA Working Group should develop a work plan in concert with all working groups to incorporate a more comprehensive strategy to integrate CEPA processes into the work of the STRP. Determining the most productive way for the CEPA Working Group to interact with other working groups to gain the greatest benefit and achieve the desired outcomes will be a priority.
- 46. The principal issues that have emerged from the reviews reported in this paper should be addressed in future work of the CEPA Working Group in STRP (see also COP10 DR 10 *Future implementation of scientific and technical aspects of the Convention* and COP10 DOC. 5 *Report of the Chair of the STRP*). These issues would benefit from some prioritisation. It may be

useful to group the issues that have emerged from the reviews according to the solutions/responses that are needed. A suggested grouping could be as follows:

- Those issues that relate to logistics and communications, such as the issue of non-functional e-mails and out-of-date contact details, should be taken up by the Secretariat and Standing Committee.
 - Those issues that require additional analysis of the results of the review of guidance, or further investigation to refine the conclusions of the review, should be addressed by the CEPA Working Group within the STRP.
 - Those issues that pose more fundamental questions about the design of Ramsar guidance for particular end users should be addressed more broadly by the STRP as a whole during the next triennium, under the lead of the CEPA working group.
47. The STRP CEPA Working Group can also contribute to discussions on strategies to improve communication with key sectors such as water, energy and agriculture. The ability to interact with these sectors is increasingly critical as the Convention seeks to contribute to global responses to climate change, and developing communication strategies for individual sectors would facilitate that interaction. Such sectors not only affect the business of wetland conservation and wise use but also, less well recognised, depend on the natural infrastructure of wetlands to sustain their own business.

Annex

Ramsar guidance utility: summary of STRP questionnaire survey results

Profile of questionnaire respondents

Questionnaires were sent to 501 formally designated Contracting Party contacts (National, STRP, and CEPA Focal Points) and to 234 wetland site managers; overall 13% of the e-mail addresses of these contacts were not functional. An unknown number of questionnaires were forwarded by key IOP contacts to their own networks.

246 questionnaire responses were received, of which 236 could be included in the analyses.

The largest group of respondents identified themselves as wetland site managers, totalling 29%, while 19% of responses were from the Administrative Authority focal points.

Of the wetland site managers that responded, 70% received the questionnaire directly while 30% of the wetland site managers received the questionnaire via their Administrative Authorities.

The regional representation was uneven, with the majority of site manager respondents originating from Europe and North America and the majority of Administrative Authority respondents originating from Africa.

Government focal points use the guidance regularly and are the most positive about the Handbooks. They regularly obtain information directly from COP meetings and almost half visit the Web site weekly or more.

Wetland site managers, the largest group of respondents, showed some results that were challenging. Over half of this group indicated that Ramsar plays no or only a small part in their work. This group is the only group where a majority did not use Ramsar guidance. While the Web site is their key access point for guidance, the frequency of visits to the Web site is low. However, 85% of those who do know about the guidance use the handbooks and over 75% of those users find them useful or very useful.

Use of guidance (Resolutions and Handbooks)

66% of all respondents indicated they use Ramsar guidance products.

Respondents most often cited that the function of the guidance is to “guide thinking about wetland issues”, followed by “used to advise/instruct others”. Twenty six percent of the users base their decisions and/or actions at least partly on Ramsar guidance, and 22% use it as a practical tool in assessments, evaluations or audits.

The responses suggest that approximately 33% of all respondents do not use Ramsar guidance products.

Those who identified themselves as non-users included a large proportion of the wetland site manager respondents and some Administrative Authority contacts. The wetland site managers represented approximately 50% of the non-users.

Asked why they do not use the guidance, they offered two main reasons:

- They do not have access to it (34%)
- They are not aware of its existence (32%)

The following results refer only to those respondents who identified themselves as users of guidance.

Among guidance users, respondents use both the Resolutions and the Handbooks, though the Handbooks appear to be regarded as more “accessible”. However, it was clear that wetland site managers in this group have a clear preference for the handbooks.

The questionnaire attempted to differentiate between preferences for either the original Resolutions and their annexes versus the Handbooks; however, the differentiation in the responses from different groups was not overly informative.

80% of guidance users found the Handbooks useful or very useful.

37% of users were not aware that Handbooks are updated after each meeting of the COP.

Suggestions for improvements to the guidance annexed to COP Resolutions requested that the texts should be more practical and results-oriented, that the current range of topics is too broad and diffuse, and in particular that the language should be simpler and tailored more to practitioners.

The questionnaire aimed to identify those Handbooks that were most well known and/or most used to provide the opportunity for reviewing either the Handbook topic or design features of those Handbooks.

Among the users of the 2nd Handbook series, four best-known Handbooks are:

- a) Handbook 1 (Wise use of wetlands), known by 92%
- b) Handbook 8 (Managing wetlands), known by 80%
- c) Handbook 2 (National wetland policies) and
- d) Handbook 7 (Designating Ramsar Sites), each known by 75%.

The Handbooks that were identified as most frequently used by the respondents’ were:

- a) HB 1 on Wise use (cited by 22% of the users);
- b) HB 8 on Managing wetlands (14%); and
- c) HB 7 on Designating Ramsar sites (11%).

Not surprisingly, Handbooks representing relatively ‘new’ areas of work under the Convention were not as well known or used. Within different user groups, obvious preferences were self-explanatory. For Administrative Authority focal points, Handbook 2 (National Wetland Policies) is prominently used. For CEPA National Focal Points the same applies to Handbook 6 (Wetland CEPA). However, due to sample sizes, high confidence cannot be attached to the preference results.

Regarding responses to the different elements of the Handbooks, the guidelines (usually originally adopted as annexes to COP Resolutions) emerged as most appreciated, followed by the Resolutions themselves.

Altogether, the respondents appreciated the Handbooks most for their technical information.

Access to guidance

Across all respondents the Web site was highly used. Only 7% of respondents never visit the Ramsar Web site. For approximately 84% of respondents the Ramsar Web site is the main source through which people first learn of Ramsar guidance.

For all groups, a clear majority indicates that ongoing access to both the Resolutions and the Handbooks is most often through the Web site. For wetland site managers, the Web site is clearly the most important source.

Over half of respondents (53%) visit the Web site at least monthly.

46% found the Web site easy or very easy to navigate, while 54% find it not that easy, among them many wetland site managers (63%) for whom the Web site is indeed crucial.