

"Wetlands: water, life, and culture"

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Cultural aspects of wetlands

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Section I

General context and rationale on the cultural aspects of wetlands

Wetlands, water, life and culture

1. Wetlands have provided valuable resources and refuge for human populations and many other life forms since the very beginning of human life on Earth. Major civilizations have been established on their shores and have depended upon their resources, and especially upon water. Settlements, including major cities such as Amsterdam, Bangkok, Tunis and Venice, have been built in wetlands or in their immediate vicinity¹.

Box 1: The Nile in Ancient Egypt

Nowhere is the intricate relation between water, wetlands and human survival better illustrated than in the case of the Nile River and ancient Egypt. The cyclical ebb and flow of the river waters determined the fortunes and fate of the powerful civilization that grew in the area and left its weighty marks.

During *Akhet*, the season of inundation, the Nile flooded *kmt*, "the black land", which included most of the flat plains along its banks. This allowed planting of wheat and barley in September, during the season of *Peret*, which were harvested in March or April. *Shemu*, the summer season of drought followed, and the life-sustaining cycle was repeated. During the Old Kingdom, in the 3rd millennium B.C., it was the kings who were supposed to maintain *Ma'at*, the cosmic order, and guarantee the continuity of the Nile cycle.

Climatic oscillations, however, led to the dramatic decrease of the Nile flow at certain periods [Fagan 1999]. As a result, only a small part of cultivated lands was

¹ An interesting report on such a settlement in NW Greece is found in Hourmouziades G.H. (1996), *The Prehistoric Lakeside Settlement of Dispilio (Kastoria)*, Codex, Thessaloniki, Greece, 64 pp.

flooded and the impact was dramatic, with large scale famine unavoidable. This eroded the power of the kings and led to massive political unrest. Thus the Old Kingdom collapsed after 2160 B.C. in a background of extended hunger and political turmoil in Southern Egypt. This phenomenon has been often been repeated in Egyptian history in more recent times.

2. Malaria in many parts of the world became a negative factor and drove populations away from wetlands. It also created one of the main reasons for the drainage of wetlands, until the discovery of quinine provided an effective remedy to the onslaught of *Anopheles anopheles*. Thus the conquest of plains and their use for agriculture entailed a heavy health cost for the populations that initiated them².
3. Human activities of some sort and intensity have existed in almost all wetlands. The abandonment of traditional activities of the primary sector during the 20th century decreased the importance of some wetlands as a direct resource base for human survival. Still many of their other values to people have begun to be understood and appreciated. These include a regulatory role in the water cycle, flood abatement, aquifer recharge, retention of nutrients and pollutants, shore protection, educational and recreational opportunities.

Box 2: Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia

During the rainy season, Tonle Sap, or Great Lake, fed by the overflowing waters of the Mekong River, grows to six times its normal size, to more than 16,000 square kilometres, thus absorbing floods and releasing the water gradually. One of the largest freshwater bodies in Southeast Asia, Tonle Sap has been the home of a fisher population living in traditional wooden houses on stilts (as in the village of Chhnok Trou), with extensive use of reeds and very characteristic fishing and transport boats and artefacts.

Lately, however, the situation is changing rapidly and radically. Internal migration and explosive population growth have increased the pressures on the lake, and have almost completely destroyed local architecture. The lake pollution is rising, both from domestic sources and from cultivation; forest logging is increasing the inflow of silt, while shallow areas, necessary for fish spawning, are being drained. In addition, dam construction has decreased freshwater flow into the lake. Overfishing and illegal practices are quite common. The result is a dramatic reduction in fish catches, which used to supply more than 60% of the protein consumption in Cambodia. In parallel, the rich local culture of the fisher communities is being bastardised and rapidly eroding.

The Cambodian government has started a new initiative to face effectively the problems at Tonle Sap, but strong and sustained efforts will be necessary to reverse the current negative trends.

4. From the very beginning, water – along with air and food – has been understood as an absolute necessity for survival. After the gradual shift from hunter / gatherer clans to

² For the impact of malaria on the Mediterranean people, see Braudel F. (1990), *La Méditerranée*, 9th edition, Armand Colin, Paris, France, pp. 56-59.

agricultural societies, water became an essential prerequisite for food production. Its abundant availability created the basis for great civilizations, as in the case of the Nile for the Egyptians and the Euphrates and Tigris for the Mesopotamians. Its scarcity in periods of drought brought down the same powerful societies. It is only natural, therefore, that water was venerated in many religions and the 'blessing of the waters' has been a common ritual. Wetlands in turn, as a major source of water, were equally respected. Thus their values, and especially their cultural values, have been inextricably linked. In a contemporary framework, water is often associated with flow, while wetlands with stagnant waters. However, this distinction is simplistic, as water in aquifers can remain static, while coastal lagoons can experience a very dynamic water regime during different times of the year. In any case, rivers may be classified as wetlands under the Ramsar definition, and their floodplains experience dynamic water movement in times of floods.

5. Wetlands are diverse ecosystems and range from great rivers and lakes to desert oases, from Alpine lakes to coastal lagoons, from underground karstic systems to shorelines with depth down to 6 meters. There are, however, certain similarities in their physical characteristics and functions, as well as in the rich variety of flora and fauna species they host. As to the cultural and other social values of wetlands, which have come into the limelight during recent years, a strong specificity (certainly regional and often local) characterises them and adds a new dimension to their diversity.
6. Yet, and in spite of all conservation and wise use efforts, wetland destruction has continued in many parts of the world, in developed and developing countries alike. In others, the appreciation of wetland values has led to significant projects for the restoration of lost or heavily degraded wetlands, at great cost. These have shown conclusively how very difficult it is to restore to some degree the values and ecological functions of destroyed or degraded wetlands. They have also demonstrated that it is practically impossible to restore, once lost, their cultural and historical values. These values are often associated with inanimate objects, such as buildings and other structures. However, a large part of them are borne by local societies, woven in their social fabric, and are lost in a few generations after wetlands are destroyed. It should be stressed here that the loss of wetlands does not only remove important resources, but also causes profound social damage to local populations.

Box 3: The case of Lake Carla

In the centre of Greece, the fertile region of Thessaly depended for water until the beginning of the 20th century on seven lakes. None exist today. Lake Carla, the last and largest, a major Mediterranean wetland known for its fisheries and the large populations of migratory birds it hosted, was drained in the early '60s to provide agricultural land. As a result, the local society that depended on lake fisheries was destroyed, taking with it the traditions associated with this important activity. Many inhabitants moved to the cities, while some attempted to cultivate the land drained.

The results soon proved disastrous. For irrigation, the water of the lake was replaced by intense pumping. This caused a dramatic drop in the level of aquifers (today down to 300 meters in certain places) and the beginning of intrusion of salt water, although the sea was a few kilometres away. The fields soon became salinated and as a result cultivation became more and more difficult and less productive, while large parts of the lake bottom were abandoned. Pollution from agricultural and industrial run-off,

initially filtered by the wetland, was led untreated into the Pagasiticos Bay, causing severe algae blooms and other eutrophication problems.

At present, a large government project has started with funding from the European Commission to restore a considerable part of the lake. It is hoped that, if successful, it will re-establish some of its functions and values. The rich cultural heritage of the Carla fisheries, however, cannot be recreated, but perhaps some of its remnants (boats and tools) will be preserved in a local museum to be established.

Rationale of concern for cultural aspects

7. The concern for the cultural values associated with wetlands and water is recent and has been limited to certain specialised circles of scientists, such as archaeologists and anthropologists. Lately, however, those responsible for wetland conservation and management have begun to pay attention to this question, within the broader context of the socio-economic approach. As a result, cultural values have become an issue of concern for the Convention on Wetlands. In April 2000, the Mediterranean Wetlands Committee, meeting in Djerba, Tunisia, devoted its technical session to this theme and developed guiding principles for the inclusion of cultural values in wetland sustainable use in the Mediterranean region. A year later, the Committee, meeting in Sesimbra, Portugal, debated the theme “Mediterranean Salinas: Cultural heritage and sustainability”. World Wetlands Day 2002 was focused on cultural values and a set of fact sheets and poster were produced and widely disseminated. Ramsar’s COP8 general theme is “Wetlands – water, life and culture” and its agenda includes Technical Session 5 on the theme “Cultural aspects of wetlands as a tool for their conservation and sustainable use”. In addition, the Ramsar Bureau has been developing links with the European Archaeological Council and other groups of social scientists concerning the key importance of wetlands for archaeological and cultural landscape heritage conservation. The reasons of this growing interest are many and the major ones are mentioned below.

Box 4: A positive concern for the cultural values of wetlands

The Ramsar Contracting Parties from Central and Western Asia, gathered at a regional meeting hosted in Tehran by the Islamic Republic of Iran on 3-5 February 2002, issued the *Tebran Communiqué*, which includes the following statement:

“Recognizing the vital role of wetland ecosystems for biodiversity conservation and for the well-being of human communities; and welcoming the theme for World Wetlands Day 2002 and the 8th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP8), on “Wetlands: Water, Life, and Culture” which explores the cultural values of wetlands as a tool for their conservation, and emphasises the importance of people’s engagement in conservation efforts, we undertake to explore cultural issues in our national and local contexts and seek to make our public more aware of the cultural, as well as the natural, values of wetlands.”

8. As through the ages many human settlements have been located close to wetlands, significant archaeological remnants are found today within them or in their vicinity. Beyond isolated structures, these may include entire ancient cities, such as Nicopolis, in the Amvrakikos Gulf of Western Greece, some of them inhabited even today, as in the case of Empúrias, in Catalonia, Spain.

9. However, the particular interest of wetlands from the archaeological point of view is that they carry and preserve records of human activities through the ages, which cannot be found in other environments. Especially peatlands, due to their anoxic and waterlogged conditions, preserve well organic matter, such as wood, leather and textiles, as well as pollen, insects, plants and bodies, materials that in drier conditions degrade rapidly. Recent archaeological excavations in wetlands, carried out mainly in the United Kingdom, have unearthed a treasure of objects which permit a much better understanding of their period.
10. Wooden elements from prehistoric settlements have been found preserved in the muddy bottom of the Black Sea, informing us of their structure. Well-maintained ships have been discovered in Venice and Marseille. Thus wetlands, even if degraded or destroyed, retain a high degree of archaeological importance.

Box 5: Sunken ships in the Venice Lagoon

In the autumn of 2001, a 1-hectare area of the Venice lagoon was temporarily drained at the site of a lost island, which included the 11th century Augustinian monastery of San Marco in Bocalama. The monastery was abandoned in 1347, the island was turned into a cemetery for plague victims, and it disappeared into the water in the 16th century, due to land subsidence.

The ensuing archaeological research not only found the traces of the monastery, but also discovered in good conditions two large ships, a galley (38 m. long by 5 m. wide) and a transport vessel (24 m. and 6 m.), which had been sunk to the bottom and covered with sand. Presumably they were on the verge of decommissioning and had been sent to act as barricades for the protection of the vulnerable island. Both were dated to the early years of the 14th century and their remains provided invaluable information on the construction of boats of that period.

Archaeological authorities have detailed information about 300 such cultural areas of interest in the bottom of the Venice Lagoon, whose locations are kept secret until excavation becomes feasible.

11. It should not be forgotten, however, that cultural values are not only associated with the past (either remote or recent), but also with the present, as culture evolves and is being created, in one form or another, on a continuous basis.
12. From a broader perspective, a large percentage of Ramsar sites have major cultural significance, as demonstrated by their corresponding Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS)³, as they include many of the elements that constitute cultural values.
13. Thus the importance of the cultural values of wetlands may broaden their appeal to significant sectors of society not initially concerned with nature conservation. These include not only specialists in the various forms of culture, from archaeology to music, but also the considerable segment of the wider public interested in culture. In this way, powerful alliances can be created, which would be of benefit to both sides.

³ According to a research project carried out in the summer of 2000 by David Pritchard, BirdLife International, on some 600 Ramsar Information Sheets.

14. As a result of the efforts to combine cultural values with the natural environment in wetlands, a single integrated interpretive tourism modality can be created, with strong attraction possibilities. The financial benefits and employment that could be generated through this will be a great asset for local communities, and will enhance their appreciation of wetlands as resources. These in turn will increase the economic valuation of wetlands and contribute to their conservation and wise use. Such an approach can be valid in many wetlands with significant cultural values, where visitors can be attracted to both their cultural and natural heritage. A particular case is the sites that have already a very strong visitor interest for their monuments, but little yet for their natural elements. In all cases, care must be taken that such activities do not exert undue pressures on wetlands.
15. It is not only financial considerations that concern local communities, and more particularly indigenous people. For them, culture is part of their tradition and social identity. Thus a fuller recognition of the significance, and sometimes the uniqueness, of the cultural values of wetlands should increase their self-esteem and their readiness to safeguard particular sites, and especially Ramsar sites. Experience throughout the world has shown that the conservation and wise use of wetlands depends to a considerable degree on the links of local populations to them. Enhancement of the cultural values, wherever they still exist, and efforts to preserve them where they are at risk of disappearing, can become a powerful tool in strengthening the links of local populations to their wetlands, their 'sense of place', and thus involve them actively in their conservation.

Section II

Cultural values of wetlands

Inventory of cultural values

16. Without entering into the discussion of the exact definition of culture and the nature of cultural values, it seems evident that in the case of wetlands, these values emerge from a variety of elements, tangible or intangible, material or spiritual, ancient or contemporary. These can be identified, experienced and appreciated in many different ways, singly, combined or in an integrated manner. To view them separately is sometimes useful in analysing and describing them. However, they are all bound together by wetland space and are integral parts of it. In addition, many of them retain links to one another. Thus an inventory of the most significant cultural values of wetlands might include the ten categories listed below (which could be grouped in various other ways).
- 16.1 **Paleontological and archaeological records** in wetland water and sediments and especially peat. This category could be extended to include archaeological findings in the immediate vicinity of wetlands or in clear relation to them.

Box 6: Research in French rivers and lakes

With the encouragement of the General Direction of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Culture, through its Regional Services of Archaeology, and with the active participation of academic institutions, careful excavations and research have been

carried out during the 1990s in the rivers and lakes of France and the neighbouring areas of Switzerland. The results have been registered in a wide variety of publications.

- 16.2. **Cultural landscapes and agro- and other production ecosystems**, as transformed by human action related to traditional primary production activities. This would include ricefields (flat or terraced), salinas, lagoons or estuaries exploited for fisheries, and other similar areas.

Box 7: Landscape poetry: the ricefields in Nepal and other Asian countries

Since the birth of agriculture, human primary sector activities have modelled the land on the basis of production needs and at the expense of immense labour. In traditional societies, the results were often landscapes of great beauty, in complete harmony with nature.

A case of exceptional beauty is the ricefields in Nepal. Formed through centuries of human toil in a steeply sloping land, the paddies follow the contours and trace their sinuous lines along hills and valleys. When flooded with water, their silvery surface produces miracles of reflection on the land, as one travels on the narrow and winding road from Kathmandu to Butwal. In parallel, and besides the production of rice, the ricefields provide important services in managing water flow, minimising erosion, and contributing to biodiversity.

Similar landscapes are found in many other parts of Asia, such as in Binong on the island of Java and the Philippine Cordilleras.

- 16.3 **Historical structures** in or related to wetlands, including buildings and settlements, hydraulic works, water mills, transport systems (such as jetties, roads, and bridges).

Box 8: The water wheels of Hamah in Syria

To raise water from the lower part of the town of Hamah to its higher neighbourhoods, an ingenious system was devised many centuries ago. A number of immense water wheels have been constructed, with diameters approaching twenty metres. Placed on the river that crosses the town, they are turned by its flow, thus lifting the water to the higher level.

The wheels are made of large pieces of wood, cleverly connected to give them stability and strength. They do not have symmetrical and concentric spokes, but the cross pieces are placed off centre, thus relieving the axle from direct stresses. Their construction and maintenance is the task of specialised workmen that inherit the knowledge from generation to generation.

Besides their utilitarian purpose, the water wheels create an imposing landmark in the heart of the town and have become an important tourist attraction. Unfortunately, due to the drought of the last years, water flow in the river has dwindled, and now only one wheel is still in operation, just for the visitors. It is feared that, if the

situation continues, the techniques and cultural values associated with them will be lost.

16.4 **Artefacts**, and in particular transport equipment (such as boats and carts) and tools used in traditional activities related to wetland resources.

Box 9: Traditional wooden boats as cultural artefacts

Boats made out of wood are a common and distinctive feature of practically all wetlands. Used mainly for fishing and transportation, they have existed since Neolithic times. Although no systematic study has been done on them, there are certain general features that can be pointed out.

- Wetland boats and the methods of their construction have changed very little during the past three millennia. As a result, their characteristic forms have remained practically unchanged, and have evolved slowly and slightly.
- Wood has been the most commonly used material, although there have been cases of reed and papyrus use (such as in India, Mesopotamia, and the Andean lakes). Contemporary materials, and especially reinforced artificial resins, have been introduced, but have been in use mainly in the developed world, due to their high cost.
- Invariably, they are flat-bottomed and keel-less so that they can go into very shallow waters. Their sides are often elevated for functional reasons, in particular to increase their carrying capacity.
- Oars or poles have been the main method of locomotion, which is slow, but silent and inexpensive. The introduction of internal combustion engines changed considerably the conditions of exploitation of wetlands, although their initial and operational costs are high.
- On the aesthetic side, traditional wetland boats are often of great beauty, as they combine austere functionality with a sleek elegance.

16.5 Past and present **collective water and land use management systems** (such as irrigation, water distribution and drainage associations, and traditional dispute settlement practices).

Box 10: Sustainable water management in India⁴

In most parts of India, the perennial water cycle of drought and floods determines the life of inhabitants. Through the years, very sophisticated methods for using water effectively and economically have been developed and applied by local societies, in a decentralised manner, helping to create stable local governance institutions.

⁴ As reported by Pasumai Thaayagam (Green Motherland).

Tank irrigation systems are one of these methods. In the State of Tamil Nadu, there are today 39,202 tanks, some of them very ancient, which account for 22.9% of consumption. However, this share is decreasing, due to encroachment, urbanization, siltation and neglect. Efforts are being made to improve their rehabilitation, maintenance and use. Water harvesting is also a traditional approach in a climate of social solidarity. To promote it, water pilgrimages (*paani yatras*) are being organized this year in Chennai and Pondicherry. Their aim is to highlight participatory, efficient, sustainable and low-cost water management methods, interacting with the responsible organizations and communities.

Box 11: Traditional and modern water management in Ecuador⁵

In the Ecuadorian part of the Andes, a large percentage of the irrigated land (320,000 of 400,000 hectares) has been managed traditionally through ancient community-based systems. In the '70s and '80s, however, the State intervened and started imposing a centralised management of water resources, through the *Instituto ecuatoriano de recursos hidráulicos*, which attempted to modernise the traditional water rights system. After 30 years of 'hydrological bureaucracy', the results were inter-community conflicts, split concessions, and ineffective operation.

To correct the situation, recent governments have attempted to apply a new, liberal approach, through a water privatization scheme (proposed by the World Bank and first applied in Chile). The political and economic crisis in Ecuador during the 1990s has not facilitated the implementation of the new system, which has been vigorously contested from many sides. At present, local communities are facing the problems of fragmented and inefficient water management and an endless series of conflicts over water rights, having lost their traditional wisdom, cohesion and mechanisms, without interest and investments from the markets and with minimal state advice and support. Yet all three sides must cooperate to find a common, satisfactory *modus operandi*.

Box 12: Water management in the Arab world

Following faithfully the teaching of the Qur'an, and inhabiting essentially arid regions, the Arab people devised a comprehensive and wise approach to water management which had profound impacts in many parts of the world as the Islamic religion spread. Some of the main ones are the following:

The concept of *al-hima* is an obligation to establish reserve areas for the public good, which would be required for the conservation and wise management of rangelands and pastures, forest and woodlands, watershed and wildlife. The importance of these reserves for the conservation of wetlands and water resources cannot be underestimated.

The equitable management, however, of water resources made necessary the existence of social mechanisms for resolving disputes. Thus water tribunals were established, which met in public and heard complaints, before passing judgment.

⁵ Based on the paper: Ruf T. (2000), "Water disputes in the Ecuadorian context up to the third millennium: The transition of Santa Rosa", presented at the IASCP 8th Conference, Bloomington (USA), 30 May to 5 June 2000.

This efficient system was transmitted from the Moors to the Spaniards and are still in existence, for example in the city of Valencia, Spain.

On the technical level, many Arab cities (such as Fez and Marrakech in Morocco) had very complex networks for water distribution. These necessitated specialised expertise in construction and maintenance, which was provided by skilled workmen organized in guilds, with their own traditions and culture. Recently, efforts are being made to re-establish both the skills lost and the corresponding forms of social organization.

16.6 **Traditional techniques for exploiting wetland resources** (salt, rice, fish, reeds etc.) and their associated products and structures. Some of them may be still in practice, while others already abandoned.

16.7 **Languages, customary law systems, political structures, roles and customs**, including oral traditions, as they exist in the memories of local inhabitants or have perhaps been recorded in the past and can be found in appropriate bibliographic sources.

16.8 **Traditional knowledge**, including traditional medicine and ethnobotany. Such knowledge is practiced today in many places. In others it is at risk or has already been lost, due to many factors.

Box 13: Traditional knowledge and WIPO

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) considers that traditional creativity and cultural expressions are important for cultural identity, as well as for preserving and promoting cultural diversity and human creativity. These they recognise in four categories:

- verbal expressions (such as stories, poetry and languages);
- musical expressions (such as songs and music);
- expressions by action (such as dances, plays and rituals); and
- tangible expressions (such as paintings, sculptures, pottery, woodwork, jewellery, basket weaving, textiles, carpets, musical instruments, and handicrafts).

All of these are treated within the overall concept of 'traditional knowledge'.

WIPO, at the request of its members, has started studying the protection of traditional knowledge and folklore through the recognition and role of related intellectual property rights. In a first phase (1998-1999), WIPO has analysed the issues relate to traditional knowledge and property rights, and in a second phase (2000-2001) has proceeded in carrying out pilot work in selected cases. Currently, this effort continues through the Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore, which was established by the WIPO Member States in 2000.

It is evident that in the present competitive global context, the recognition of intellectual property rights to traditional knowledge, if done in an equitable and sensitive manner, may contribute to its preservation.

One of the most interesting results of WIPO efforts is the recognition that protection of cultural knowledge may also depend upon safeguarding of the resources, spaces, and other aspects of the social and natural context necessary to promote and sustain traditional creativity.”

16.9 **Mythology, beliefs and religious aspects, including sacred sites and ritual ceremonies.** As water is one of the critical elements for sustaining life, it is natural that it has given rise to a multitude of beliefs. Thus, from mythology and the religious beliefs of indigenous societies to the contemporary teachings of the major churches, one common thread is reverence for water. On a broader level, many of the churches have become sensitive in recent years to nature conservation and the sustainable use of its resources, as stewardship of the Creation and veneration of the Creator, and have restudied their traditional texts from this perspective.

Box 14: The sacred nature of water

In most religions, water is considered a sacred element of great importance. As the Qur’an states: “We made from water every living thing”⁶. Some other examples of the religious use of water:

- The sacred bathing in the Ganges.
- The sacrament of baptism in Christianity.
- Ablutions before prayer in Islam.
- The blessing of the waters in many religions.

16.10 **The arts** that have drawn inspiration from wetlands and water include mainly:

- a) many expressions of popular art, such as “naïve” and other forms of painting, including engravings on rocks, sculptures, carvings and handcrafts in general, as well as music, dance, poetry, etc., and including traditional festivals in many parts of the world;
- b) literature, such as Swift G. (1983), *Waterland*, William Heinemann Ltd, London, UK, pp. 310.;
- c) painting and sculpture, such as the landscapes of Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) and John Constable (1776-1837) and the work of Chinese and Japanese artists for many centuries;
- d) music and dance (see table below); and
- e) cinema and theatre, such as “Rizzo amaro” (Italy) and the “African Queen” (Lake Victoria).

Naturally, there are great differences from society to society, but generally water and wetlands have provided inspiration for many of the art forms.

⁶ Qur’an: Surat al-Anbiya’ (21), ayah 30.

Table 1: Characteristic classical music works related to wetlands and/or water

<i>Composer</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Title</i>
Handel, Georg Friedrich	1685-1759	Water Music Suite
Respighi, Ottorino	1879-1936	Fontane di Roma (Fountains of Rome)
		Gli Ucelli (The Birds)
Schubert, Franz Peter	1797-1828	Trout Quintet
Smetana, Bedrich	1824-1884	Vlatava
Tchaikovski, Peter Ilyich	1840-1893	Swan Lake
Telemann, Georg Philipp	1681-1767	Hamburg Ebb and Flood

Box 15: Japanese water music⁷

“On September 4 (2001), we organized ‘The Japan Water Sound Night’ at the site of the opening ceremony. The event attracted a capacity audience. The performance of melodies on a water theme, played by *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute), *koto* (Japanese harp) and *kozutsumi* (Japanese hand drum), received a standing ovation at the end. Through this concert, I recognized the characteristics of both the universal as well as the local features in common of ‘water and music’.” Hideacu Toda

Current situation and trends

17. The current situation concerning wetlands and their cultural values is far from satisfactory. Obviously, substantial wetland loss (well documented in all regions) also destroys the cultural values associated with them. The plight of indigenous people, natural guardians of wetland values, has resulted in the gradual or rapid erosion of those values. In addition, globalization has an impact on traditional cultures and has caused widespread homogenization, reinforced by industrial development, urbanization, intensive agriculture, and mass tourism pressures. Thus the technical and social framework for preserving wetland values is not propitious and the current trends, unless reversed, are far from positive.
18. Substantial archaeological knowledge related to wetlands has been gathered during the recent past, although not in every part of the globe, but there has been little effort to manage and conserve this invaluable heritage. The European Archaeological Council estimates that in England 90% of blanket bogs and 94% of raised bogs, both depositories of archaeological treasures, have been destroyed during the past century by agriculture, forestry, landfill, and peat extraction. The situation is similar in other parts of the world. Often such destruction occurs before archaeological research is carried out and, through it, knowledge is acquired and preserved.
19. Other forms of cultural expression related to wetlands have been neglected because of lack of understanding and appreciation. Perhaps an exception is traditional salt extraction and salinas, where considerable work has been carried out in recent years, especially in the Mediterranean [Petanidou 1997]. However, a growing interest in traditional civilizations is

⁷ As reported in the World Water Forum Newsletter No 44, September 2001, on the occasion of the Fourth Inter-American Dialogue on Water Management, held in Iguacu, Brazil.

growing, perhaps as a natural response to globalization, and this might assist in the rediscovery of wetland cultural values.

Box 16: Maintaining the cultural values of salinas [MedWet 2001]

Salinas (salines, salt-pans) are shallow, usually coastal, lagoons in which saline water is allowed to evaporate under the heat of the sun and the resulting salt crystals are gathered for domestic and industrial use. They provide habitats for many species and maintain high cultural values, in buildings, artefacts, exploitation methods, landscapes, and life styles. In many parts of the world, however, salinas are today facing intense pressures in the face of changing social values and economic stresses, notably their conversion from low intensity to mechanised production, or their abandonment or conversion to other uses such as urbanization, rice production, or aquaculture. All of these affect their role as a cultural landscape and the coexistence of sustainable salt production and natural biodiversity.

On the other hand, networks to promote such solutions have been established. For traditionally managed salinas there exist opportunities to maintain such management, working with salters and local communities, in recognition that it maintains both their cultural and historic values and landscapes and their wetlands and biodiversity importance. As this may not be economically feasible on a large scale, traditional management should be applied in at least part of each salina. For the rest, management regimes can be developed that maximise the maintenance of biodiversity without jeopardising salt production capacity, and that capitalise on the tourism potential of such systems, through appropriate infrastructure (salt museums, ecotourism facilities, guided visits, etc.).

In addition, abandoned salina sites can be returned to a natural state as saltmarshes, including the maintenance of their hydrology, as long as property rights are respected and economic considerations taken into account.

Cultural aspects and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

20. CBD has established an Ad hoc Open-ended Inter-Sessional Working Group on Article 8(j) and Related Provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Article 8(j) deals with the maintenance of knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities.
21. On the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Working Group, CBD COP6 adopted Decision VI/10 with recommendations for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessment regarding developments proposed to take place on, or which are likely to impact on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities.
22. The Decision requests the Ad Hoc Working Group to carry out further work on guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessments, with the aim of strengthening the social and cultural aspects, to complement, and be in conjunction with CBD's guidelines for incorporating biodiversity-related issues into environmental assessment legislation and/or processes and in strategic environmental assessment (Decision VI/7). Note that Ramsar's COP8 will consider these latter guidelines, with the

addition of interpretation for their application in the Ramsar context, for application, as appropriate, by Ramsar Contracting Parties. The Decision addresses those secretariats of intergovernmental agreements, agencies, organizations and processes whose mandate and activities involve potential significant impacts.

23. The CBD recommendations state that through the cultural impact assessment process, issues that are of particular cultural concern should be identified, such as beliefs and religions, customary practices, forms of social organization, systems of natural resources use, including patterns of land use, places of cultural significance, sacred sites and ritual ceremonies, languages, customary law systems, political structures, roles and customs. The recommendations also state that there is a need to respect both the custodians and holders of traditional knowledge and the knowledge itself, and that the possible impacts on all aspects of cultural, including sacred, sites should therefore be taken into consideration while developing cultural impact assessments.
24. Also as part of Decision VI/10, CBD COP6 also adopted the Outline of the Composite report on the status and trends regarding knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and the plan and timetable for its preparation. Phase 1 of the preparation of the Report will include issues related to the state of the retention of traditional biodiversity-related knowledge, and the identification and assessment of measures and initiatives to protect, promote and facilitate the use of traditional knowledge. Subsequent phases of the preparation of the Report will include issues related to the relationship between biological, cultural and linguistic diversity, identification of national and community level processes that may threaten the maintenance, preservation and application of traditional knowledge, and lessons learned and identification of best practices for the maintenance, preservation and application of traditional knowledge.

Conclusions: a major role for Ramsar

25. The Convention on Wetlands, including the Contracting Parties, the Ramsar Bureau and its regional activities (such as the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative, MedWet), as well as its International Organization Partners, should play a key role in the implementation of the Guiding principles that follow and in catalysing the launching of the proposed actions. In this process, the Convention on Wetlands should actively seek partners from the cultural sector and decentralise as much as possible the necessary activities, retaining only a general coordination role. In a first phase, these efforts could perhaps be incorporated in the work plan of the Ramsar Bureau. In the medium term, however, once the programme starts expanding, it will require more substantial human (and, therefore, financial) inputs to carry out the tasks agreed, which must be secured through appropriate fundraising.
26. In addition, the debate concerning the use of cultural values as one of the criteria for the listing of Ramsar sites should continue. In this context, it should be noted that the 26th meeting of the Standing Committee discussed a range of issues concerning the role of cultural and socio-economic issues in the Convention, including the question of a new criterion, and how to enhance that role, and requested the preparation of a discussion document to facilitate debate on this matter at COP8 in Technical Session 5.

“**Decision SC26-14:** The Standing Committee determined to have a broad-ranging discussion on the role of cultural and socio-economic issues in the

Convention, and on how to enhance that role, and requested the preparation of a discussion document to facilitate talks at COP8. Uganda was invited to work with the Bureau, the Chair of STRP and any other Party and IOP interested to contribute, in the preparation of the discussion paper.”

27. It should also be noted that a paper prepared by the CBD Secretariat and Ramsar Bureau concerning the CBD and Ramsar approaches to criteria and classification of inland water ecosystems will be considered by CBD COP6 (April 2002). This paper notes that the CBD includes some criteria (notably concerning wild relatives of domesticated species; species, communities, or genes of social, scientific, or cultural importance; and importance for research) that Ramsar does not. The COP8 discussion paper will also examine the CBD’s suggestions and the extent to which they might make expansion of the Ramsar Criteria desirable.
28. Thus the approval by Ramsar COP8 of a Resolution on the cultural values of wetlands should constitute the launching platform for the sustained efforts of the Convention in this field, which must have both a medium-term (5 years) and a long-term (20 years) horizon.

Box 17: Cultural values and societies: a plea from Wetlands International

“In many cases, not just some cultural values, but entire societies with all their social and cultural values depend fully on well-functioning wetlands or specific wetland habitats. (Significant) ecological change can thus destroy not just some cultural values, but the foundation of culture: the human societies including their cultural heritage that have formed over thousands or years in these particular habitats or in relation to (some of) their functions. Almost any indigenous society that relies on wetlands or wetland productivity for its basic livelihood falls under this. All of these have their own, often unique cultural and social features. It will be easy to make a very long list of such societies and the wetlands on which they depend. In some regions or even countries over half the population may fall in this category.

Destruction of the wetlands or wetland functions on which these societies depend can be regarded as an infringement on the human rights of these societies/cultures and could amount to “cultural genocide”.

Cultures and their environment do change and evolve of course, and they cannot be “preserved” as museum pieces. However, there is a major difference between, on the one hand, a culture adapting from within to gradually changing environmental, social and economic conditions (which generally allows building on and enriching the cultural heritage), and on the other hand, a culture being confronted with an “overnight” annihilation of its (wetland) resource base (for instance as a result of a dam, deforestation, pollution, drainage, etc), which may lead to a complete disintegration of the society and its cultural heritage.

I, therefore, would like to plead for a ninth criterion for Ramsar site designation.”

Marcel Silvius, Wetlands International

29. All of this work on cultural values of the Convention on Wetlands must be based on a sound scientific basis. It is recommended, therefore, that a special working group for that

purpose be established in the framework of STRP, which should include experts on cultural heritage management.

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