



Ramsar Pre-COP11 Asia Regional Meeting

14-18 November 2011, Jakarta, Indonesia



Meeting Report

The Asia Regional Preparatory Meeting for COP11 was hosted by the Ministry of Forestry, Indonesia and was attended by over 100 participants. These included representatives from:

- 20 Contracting Parties in the Asia region;
- 1 from Papua New Guinea as an observer representing the Oceania region;
- 2 from non-Contracting Parties countries (Bhutan and Brunei), attending as observers; and
- Over 20 Ramsar International Organization Partners (BirdLife International, IUCN, Wetlands International and WWF), governmental organizations and NGOs, academics and other experts, attending as observers.

The Parties represented were Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Iraq, I.R. Iran, Japan, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao PDR, Mongolia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, R.O. Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Viet Nam and Yemen. Apologizes were received from Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, India, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Philippines, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The meeting updated Contracting Parties on activities of the Secretariat, the STRP and Ramsar Regional Initiatives since COP10 in 2008, and explained the background to the key Draft Resolutions that will be presented to COP11. There were also sessions where Contracting Parties, Ramsar partners and experts could exchange experiences and best practices on how to improve the implementation of the Convention, and discuss how best to increase regional cooperation in future.



UPDATES

1. Updates from the Ramsar Secretariat

The Ramsar Secretariat gave a number of updates on their work at the global and regional level, and there were also updates on the work of the STRP and the Draft Resolutions that will be presented to COP11. UNEP also provided a presentation on the need for increased collaboration between the work of the MEAs and this was supported by the Parties, who said that this was needed particularly on climate change issues.

Contracting Parties also stressed that regarding Ramsar Site designation, the focus should be on quality not quantity, in order to develop a well-managed network of high priority sites for the country and for the region.

2. Updates from the Ramsar Regional Initiatives

There are three Ramsar Regional Initiatives operating in Asia. These are the:

- Ramsar Regional Centre – Central and West Asia (based in Tehran, I.R. Iran)
- Ramsar Regional Centre – East Asia (based in Changwon, R.O. Korea)
- Partnership for the East Asian - Australasian Flyway (based in Incheon, R.O. Korea)

All of these initiatives are carrying out good work to help implement the Convention in the different regions of Asia where they operate, and this work is very much appreciated by the Contracting Parties in those regions. The work these initiatives carry out range from organizing training courses and workshops for network, providing funds for small projects, and translating Convention documents into local languages. However, these initiatives are facing challenges to their effective functioning and these issues need to be resolved. They include:

- Financial issues: Whilst the daily administration of the initiative is funded by the host country, there needs to be more financial support from the country which the initiative serves to cover the cost of activities that the initiative carries out.
- Administration issues: Although the administration of these initiatives is supported by the host country, the initiative needs to be given enough independency so that for example, they can raise and receive funds from outside sources, have their own letterheads/logo etc.

THEMES

On Day 2 of the meeting (15 November), a series of presentations were given on a number of key themes related to the effective implementation of the Convention. These topics were selected by the Asian Contracting Parties in advance of the meeting. The notes below aim to summarize the main points from the presentations and the discussions that were held after each of the key themes.

3. Economic valuation of wetlands

- Wetlands play a significant role globally in delivering ecosystem services. However, they are generally under-valued compared to other ecosystems and many wetland assessments still lack a rigorous economic valuation element.

- Wetlands are inseparable from other parts of economic infrastructure just like “built” capital and assets, and so should be counted, valued and invested in as an economic part of infrastructure. The investment in wetland conservation and wise use yields tangible returns and cost savings therefore their maintenance and upkeep require an equal – or even greater – investment priority. Unfortunately, wetland costs and benefits are not adequately reflected in decision-making.
- A number of studies on the economic valuation of specific wetlands have been conducted in Asia. Whilst the results have highlighted the long-term value of conserving the wetland and the economic services that it provides, these studies have not always lead to the conservation of the site itself, e.g. That Luan, Vientiane, Lao PDR.
- In order to factor wetland ecosystem values into economic planning, we need to:
 - take valuation beyond the realms of a purely academic exercise;
 - value wetlands as productive assets so as to demonstrate the returns to conservation and wise use – and the costs and losses they help to avert;
 - strategically respond to real threats and management needs, and
 - communicate values to support better and more informed decision-making.
- There are ongoing initiatives that can be utilized to address the challenges: Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI), Sub-global Assessment (SGA) Network, and Project for Ecosystem Services (ProEcoServ).



4. Business, wetlands and water

- There is a growing recognition worldwide of the economic value of the services provided by the world’s ecosystem and natural capital. In the case of wetlands, this value has been estimated to be worth some trillions of USD annually.
- Traditionally, the corporate sector have had little role in environmental conservation work but increasingly, they too are recognizing the value of ecosystems and wetlands. As a result, many businesses now regard environment responsibility as being an important and integral part of their work ethics (corporate social responsibility). It also make sounds financial sense to be engaged in ecosystem/wetland management, conservation and wise use as it may allow corporate to capture new business opportunities.
- As a result, a range of economic, financial and business mechanisms have been developed to attract corporate funding for conservation and it is just a matter of getting the prices, markets and incentives right.
- Previously, the main actors carrying out conservation work were government, organizations, NGOs and academic institutions. Now however, the landscape is changing and the role of the corporate sector is increasingly away from just donors, to conservation actors themselves.

Today, there are many examples worldwide of corporations being engaged in wetland conservation work.

- Recommendations for engaging with the business sector include:
 - Much of the responsibility lies with us, as wetland planners, managers and researchers to shift the paradigm, and approach, from our traditional focus on governments, donors and the public interest;
 - Start to demonstrate why and how it makes good business sense to invest in the conservation and wise use of wetlands, and;
 - Move beyond the view that we hold the monopoly on planning, implementing and controlling wetland management.

5. Sustainable financing for wetland conservation and wise use

- At the national level, Contracting Parties are facing the challenge of finding sustainable sources of financial support for the management and conservation of wetlands. As a result, Malaysia for example, is currently conducting a study to develop a mechanism that would lead to the financial sustainability of their Ramsar Sites.
- At the site level in the United Arab Emirates, Fujairah Municipality and the Emirates Wildlife Society – WWF (EWS-WWF), have been successful in finding financial support for the conservation of the Wadi Wurayah Ramsar Site through working with a range of stakeholders, including local government, international and national business companies etc. This was made possible by identifying the main features of the site that would attract the ‘social responsibility’ side of the sponsors, e.g. funding to develop the potential of the site for organizing tours for students to raise their awareness about the environment; for conserving the unique biodiversity at the site etc;
- Developing payments for ecosystem services (PES) mechanisms. This involves:
 - Identifying and assessing the full range of ecosystem services that the wetland provides and the people who benefit from those services;
 - Estimating and demonstration the economic value of those ecosystem services;
 - Develop a market system for the delivery of those services that involves the users or beneficiaries having to pay for the ecosystem services that they depend upon, with the funds raised being used to;
 - Compensate the land and resource managers for the cost they incur in maintaining the ecosystem services that the wetland provides;
- A case study of PES was provided of the Tuul River (Mongolia) that supplies water for Ulaanbaatar. The value of investing in the conservation and wise use of the river has the potential to generate water, land and resource benefits over 25 years worth almost US\$ 1 billion whilst degradation would cost the economy from US\$ 275 million to US\$ 440 million. Furthermore, every US\$1 invested in conservation would generate additional water and livelihood benefits of US\$15 each year.
- WWF International raised the issue that both the Africa and Latin America regions have been able to establish functioning grant programs under the Ramsar Convention, i.e. the ‘Swiss Grant for Africa’ and ‘Wetlands for the Future Fund’ respectively, and he then raised the possibility of a similar fund being established for Asia.

6. National implementation

Key recommendations and points that were raised by the presentations and from discussions on best practices for implementing the Ramsar Convention at the national level included:

Promoting increased synergies between the different MEAs

In order to help Contracting Parties improve the effectiveness of their conservation work, there needs to be greater collaboration between the MEAs so as to avoid duplication of effort and wastage of resources. Comments and recommendation on how this could be done included:

- Guidelines should be prepared on how implementing the Ramsar Convention can also contribute towards achieving the Aichi Targets;
- Inclusion of wetland and water conservation objectives into NBSAPs;
- Provide opportunities for the National Focal Points from the different MEAs to share and discuss issues on implementation of their conventions, such as by inviting the NFP from the relevant MEAs on the broad-based national wetland committee (see below);



National Wetland Committees (NWC)

- Contracting Parties that have NWC's reported that they can play a vital role in coordinating and implementing wetland conservation and wise use activities on the national level;
- It is difficult to generalize how the NWC should be formed or administered because of the different situation in each country but generally, they should be broad-based to include all the relevant stakeholders, such as from the relevant ministries as well as academics, NGOs, local communities etc. The Ramsar Secretariat has prepared an information paper that illustrate some of the diverse approaches Parties have utilized to create and operate NRCs.
- Contracting Parties reported that NWC's are especially effective when they are connected with high level government officials who can take executive decisions. For example In Thailand, the Prime Minister is the chair of the environmental board that supervise the NRC.
- For NWC's to be successful generally, they should be able to take independent decision without having to go through a bureaucratic process for approval. NWC should also be supported by technical sub committees, and there is good communication between the sub-committees, and between the sub-committees and the NWC.

Support from the Ramsar Convention for Contracting Parties at the national level

- Ramsar guidance should target not only government level, but also sub-national and local level. In particular, Ramsar guidelines should be simplified for wetland managers;
- Help CPs not only to increase the number of Ramsar Sites but that as part of the site designation, to ensure that a site management planning process is also in place.

On Day 4 of the meeting (17 November), there were parallel sessions with presentations and discussions to highlight best practices for implementing the Ramsar Convention at the national and regional level in Asia.

7. Working with local communities

The support and involvement of the local community in the conservation and wise use of Ramsar Sites is critical because the community are often the owners, managers and beneficiaries of the wetland and the resources that it holds. However, existing local practices may not always be compatible with the long-term conservation of the site because the practice may cause some level of pollution and over-harvesting of resources, e.g. timber, fish, wildlife. There may also be disputes amongst the community over resources use and the community may also be faced with economic problems such as having low income or they may be living in poverty.

Suggestions for best practices on how to work with local communities include:

- Implementing a targeted CEPA programme to develop environmental stewardship amongst the local communities, for people of different age, sex and level, e.g. from the farmer to the local government official, as well as including the religious leaders.
- Identify ways in which the community may benefit from the designation and effective conservation of the Ramsar Site. This could be from obtaining sustainable yield of resources from the wetlands, and developing new income generating practices such as from organized tours by visitors and tourists coming to see the scenery or target species (e.g. orang-utans);
- The Convention should be more convincing in selling “the benefits of Ramsar Site designation”, as it is a common question from the communities. Developing a coherent message will help to overcome local concerns about possible constraints that they perceive to come with Ramsar Site designation.
- The Secretariat should provide case studies to illustrate the benefits provided by Ramsar Site designation, particularly those benefits for local communities.
- The Secretariat should also work with the National Focal Points to create “slimmer” versions of the existing Ramsar Handbooks and to include case studies from the ground, which can be translated into local languages for distribution.
- Secretariat to make better use of the existing work of NGOs that already have programmes and experience of working with local communities.
- The criteria for Ramsar Site designation is still mainly focused on biodiversity and local people find it hard to see the relevance of designation to them. Ramsar should change their approach to conservation and site designation and pay more attention to the role of local people. The Convention could introduce a “Ramsar Award for Local Communities”.

8. Practices to improve management effectiveness and conservation of Ramsar Sites

- Ramsar Sites usually have a range of ecosystem services and benefits that they provide for people and the environment. As a result, when the site is being promoted, all of these services and benefits should be mentioned so as to attract a wider audience to support the conservation of the site. Similarly, when planning the conservation management of the site, the goals should be to maintain the range of services and benefits that the site provides.

- At the time of designation, an effective management planning process should also be put in place for the long-term management of the site. This would involve:
 - Involving and empowering the local community in the decision making and management process, and to ensure that conservation of the site would benefit the community;
 - A monitoring programme should be put in place to measure the effectiveness of management interventions so that any necessary corrections and changes can be made;
- In addition to the site management plan, the regulations for land-use in the buffer area and catchment around the site should be reviewed to ensure that any activities there should be able to support the conservation of the site.
- Designating a wetland as a Ramsar Site helps to raise its profile as being of international importance. This then attracts opportunities for funding and support for its conservation and management from many groups of stakeholders.
- Experience has shown that effectively managed Ramsar Sites are often supported by a network of organizations and people from a wide range of backgrounds, such as the government, NGO, universities, business sector or from the community or public. This network helps to provide technical, manpower, and financial support that the site staff need but which they themselves do not have.
- Site staff should have access to opportunities for capacity building and training.
- Ramsar Sites sometime have a hybrid status under national law and as a result, a budget for its management is not automatically allocated. As a result, the Secretariat should help local authorities identify sources of financial assistance for managing Ramsar Sites.

9. Best practice in wetlands and tourism

- Problems identified in discussions included:
 - Not all Ramsar Sites are suitable for promoting visitors and tourists. This is because the site may be too remote, or too small or too sensitive such that it cannot accept large numbers of visitors without causing impacts to the site.
 - The tours are arranged by outside private companies so that all the financial benefits from the visitors do not reach the site management or the local community.
 - Even if the site is suitable and the local community is interested, the community may however not have the knowledge on how to market and organize the tours, and to handle the finances. Support will therefore be needed;
- Develop simple guidelines/general principles to develop sustainable tourism at Ramsar Sites and how to manage and control them. These would include how to:
 - Establish better synergies between government and local communities;
 - Ensure equitable sharing of income generated from tourism;
 - Ensure that some of the income generated from tourism goes into financing conservation;
 - Involve local hotels in packaging different packages for different tourist targets.
 Contracting Party can then tailor these guidelines to their own situation.
- There should be more exchange of experiences of best practices for tourism at wetland sites by communicating through study tours, websites, articles and video clips;
- Advertise Ramsar Sites that have sustainable tourism practices as a branding opportunity through a) articles in the travel trade or b), establish a Ramsar Award for “Best Ramsar Site for sustainable tourism”.

10. Managing wetlands within river basins

- Threats to international and national river basins include:
 - The unequal sharing and usage of water between different jurisdictions in the river basin;

- Upstream activities affecting downstream users, e.g. construction of water holding structures, forest logging, polluting land uses;
- Unpredictable changes in weather causing increasing frequency and severity of flooding and drought events on farmland, industry, urban centres etc.
- One solution to some of these issues has been to establish river basin ‘authorities’ to coordinate land-use changes in the basin to ensure that the quantity and quality of flow can remain sufficient for downstream users. On the national level, such authorities involving different provincial/state governments who share the basin are easier to establish and to make decisions because of supervision and support from central government. However, it is more difficult, if not impossible for the moment, to establish similar authorities for certain international river basins because of political issues. Even if such international river basin authorities have been established, some find it difficult to make effective binding decisions.
- The river basin authority will often develop a basin management plan involving representatives from different stakeholder groups in each of the jurisdictions that share the river basin. Such management plans should:
 - Protect the ecological functions that the river basin provides, focus on developing collaborative management strategies between the different user groups in the basin; considers the livelihoods of local communities; enhance biodiversity conservation, monitor resource levels and ensure their sustainable management; develop and disseminate knowledge about the basin;
 - consider the increasing variability in rainfall in the basin.
- Where Ramsar Sites occur in river basins, consider opportunities for how they can be restored and managed to help adapt to the impacts from climate variability, e.g. to store floodwater during times of high river flow, and to provide water during times of drought;
- The Ramsar Convention can help further encourage best practices for managing wetlands within river basins by Reviewing Res X.19 on ‘Wetlands and river basin management: consolidated scientific and technical guidance’ so that it includes:
 - the conservation of environmental flows;
 - guidelines for the allocation and management of water for maintaining the ecological functions of wetlands, and;
 - transboundary water sharing.
- Ramsar’s role needs to be re-evaluated in promoting bi-/multilateral cooperation to resolve transboundary wetland sharing issues, especially on the international level.

11. Opportunities for national and regional cooperation

- On the national level, the cooperation could be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal cooperation would be between different MEAs, government ministries, NGO groups, academic fields, land-use practitioners, e.g. farmers, fishermen. Examples of vertical cooperation would be between local communities with provincial government, with national NGOs, with the private sector and with central government.
- There are many opportunities for regional cooperation, e.g. involving international and regional organizations, as well as with funding and aid agencies operating in the region who share similar aims as the Ramsar Convention.
- There are obstacles however, and these include the many languages in the Asia region and the Convention not operating some of the key languages, especially Arabic and Russian. Some countries have overcome this by translating Convention documents themselves into their local language, e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese;
- Other opportunities include:

- Development of regional strategies for wetland conservation and wise use, e.g. for the ASEAN region;
- Organizing regional training courses and workshops to share successful case studies on different aspects of implementation of the Convention;
- Organizing study tours for non-Contracting Parties to Contracting Parties who are successful in their implementation of the Convention, so that they can gain a better understanding of the Ramsar Convention and benefits of accession to the Convention;
- The Secretariat to encourage IOPs and other interested international organizations who are active in the region such as GEF and their implementation agencies, to support Contracting Parties to implement the Convention;
- All of these suggestions should also investigate opportunities for closer cooperation on the conservation and wise use of transboundary wetlands.

12. Future scientific and technical priorities for the Convention

During the meeting, participants were asked to identify their priority scientific and technical task for the Convention in the coming triennium, and the top five priorities identified were;

1. Economics of Wetland Ecosystem Services;
2. Assessing and supporting the capacity-building needs of Contracting Parties in applying Ramsar guidance;
3. Ramsar, water and wetlands: review and development of a strategy for engaging in the global water debate;
4. The role of biodiversity and wetlands in the global water cycle;
5. The application of REDD+ for forested wetlands.

The meeting appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on future scientific and technical priorities for the Convention but participants also noted that the Secretariat should put in place an effective mechanism to ensure that priorities of the Contracting Parties are communicated to the STRP and the Ramsar Secretariat. They also stated that the STRP needs to be connected to regional and in-country expertise, and that the STRP NFPs want to see the benefit from being a part of the STRP process.

It was agreed that STRP NFPs should be the active link to connect in-country expertise with the STRP and also that the STRP NFP should be based in a research centre or separate institution from the Administrative Authorities. AA's were urged to appoint STRP NFPs who have an interest to share scientific findings.

