



11th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

“Wetlands: home and destination”

Bucharest, Romania, 6-13 July 2012

Joint IOP Statement at the 11th Ramsar Conference of the Parties (COP11) Bucharest, 6th July 2012 (delivered by Jim Leape, Director General of WWF International)

Thank you for this opportunity to address the conference on behalf of the five International Organization Partners: BirdLife International, IUCN, The International Water Management Institute, Wetlands International and WWF.

Some of you, like me, may have participated in the recent Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development. If so, perhaps you share my disappointment over what governments failed to achieve. So why continue with such conferences? What can we hope to achieve over the next week here in Bucharest?

We can expand on the few positive developments that Rio did yield.

- The Rio text recognizes that water is at the core of sustainable development and recognizes the key role that ecosystems play in maintaining water quantity and quality.
- Many of us were frustrated by all “recognizing” and “acknowledging” in the text. We wanted more commitment to action. So let that be your mandate: to turn the words of Rio into conservation achievements and sustainable development on the ground.
- Also at Rio – away from the policy stalemate – we saw leadership from the private sector as 45 CEOs committed to working more actively with governments and public authorities – in responsible and transparent ways – to help solve the global water crisis.

In both the public and the private sector, water is on the agenda as never before, which means Ramsar is more relevant than ever. This means that we need Ramsar to be at the top of its game.

A critical resolution up for consideration during this COP pertains to hosting the secretariat. And this is one resolution that truly needs resolution! The International Organisation Partners reiterate our call for Parties to put an end to this long-running debate. With all of the challenges we face today, we cannot afford this continuing distraction from the Convention’s real business.

Indeed, we know the many threats to freshwater ecosystems. We can all repeat the dire statistics. Yet the water sector, perhaps better than any other sector, has demonstrated that a threat can often become an opportunity. Water truly is about shared risk, and shared opportunity.

Consider agriculture: Our pressure on freshwater resources is mounting at a furious pace

- We will have to produce as much food in the next 40 years as in the past 8,000
- And if we irrigate those crops at current rates, we will have to extract twice as much water as we do today.

That's a substantial risk. It's also an opportunity. Partly because of rising food prices, there is mounting pressure for government policies that will boost the capacities of small-scale farmers to be self-sufficient and profit from higher crop prices. Without doubt, this will affect wetlands. But if the concept of 'wise use' – as enshrined in the Ramsar Convention – underpins these policies, healthy wetlands will indeed be the lifeblood of sustainable development. Concerns about the availability of freshwater and the price of food have led to increased private investment in farmland, particularly in Africa. Ramsar can help remind governments that they cannot transfer their obligations to protect the environment to foreign landowners.

Agriculture is only one component of the much-discussed "nexus" of food, water and energy.

- We know that growing populations and growing economies demand energy, much of which is expected to come in the form of hydropower.
- We have all seen the consequences of poorly sited, poorly operated hydropower dams. We're also starting to see some hopeful signs of how conservation science can help influence investment decisions and energy policy, so the right dam can be built in the right place to have minimal impact on rivers and wetlands.

Draft Resolution 9, on "An integrated framework and guidelines for avoiding, mitigating and compensating for wetland losses" could help ensure positive outcomes on decisions related to hydropower development, and other issues that affect the natural rhythms of rivers and wetlands.

Time is of the essence. An IUCN Situation Analysis to be presented at this meeting warns of the imminent extinctions of species (notably migratory shorebirds) and collapse of crucial ecological services in East and Southeast Asian tidal flats, especially around the Yellow Sea.

Additional Ramsar sites that face urgent threats due to unsustainable development:

The Bay of Panama: the most important staging area for migratory shorebirds in the Americas, and mangrove forests that play a vital role in supporting fisheries and protecting Panama City from flooding. With its Protected Area status recently suspended and controls on mangrove cutting and in-fill relaxed, survival of the Bay of Panama wetlands is now a test case for the effectiveness of the Ramsar Convention.

Democratic Republic of Congo's Virunga National Park – Africa's oldest national park and a World Heritage site – is the focus of an international campaign against oil exploration. Drilling in Lake Edward would risk bringing a huge influx of people and infrastructure development into the park and its surroundings.

With iconic Ramsar sites like these under pressure, continued vigilance and investment is essential. The IOPs therefore urge the Convention to multiply the use of Ramsar Advisory Missions as an instrument to assist Contracting Parties confronted with serious threats to internationally important wetlands.

Further, we call for “energizing” and strengthening the Ramsar Small Grant Fund – a vitally important tool of the Convention. From our perspective both the Small Grant Fund and Ramsar Advisory Missions should be top fundraising priorities of the Secretariat.

I started this speech reflecting on the missed opportunity of Rio+20. Conservation is not for the faint of heart or of wavering determination. That’s why I close with a message of gratitude and congratulations to two men who are being honoured this evening for their lifetime commitment to protecting the natural world.

Dr. Luc Hoffmann and Mr. Thymio Papayannis.

Dr. Luc Hoffmann was instrumental in bringing about both WWF and the Ramsar Convention; he also played a major role in the early development of IUCN and the establishment of Wetlands International.

Mr. Thymio Papayannis, founder of WWF-Greece and leader of the Prespa Lake Conservation, has played a crucial role in the development and the success of MedWet, Ramsar’s very first Regional Initiative. Congratulations and thank you, both.

Finally, I call your attention to a gift presented by Ramsar, the Romanian Ministry of Environment and WWF. The “Lower Danube Album” celebrates the amazing beauty and diversity of the world’s most international river.

I find the success of conservation on the Danube a particularly heartening example of what’s possible through international cooperation. In a region with a bitter history of conflict, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River has forged agreement among the 19 countries of the basin to define objectives for the Danube River and coordinate action to address key problems, especially water quality.

Let this example guide the discussions of the coming days. Let’s show the world that governments, the private sector and civil society can work together toward a future in which people live in harmony with nature.