



## 11<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

*“Wetlands: home and destination”*

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**Ramsar COP11 DOC. 13**

### **Progress and issues concerning Regional Initiatives operating within the framework of the Convention**

#### **Introduction**

1. In 1999, the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP7) adopted a framework of guidelines for international cooperation under the Ramsar Convention (Resolution VII.19). It recognized the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), originally launched in 1991, as a model of regional cooperation, based on endogenous efforts and a wide participation of all sectors (Resolution VII.22), and it encouraged the government of Panama to implement its plans to establish a regional Ramsar centre for training and research on wetlands in the Western Hemisphere (Resolution VII.26).
2. These Resolutions formally launched the process of regional cooperation under the Convention. The first two models, of a network for regional cooperation and a centre for regional training and capacity building, rapidly inspired the development of other Regional Initiatives. In response, in 2002 COP8 adopted guidance for the development of Regional Initiatives in the framework of the Convention (Resolution VIII.30) and included in the Ramsar core budget a funding line for operational start-up support to regional networks or centres (Resolution VIII.27).
3. Resolution IX.7 (2005) and Resolution X.6 (2008) endorsed a number of specific Regional Initiatives as working within the framework of the Convention and adopted *Operational Guidelines* for them, updating and replacing the earlier guidance from COP8.
4. The Standing Committee was entrusted to monitor the work of the current initiatives during its annual meetings, to examine and approve new initiatives that meet the Operational Guidelines between meetings of the COP (details were provided in DOC. SC40-10, SC41-13, SC42-08), and to allocate the annual amount earmarked in the Ramsar core budget to the approved individual initiatives, based on requests and updated financial and work plans submitted by the initiatives to the Secretariat (allocated through decisions SC40-15/16/17/18/27/28, SC41-19/23, SC42-15/20, and by electronic means in April 2012, reported in DOC. SC44-02).
5. Finally, Resolution X.6 (2008) requested the Standing Committee and the Secretariat, particularly for those initiatives funded by the core budget, to review their success and

submit a summary report for consideration at COP11. The review of the success of the initiatives operating during the period 2009-2012 is provided below, and the summary of its conclusions and recommendations is included in the operative paragraphs of the Draft Resolution “Regional initiatives 2013-2015 in the framework of the Ramsar Convention” (document Ramsar COP11 DR5). The review of the success of the initiatives is based on an assessment of their fulfillment of the points listed in the Operational Guidelines that were adopted by Resolution X.6.

### **Regional Initiatives operating in the framework of the Convention 2009-2012**

6. Prior to COP11, fifteen Regional Initiatives (i.e., centres and networks) have been endorsed as operating in the framework of the Convention, and these are listed below. A brief presentation with contact details of the Ramsar Regional Initiatives can be found on the Convention’s website, at [http://www.ramsar.org/ramsar\\_regional\\_initiatives](http://www.ramsar.org/ramsar_regional_initiatives). It is not anticipated that additional Regional Initiatives will become operational in the short term. The priority for the period leading up to COP12 (2015) is to focus on the further development of the currently operative initiatives and improving their weak points, and possibly to consolidate separate initiatives in geographically close or overlapping areas.
7. However, in the event of additional initiatives becoming operational, the Standing Committee could be authorized, as was the case in Resolution X.6 for the period 2009-2012, to examine and approve, at its annual meetings between the meetings of the COP, any newly-proposed initiatives that fully meet the Operational Guidelines after COP11.
8. Prior to COP11, four centres are operating for regional training and capacity building:
  - in East Africa (established in Kampala, Uganda),
  - in the Western Hemisphere (established in Panama City, Panama),
  - in Central & West Asia (established in Ramsar, Islamic Republic of Iran), and
  - in East Asia (established in Changwon, Republic of Korea).
9. Prior to COP11, eleven networks are operating for regional cooperation:
  - along the West African coast,
  - in the Niger river basin,
  - in the High Andes,
  - in the La Plata river basin,
  - in the Caribbean,
  - for American mangroves and coral reefs,
  - along the East-Asian Australasian flyway,
  - in the Mediterranean,
  - in the Carpathians,
  - in the Nordic-Baltic region,
  - along the Black and Azov Sea coast.
10. During the years following COP10 (2009-2011), the Standing Committee endorsed the above-listed Regional Initiatives as fully meeting the Operational Guidelines attached to Resolution X.6 based on their submitted work plans and annual reports. This original *ex ante* analysis has been completed with an *ex post* assessment after three additional years of operation. As required in the Operational Guidelines, all current initiatives work towards

providing operational means for effective support for improved implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Plan. They are all moving in the right direction, but to a substantially varying degree of effectiveness. Many of the more recent initiatives still need to constitute their full membership, active participation, and full operation.

### **The aim of Regional Initiatives**

*(Operational Guidelines points 1-4)*

11. The currently operative initiatives do not cover all parts (or countries) of the globe, but are reasonably well spread across the major Ramsar regions (Africa, Americas, Asia-Oceania, Europe). They cover a great variety of wetland types, ranging from upstream (High Andes, Carpathians) to coastal marine ecosystems (West Africa, Caribbean, Black Sea), and from tropical (American mangroves and coral reefs) to high latitude regions (Nordic-Baltic). The initiatives include different geographical approaches, focusing on regional sea basins (Mediterranean, Caribbean, Black Sea) and major river catchments (Niger, La Plata), as well as on wider geographical areas (East Asian-Australasian flyway, Western Hemisphere) for a number of good ecological and also socio-economical and political reasons.
12. Most of the above initiatives received written support from all or at least a significant number of Contracting Parties in the regions concerned. Written support of the range of countries being covered is important. At the initial stage of acceptance of the initiative, this seals their membership and is essential to setting up a minimal structure to provide lasting structural and operational support to facilitate and improve the implementation of the Convention. Some of the earlier established initiatives provide advice to more recent initiatives, such as the Mediterranean initiative advising the Nordic-Baltic and Black Sea initiatives, and the High Andean initiative advising the Caribbean and American mangroves and coral reefs initiatives.
13. However, some initiatives still have difficulties in bringing together all Parties in their region and in receiving formal letters of support from the missing Parties. Often, this is not helped by the frequent changes of national focal points in the national Ramsar Administrative Authorities.

### **Coordination between Regional Initiatives and the Secretariat**

*(Operational Guidelines points 5-10)*

14. The development of effective coordination between the Regional Initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat is essential. It depends upon regular mutual contacts, physically (meetings of steering groups and similar bodies) or via telephone (conferences) and e-mail, and upon regular reporting to the Secretariat. To this end, reporting by some of the initiatives needs to become more frequent and more regular.
15. The establishment of Regional Initiatives is a process over time. In order to fulfill their aims, Regional Initiatives depend on the services provided by professional staff who can assure a minimal coordination between the participating Parties and with the Ramsar Secretariat. With the exception of initiatives that have become operative only very recently, the majority of the initiatives are benefitting from such professional support.
16. The different and complementary roles of the Regional Initiatives and the Secretariat were defined in written agreements, with Secretariat advice or input, for a majority of the

initiatives. In this way, Regional Initiatives can communicate clearly to the countries in the region where they operate how their operation differs from, but is complementary to, the work of the Secretariat. This can be through clearly communicating their own identity (such as through having their own individual name, logo, website, etc.). For some initiatives, it is proposed that they elaborate such guidance rapidly in the near future. Having clearly articulated written terms of reference and rules of procedure, before potential operative and governance problems arise, is a great advantage. Many of the longer established initiatives have experienced the value of this during their first years of operation.

### **Governance of the initiatives**

*(Operational Guidelines points 11-13)*

17. Two thirds of the initiatives have elaborated robust and transparent governance and advisory mechanisms, but often as a result of serious operational problems encountered at some stage during their work. Such mechanisms, rules and structures are important to provide guidance and insight to all participating Parties and other appropriate stakeholders, in order to firmly establish the initiative in its geographical region in the long term. The experiences of the longer-established initiatives should be a strong incentive for the more recent ones, and for all those that have not yet formally elaborated their written administrative and financial rules and procedures, to do so in an equitable, participatory and transparent manner, and to establish active governing bodies, capable of addressing and solving governance problems when they arise. This will be useful in preventing operational difficulties. The Secretariat puts itself at the disposal of the initiatives to help with drafting such rules and procedures.
18. Having established the coordinating and governing bodies and clarified their responsibilities is one requirement. Assuring the regular participation of representatives of all members of the initiative in the mutual exchange of information and the decision-making meetings is another requirement, and that remains a challenge for several initiatives.
19. Whilst some Regional Initiatives are benefitting from being hosted by a national, provincial or local government agency, a number of those initiatives are not able to function independently of the agency hosting them. Regional Initiatives need to have their own financial system (e.g., bank account, ability to raise fund) and ability to hire and retain staff.

### **Substantive elements of the initiatives**

*(Operational Guidelines points 14-20)*

20. Regional Initiatives should be based on a bottom-up approach and profit from the participation, not only of the Ramsar Administrative Authorities, but also of other relevant stakeholders such as ministries responsible for water management, agriculture, energy and others, NGOs, academic experts, the private sector, and national or regional offices of Ramsar's International Organization Partners.
21. Establishing and maintaining comprehensive and active membership is an ongoing challenge for most of the initiatives, even for the longest established one in the Mediterranean. Other initiatives are only at the beginning of this path and so far are missing many opportunities for contributions by members who are not yet participating.

Bringing other partners into the network, with their complementary capacities, is beneficial for the operation and the outcomes of the work of the initiatives. Working on active, multi-stakeholder participation therefore remains an important challenge for all Ramsar Regional Initiatives, albeit to a different degree for each.

22. An additional key objective of Regional Initiatives is to develop collaboration with other intergovernmental and international partners active in the region. All of the initiatives are - at least in principle aware of the huge potential of such collaboration, and many of them have established plans for concrete cooperative programmes with such intergovernmental organizations. However, these need to be turned into action on the ground, and much still needs to be done, notably in regions where specific regional conventions exist that could provide an ideal policy and finance platform for concrete activities in the framework of the Ramsar Convention. Concrete examples of cooperation between the Ramsar initiative and a regional body include supportive agreements with the Caribbean, Carpathian and Black Sea Conventions, with the Nordic Council and others.
23. The operation of Regional Initiatives should be focused upon making optimal use of the Ramsar tools published in the Ramsar Handbook and Technical Report series. In addition, strategic and operational targets of the initiatives should be aligned with the Strategic Plan of the Convention. The national focal points of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) should become actively involved in the operations of Regional Initiatives. Many initiatives argue that they operate intuitively in line with these objectives, but some of them could refer to the Ramsar tools, and involve national Ramsar focal points, in much more concrete terms during their work. This might include focusing on how to apply Ramsar tools and how to implement Ramsar approaches in the region in the context of medium-term planning of activities rather than just an ad hoc annual approach.
24. In order to avoid having the Regional Initiatives working in an ad hoc way, they should develop long-term programmes with clear annual work plans in conjunction with their governing mechanisms. Regular updates on progress in implementing the work plan needs to be communicated to the governing mechanisms and any change to the work plan should also be through prior consultation with the governing mechanisms.
25. Regional Initiatives should serve to raise the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and the general awareness of Ramsar objectives. To this end, the operations of Regional Initiatives need to profit more from the contributions that national Ramsar CEPA focal points (governmental and non-governmental) for communication, education, participation and awareness are able to make. CEPA activities are often performed among the members and other participants in the initiative, but still do very little beyond this audience and before the general public in order to reach out to other sectors influencing the fate of wetlands. Longer established initiatives are more advanced in fulfilling this objective, but others need to focus much more upon it.

### **Financial and other support, reporting and evaluation**

*(Operational Guidelines points 21-29)*

26. Regional Initiatives require both political support from all concerned Parties and sufficient financial support from concerned Parties and other partners in the region. After an initial start-up phase with possible financial contributions from the Ramsar core budget (in

principle not more than during an interval between two meetings of the COP), Regional Initiatives need to become self-sustaining.

27. A number of the operational initiatives benefit from being permanently hosted by a national, provincial or municipal government agency. The agency often provides the financial support for hiring professional staff and even funding for projects and activities. Other initiatives profit at the start from sufficient support by intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the networks for the Mediterranean and the Nordic-Baltic regions) and have established financial forward planning mechanisms since. A third group of initiatives are entirely – or largely – dependent on Ramsar core budget support. This can only be an exceptional start-up situation during their first years of operation and needs to be improved rapidly. They must now find substantial financial support from regional resources.
28. Some of the longer established initiatives have received Ramsar core budget contributions for many years, making up a small proportion of their annual budget. This token support should now be replaced by other funding sources in order to ensure their long-term viability and to comply with the Operational Guidelines.
29. Finding sufficient financial support remains a regular challenge for all initiatives. However, using earmarked financial contributions according to annual work plans, during the year in which the planned activities (and expenditures) were supposed to be executed, remains another challenge for several initiatives as well.
30. The experiences since COP8 (2002), when an amount for start-up funding support for Regional Initiatives was included in the Convention core budget, show that this amount was generally sufficient for the initial start-up needs. Such needs then tend to decrease regularly with the maturation of the initiatives and their capacity for self-sustainability.
31. Regular annual reporting and work planning through the Secretariat to the Standing Committee proved to be essential for effective operations of the initiatives. The Standing Committee has adopted a simple annual reporting and planning format, and the Secretariat's procedures for disbursing annual funding allocations to selected initiatives are working well as long as those initiatives actually incur the planned annual expenditures and maintain regular contacts with the Secretariat. All of the operative initiatives listed above have established satisfactory minimal reporting procedures. Care needs to be taken, however, that this will continue in future, in order for the initiatives to remain in a position to be endorsed as operating in the framework of the Convention during the years 2013-2015 leading to COP12.

#### **Priority issues meriting urgent attention by Parties and the Secretariat**

32. The table below summarizes an analysis of key indicators allowing Regional Initiatives to operate in an efficient and effective way. White boxes illustrate optimal situations achieved; shaded boxes indicate gaps where the current situation merits actions for improvement by Parties concerned, where feasible with Secretariat assistance.
33. Few initiatives are financially self-sustaining at present. Only six report fundraising activities. For effective fundraising, the initiatives need to have an operational and transparent governance structure in place, recognized and supported by the host country

of their coordinating body (secretariat or centre, etc.). The Secretariat cannot continue to manage travel arrangements, hotel bookings and payments on behalf of specific Regional Initiatives. All initiatives have to make sure that they have the capacity and mandate to receive funds, use reliable and transparent financial rules and procedures, and produce financial reports. The Secretariat makes itself available to support initiatives in their search for alternative sources of funding.

Regional initiatives	Effective coordinating body and operational structure  A: active and functional structure B: initiative hosted by other institution C: no effective structure	Financial rules and procedures  A: own bank account B: bank account in name of a host institution C: no account	Financially self-sustaining (no funds from Ramsar during the triennium)  Yes  No	Need for assistance from Ramsar Secretariat  1: Low (should increase)  2: Optimal  3: High (should decrease)	Number of annual reports received  2009  2010  2011
American mangroves and coral reefs	<b>A</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>No</b> (funds from Parties)	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Black Sea Coast	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
Caribbean	<b>A</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>No</b> (funds from Parties and donors)	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
Carpathians	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b> (and projects)	<b>No</b> (project dependent)	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
Centre for Central and West Asia	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b> (and projects)	<b>No</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
East-Asian Australasian flyway	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b> (and projects)	<b>Yes</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Centre for Eastern Africa	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>No</b> (alternative funding)	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Centre for Eastern Asia	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b> (and projects)	<b>Yes</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
High Andean	<b>A</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>No</b> (funds from Parties and donors)	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
La Plata river basin	<b>A</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>No</b> (funds from Parties)	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
Mediterranean	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b> (and projects)	<b>Yes</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Niger river basin	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>No</b> (fundraising plan in 2012)	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
Nordic-Baltic region	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b> (and projects)	<b>Yes</b> (project dependent)	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
West African Coast	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>No</b> (fundraising plan in 2012)	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>

Centre for the Western Hemisphere	<b>A</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>No</b> (funds from Parties)	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
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34. For some initiatives, the investment of the Ramsar Secretariat for their support is too important. The Secretariat intends to continue analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each initiative so as to better adjust its assistance within manageable limits. To enhance fundraising success, the initiatives are encouraged to prepare long-term objectives for their work towards tangible achievements. The Secretariat can provide some support for the preparation of proposals linked to a programmatic approach with long-term objectives that match national and regional priorities, as well as the main concerns of potential donors.
35. The Secretariat recognizes the importance for Regional Initiatives to establish their operational governance structure in a transparent way, based on written terms describing roles and responsibilities, and for them to ensure that all members are adequately represented in such structures. The Secretariat reaffirms its commitment to act as a facilitator and advisor to assist the initiatives with the preparation of hosting agreements with host organizations or countries and to clarify the respective responsibilities in accordance with the Operational Guidelines, notably paragraph 12 which states that “the coordination body will be responsible to all members that constitute a Regional Initiative (Contracting Parties and other members), not only to the host country”. This implies that the initiative needs to be able to operate independently from the host agency, notably with regard to financial management, staff recruitment, and its operations.
36. The Secretariat encourages all Regional Initiatives to maintain active and regular contacts and exchanges with the Secretariat, and to include in their work plans, based on communication with the Secretariat and their governance bodies, the undertaking of an independent evaluation of their operations, outcomes, strengths and weaknesses that makes reference to the Operational Guidelines, and to share the results of those evaluations with the Secretariat and the Standing Committee. Regular reports should not only be provided to the Ramsar Secretariat, but to all Parties and other members of the initiative.
37. The above listed key issues are encapsulated in decision SC40-28 taken by Standing Committee in 2009, urging “all Parties directly concerned in the activities of regional centers for training and capacity building and in regional networks for improved implementation of the Convention to provide such centers and initiatives with their substantial support, political, in kind and financial, where possible, and to the maximum extent possible. Such support is crucial to allow such centers and networks to develop, to establish themselves and to become rapidly self-sustainable, in order to provide lasting, structural and operational support to the Parties in the regions concerned. The Secretariat is requested to advise such centers and networks, to the extent of its capacities, on how best to raise additional funds for their operations”.

### Concluding remarks

38. The Ramsar approach to working specifically at regional level through the means of active and independent networks of cooperation and centres for training and capacity building has provided the opportunity to engage Parties in novel processes that keep the issues of the Convention alive during the periods between COPs and regional meetings. Establishing lasting Regional Initiatives is an ambitious endeavour and cannot succeed



without sufficient formal, financial and active support from all concerned Parties and other partners in the region. While expectations are high (and remain so), in many cases few concrete activities of cooperation happen at regional level that go beyond annual meetings to exchange experience and transfer know-how and advice.

39. Still too often, the preparation and running of (limited) regional activities depend on only a few active members and substantial involvement by the Ramsar Secretariat, with largely insufficient support at regional and national level provided by other partners beyond the local organizers. Many regional activities depend on opportunities rather than being based on forward plans. Many of the activities planned on an annual basis are delayed or deferred. The members in the regions have still to show their willingness and capacity – politically, practically and financially – to demonstrate the priority for regional cooperation and put it on a lasting footing.
40. The experiences of the longest established network, that for the Mediterranean, have been published and shared widely at workshops and otherwise to inform fellow initiatives about how to overcome difficulties and solve problems. More such inter-regional exchanges seem to be most useful for the near future. For all initiatives, reaching a cruising speed, and maintaining it to make a substantial difference, remains a challenge, unless all concerned countries and partners in the region are convinced that this form of regional cooperation provides a definite advantage and merits sufficient support in kind and cash. The active partners in regional cooperation believe that this would boost the impact of the Ramsar Convention substantially.