

Wetlands: water, life, and culture"
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Issues and options concerning the further elaboration of the
Ramsar criteria and guidelines for the future development of the
List of Wetlands of International Importance

Note: This discussion paper relates to the presentation and discussions in COP8 Technical Session 4 (Friday, 22 November 2002) concerning the implementation and future development of the Strategic Framework and Vision for the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Resolution VII.11). It also provides background information relevant to Technical Session 5 concerning cultural issues and wetlands.

Background

1. This COP8 discussion paper has been prepared in fulfilment of Decision SC26-14 of the 26th meeting of the Standing Committee (December 2001): "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."
2. This Decision was made in response to two related issues raised to the 26th meeting of the Standing Committee concerning the absence of Ramsar criteria based on socio-economic and cultural values for the identification and designation of Wetlands of International Importance in Resolution VII.11, *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance*.
 - a) a paper tabled by Uganda at the 26th meeting of the Standing Committee at the request of Contracting Parties at two of the Convention's Subregional COP8 Meetings (South America, 10-12 September 2001, and Eastern and Southern Africa, 12-14 November 2001) concerning the lack of such criteria; and
 - b) a draft paper tabled by the Bureau at the request of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) concerning gaps and harmonization of the CBD and Ramsar Convention approaches to criteria and classification of inland water ecosystems. It is anticipated that a revised text of this paper will be considered by the 8th meeting of CBD's Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) in March 2003 as part of its work in reviewing and elaborating the CBD's programme of work on inland waters biodiversity (for which, under CBD Decision III/21, the Ramsar Convention acts as a lead implementation partner).

3. This paper reviews the issues and proposes options for three categories of potential additional Criteria for identification and designation of Ramsar sites and/or elaboration of the guidelines for their application:
 - i) socio-economic importance
 - ii) cultural importance
 - iii) certain other indicative features of the biological diversity of wetlands, as identified by the CBD's draft paper referred to in paragraph 2.b above.
4. The issue of the lack of a Criterion or Criteria based on the socio-economic and cultural importance of wetlands has been a matter of past debate by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and Standing Committee, notably during the 1996-1999 triennium. At that time those bodies concluded that socio-economic and cultural issues should be incorporated in the guidelines on the application of the existing Criteria and in the guidelines on management planning, but not as a Criterion for designation. The basis for this view was two-fold:
 - a) that Article 2.1 of the Convention text states that wetlands should be designated for the List "on account of their international significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology", which was considered to exclude the possibility of designation on the basis of socio-economic and cultural values; and
 - b) that such a Criterion could allow room for abuse of the intent of designating a wetland as internationally important, for instance through claiming that a development causing damage to the ecological character of a wetland made the wetland internationally important because of the income and employment of people which it would generate.
5. This previous debate also recognised the importance of socio-economic and cultural issues as an element of the Convention's Wise Use concept (Article 3.1) and that their full incorporation into the management and sustainable use of wetlands, including Ramsar sites, should be mandatory.
6. In view of the increasing recognition under the Convention of the vital role that wetlands, and their values and functions, play in securing and maintaining the livelihoods of local communities and indigenous peoples and others (for example, the flood protection of other communities living downstream in a river basin), the importance of ensuring recognition of the full range of values and functions, including socio-economic and cultural values and functions, through the processes of the Convention has risen significantly. This recognition, that Ramsar sites and other wetlands fulfil a vitally important role for people, is for example incorporated more thoroughly into the *New Guidelines for management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands* being considered for adoption by COP8 (COP8 – DR 14).
7. The Convention text, written over 30 years ago, and negotiated by mostly developed countries, has nevertheless proved admirably flexible in allowing for its interpretation and application to evolve as the world's approach to environmental issues has itself evolved. This has permitted the Convention's approach to its implementation also to evolve in response. The issue of fully addressing such matters as socio-economic and cultural issues

has been identified by many countries in the developing world as critical to their priorities and the approach to securing the conservation and sustainable use of their wetlands.

8. Such a review is in line with Resolutions VI.2 and VI.3 and Operational Objective 6.3 of the Strategic Plan 1997-2002:

to keep general criteria under review to ensure that they reflect global wetland conservation priorities and values [Strategic Plan];

to take into account cultural values and or benefits derived from wetlands [and] to consider designating sites on the basis of important natural hydrological functions [Resolution VI.3].

9. It is also in accord with Objective 2.1 of the Strategic Framework for the Ramsar List:

To review the development of the Ramsar List and further refine the Criteria for identification and selection of Ramsar sites, as appropriate, to best promote conservation of biological diversity and wise use of wetlands at the local, subnational, national, supra-national/regional and international levels.

10. This paper reviews the current extent to which socio-economic and cultural issues are included in the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* (Resolution VII.11), and proposes for discussion a number of options for how recognition of such features could be strengthened in the identification and designation of Ramsar sites and their sustainable management.

Recognition of socio-economic and cultural issues in the current approach to Ramsar site designation (Resolution VII.11)

11. The Vision for the List recognises the importance of designating Ramsar sites which are important for their values and functions for people: “To develop and maintain an international network of wetlands which are important for the conservation of global biodiversity and for sustaining human life through the ecological and hydrological functions they perform.”

12. The Strategic Framework emphasises the link between Ramsar sites and the Wise Use principle, the values and functions of wetlands for people and Ramsar sites:

Contracting Parties also recognise that wetlands, through their ecological and hydrological functions, provide invaluable services, products and benefits enjoyed by, and sustaining human populations. Therefore, the Convention promotes practices that will ensure that all wetlands, and especially those designated for the Ramsar List, will continue to provide these functions and values for future generations as well as for the conservation of biological diversity.

13. Three of the existing eight Criteria in the Strategic Framework already include attention to elements of socio-economic importance. These are as follows:

Criterion 1. The guidelines for the application of this Criterion include giving priority to the designation of sites which play a substantial hydrological role in the natural functioning of a major river basin or coastal system. Specifically, in the guidelines this hydrological importance implies the major role of wetlands as including, *inter alia*:

- i) the natural control, amelioration or prevention of flooding;
- ii) seasonal retention for wetlands or other areas of conservation importance downstream;
- iii) the recharge of aquifers;
- iv) part of karst or underground hydrological or spring systems that supply major surface wetlands;
- v) a major natural floodplain system;
- vi) a major hydrological influence in the context of at least regional climate regulation; and
- vii) maintenance of high water quality standards.

Criterion 7. The Criterion itself states that “a wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports a significant proportion of indigenous fish subspecies, species or families, life-history stages, species interactions and/or populations that are representative of wetland benefits and/or values and thereby contributes to global biological diversity.” However, the guidelines for the application of this Criterion currently provide no guidance on its application in relation to the wetland benefits and/or values of fish.

Criterion 8. In recognition of the importance of the role of inland and coastal wetlands in the life-cycles of fishes, the guidelines for the application of this Criterion make reference to their not interfering with the regulation of fisheries, in implicit recognition of the socio-economic and cultural importance of such wetlands.

14. Hence the principle of designating Ramsar sites for socio-economic importance has already been established through Contracting Parties’ adoption of Resolution VII.11 and its annexed Strategic Framework. However, the Criteria and their guidelines currently only address certain types of socio-economic importance, chiefly in relation to hydrological values and functions.
15. The eight Criteria and the guidelines for their application adopted through Resolution VII.11 do not currently include reference to the cultural importance of wetlands.

CBD’s indicative list of the components of biological diversity, and their coverage by Ramsar’s *Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance*

16. Article 7 of the text of the Convention on Biological Diversity, concerning identification and monitoring, states that each Contracting Party shall, as far as possible and as appropriate, identify components of biological diversity important for its conservation and sustainable use having regard to the indicative list of biodiversity components presented in Annex 1 of the Convention text. This is for a number of purposes including, *inter alia*, in-situ conservation and the sustainable use of components of biological diversity.

17. Annex 1 of the CBD Convention text lists the following components of biological diversity. The Ramsar Criteria which relate to each component are indicated.

<i>CBD components of biological diversity</i>	<i>Ramsar Criteria</i>
Ecosystems and habitats:	
Containing high diversity	Criteria 1, 2, 3, and 7
Containing large number of endemic or threatened species, or wilderness	Criteria 2, 5, 6, and 7
Required by migratory species	Criteria 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8
Of social, economic, cultural or scientific importance	Included, partially, in the Guidelines for the application of criteria 1, 7, and 8
Which are representative, unique or associated with key evolutionary or other biological processes	Criteria 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8
Species or communities which are:	
Threatened	Criterion 2
Wild relatives of domesticated or cultivated species of medicinal, agricultural or other economic value	Criterion 7, partially
Of social, scientific or cultural importance	Included, partially, in the Guidelines for the application of criteria 3 and 7
Of importance for research into the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, such as indicator species	Criterion 4, partially
Described genomes and genes of social, scientific or economic importance	Criteria 6 and 7, partially

18. Thus the CBD Secretariat's draft paper, to be considered by SBSTTA8 and to which the Ramsar Bureau is contributing, indicates that one or more of the current eight Ramsar Criteria cover most of the CBD's indicative list of components of biological diversity.
19. However, the CBD's analysis indicates that, to achieve a more comprehensive coverage of components of biological diversity through the designation of Ramsar sites, there is a need to consider the development of additional Criteria, including quantitative criteria, and/or to elaborate the guidelines for existing Criteria, for the following features:
- i) wetlands supporting wild relatives of domesticated or cultivated species;
 - ii) wetlands that support species or communities and genomes or genes of economic, social, scientific or cultural importance;
 - iii) wetlands supporting species or communities that are important for research into the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity including indicators of ecosystem health and integrity; and
 - iv) wetlands that support important populations of taxonomic groups with wetland-dependent species, including *inter alia*, amphibians.

20. The CBD's paper also notes that socio-economic factors are in general the main drivers of wetland loss and degradation and therefore must be of central concern to wise use, and it recognises that the Ramsar Wise Use concept provides a basis for developing criteria and/or guidance for the identification and designation of wetlands which are of socio-economic importance.
21. It is anticipated that CBD's SBSTTA8 (March 2003) may recommend to the CBD's 7th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (2004) that it consider requesting the Ramsar Convention to review ways and means of developing the Ramsar Criteria and/or their accompanying guidelines so as to fully cover the indicative list of components of biological diversity, with a view to further harmonising the mechanisms for implementation of the Ramsar Convention and CBD by Contracting Parties.

Article 2.2 of the Ramsar Convention and socio-economic and cultural Criteria

22. Article 2.2 of the Convention states that "wetlands should be selected for the List on account of their international significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology".
23. Previous discussion has focused on whether term "ecology" can and should be interpreted as capable of accommodating a Criterion or Criteria based on the socio-economic and cultural functions and values of wetlands.
24. There would appear to be two justifications for such an interpretation:
 - a) that selection for the List is based on their contribution to global biological diversity and for sustaining human life, in line with the Vision for the List, recognising that their contribution to such sustenance of human life is necessarily derived from, *inter alia*, their socio-economic and cultural functions and values; and/or
 - b) that the term "ecology" be interpreted to include human ecology, in line with current and increasing recognition of the essential and close relationship between people and biodiversity. Support for this interpretation comes from the description of human ecology (*New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition) as:

[people's] collective interaction with [their] environment.

Influenced by the work of biologists on the interaction of organisms within their environments, social scientists undertook to study human groups in a similar way. Thus, ecology in the social sciences is the study of the ways in which the social structure adapts to the quality of natural resources and to the existence of other human groups. When this study is limited to the development and variation of cultural properties, it is called cultural ecology. Human ecology views the biological, environmental, demographic, and technical conditions of the life of any people as an interrelated series of determinants of form and function in human culture and social systems. It recognizes that group behaviour is dependent upon resources and associated skills

and upon a body of emotionally charged beliefs; these together give rise to a system of social structures.

25. Thus, inclusion of human ecology in the definition of ecology recognises both socio-economic and cultural features of ecosystems.

Opportunities and options for incorporating socio-economic, cultural and other features into Ramsar site designation

Interpretation of “ecology” in Article 2.2 of the Convention

26. There are two options, each with consequences for how such matters could be addressed through the Strategic Framework. These are:

A) *Consider that “ecology” under the Convention excludes consideration of “human ecology” and the recognition of the values and functions, and goods and services, that wetlands provide for people.*

27. This approach would imply that a change to the Convention text would be needed before any identification and designation of Ramsar sites would be possible for their values and functions. Previous experience indicates that any such change to the Convention text could take many years to come into force, and this would ignore the urgent need identified by many Contracting Parties, particularly in the developing world, to have available a full range of tools and mechanisms for the wise use of wetlands, including Ramsar sites, that would recognise the vital importance of wetlands for people, including their food and water security, as well as the wetlands’ biodiversity importance.
28. Adopting this approach would also disregard the fact that certain socio-economic features, notably in relation to hydrological values and functions of socio-economic importance, are already recognised in the Criteria and guidelines for Ramsar site designation, and that the Vision for the List, adopted by Contracting Parties through Resolution VII.11, is explicit in recognising the importance of designating a Ramsar sites network “for sustaining human life through the ecological and hydrological functions they perform”.
29. Such an approach would also disregard the recognition by the Convention on Biological Diversity that the indicative components of biological diversity include socio-economic and cultural features of ecosystems (see above).
30. Under this approach, inclusion of cultural, socio-economic and other important features of Ramsar sites would need to be through their recognition in the Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS) as the basis for management planning for designated sites, in line with the *New guidelines for management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands* being considered by COP8 (COP8 – DR 14).

B) *Consider that Article 2.2 of the Convention includes human ecology and the values and functions which wetland ecosystems provide for people.*

31. This approach would allow for a more coherent and consistent development of the Criteria and guidelines for the designation of Ramsar sites, and would reflect the increasing understanding in many parts of the world of the vital links between people and biodiversity

as the fundamental basis for securing the sustainable use of wetlands, including Ramsar sites.

32. This interpretation would also permit a response to the recognition of such features as key components of biological diversity (*sensu* CBD) and so allow for the preparation of clearer guidance to Contracting Parties on recognising and incorporating such features into Ramsar site designation, in line with the ecosystem approach embodied in the Wise Use concept.
33. This would also permit the Ramsar Convention to respond to the need for harmonisation of guidance on identification of internationally important wetlands between Ramsar and the CBD, in accordance with the role of the Ramsar Convention as a lead implementing partner of CBD on wetlands (CBD Decision III/21).
34. Using this approach, several possibilities exist for incorporating these additional elements into Ramsar site selection and designation. These are further outlined below.

Socio-economic importance

35. Concerns have been expressed in past Convention debate about the consequences of developing a separate Criterion or Criteria for Ramsar site designation on socio-economic importance. This reflects concern that such a Criterion could lead to designation of sites in the network which would not have any biodiversity features of international importance; and that such sites designated only for certain features of socio-economic importance could be highly degraded wetlands used solely, for example, for industrial purposes or where unsustainable exploitation of the wetland resources are occurring (for example, excessive water abstraction leading to degradation of the ecological character of the wetland).
36. These concerns are legitimate but should not prevent the Convention from further developing its Criteria in line with current requirements, particularly in developing countries, and also in line with the provisions of CBD and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. These concerns should be addressed by establishing the necessary safeguards, so that any Criteria based on socio-economic values are not abused and/or used in a way that violates the basic principles and the spirit of the Ramsar Convention. A key test for the inclusion of sites in the List for such socio-economic values and functions could be that any exploitation of such values and functions is sustainable or perhaps that designation of the Ramsar site will lead to such sustainable use.
37. These developments would address a number of the indicative components of biological diversity identified by the CBD as being not yet fully covered by the current Ramsar Criteria and guidelines.
38. Concerning the socio-economic features of wetland values and functions which should be taken into consideration, it would be appropriate to use as a basis the indicative list of wetland values and functions derived from Annex III of CBD's impact assessment guidelines, which are being considered by COP8 for adoption (COP8 – DR 9), and which have been incorporated into Ramsar's *New guidelines for management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands* (COP8 – DR 14). These are included for reference in Annex I of this Discussion Paper.

39. In addition, since the principle of identifying features of socio-economic importance in the identification and designation of Ramsar sites has already been established in the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* (Resolution VII.11), it would be necessary to further review and revise the guidelines for the application of the existing Criteria, so as to recognise such features of socio-economic importance of the wetland's values and functions more thoroughly.
40. Expanded guidelines covering socio-economic importance, provided that the proposed sites also respond to at least one of the other criteria, will be particularly important and relevant to the full application of Criterion 1 of the current Strategic Framework concerning representative, rare or unique wetland types.

Cultural importance

41. The World Heritage Convention recognizes sites for their cultural values for inscription in the World Heritage List when these are of exceptional importance, representing an asset of the common patrimony of humanity. Thus, a wetland could be included in the World Heritage List if it has exceptional cultural values, but there are many wetlands which have a great cultural significant for local communities, without necessarily qualifying for World Heritage listing.
42. The importance of cultural aspects of wetlands is recognised in the draft Resolution and guiding principles on this topic being considered by COP8 (COP8 – DR 19), which requests the Scientific and Technical Review Panel to prepare criteria and methods for the development of appropriate policies and management actions in relation to cultural aspects of wetlands.
43. This discussion paper has mentioned that cultural aspects of wetlands are not addressed in the current Criteria, though they are increasingly being understood to be an emerging and important element of the conservation and wise use of Ramsar sites and other wetlands.
44. Therefore it is appropriate to consider development of a Criterion or Criteria to cover identification of internationally important cultural features of wetlands. Such work could be undertaken by the STRP as part of that called for in COP8 – DR 19.
45. This addition of a cultural Criterion would also lead to improved coverage of the CBD's indicative components of biological diversity in relation to wetlands *sensu* Ramsar.
46. Such a Criterion or Criteria could use as its basis the indicative list of cultural features of wetlands included in COP8 – DR 14 concerning cultural features and management planning.
47. The criterion should reflect the international importance of particular wetlands due to their cultural features. To this end, it may be appropriate to review the guidance of the World Heritage Convention on this matter. As a starting point it may be appropriate to recognise that any such cultural feature should be specifically linked to, and derived from, the wetland concerned. The feature should be of critical importance to the maintenance of the national or local cultural diversity, which in turn would constitute a powerful tool for the conservation and wise use of biodiversity and ecosystems.

CBD's components of biological diversity

48. Whilst the above approaches would address a number of the components of biological diversity identified as not being adequately covered by the current Ramsar Criteria, certain other components would additionally need to be addressed, as stated in paragraph 19 above.
49. It may be possible to address at least some of those features through use of the existing Criteria but with elaboration of the guidelines for their application, but some features might require the development of an additional Criterion.

Conclusions

50. There is a case for recognizing the importance of Wetlands of International Importance for their socio-economic, cultural and certain other biodiversity features in the designation of Ramsar sites. This would reflect appropriately both the intent of the Vision for the List adopted by COP7 and the approach to the wise use of wetlands now considered necessary in the delivery of sustainable use of biological diversity, especially in the developing world.
51. This development would more clearly align the Ramsar Criteria with CBD provisions and would respond to the spirit and results of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the paramount concern of which was the eradication of poverty based upon the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental.
52. Since the principle of using certain socio-economic features in Ramsar site designation has already been employed by the Convention, it seems likely that the current interpretation of the Convention implicitly interprets the term "ecology" in Article 2.2 to embrace the concept of human ecology as well. It is recommended that the STRP be requested to review and elaborate the existing Criteria and guidelines so as to reflect the full range of values and functions of socio-economic importance provided by wetlands.
53. As cultural features of wetlands are being increasingly recognised by Contracting Parties as of significant importance, but current Criteria and guidelines do not incorporate such cultural issues, it would be appropriate, in line with COP8 – DR 19, to request the STRP, working with other relevant experts and organizations, to develop an additional Criterion or Criteria covering the cultural importance of wetlands.
54. So as to improve the harmonised delivery by Contracting Parties to Ramsar and the CBD, in the spirit of the CBD/Ramsar Joint Work Plan, it would also be appropriate to request the STRP to review ways and means of developing further Criteria and/or the elaboration of existing Criteria and guidelines in order to cover the entire range of CBD's indicative components of biological diversity with the network of designated Ramsar sites, taking into account the work being done on this matter by CBD's SBSTTA8 and the outcomes of CBD's COP7.
55. As part of its work envisaged in COP8 – DR 7 concerning gaps and harmonization of Ramsar guidance on ecological character, inventory, assessment and monitoring, the STRP should recommend revisions to the Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS) so as to incorporate these additional ecological, socio-economic, and cultural features, including

their values and functions. This would then form a sound basis for addressing such matters through the management planning process recommended in COP8 – DR 14.

56. Reviewing and updating the Wise Use principle (to reflect more fully current attitudes and the role of the Ramsar site network as a powerful demonstration of wise use, the ecosystem approach, and sustainability) will be important for ensuring that the full range of wetland values and functions are reflected throughout the process of site identification, designation, management, and monitoring.

Annex I

Indicative list of wetland values and functions for the evaluation of socio-economic features of wetlands for management planning

(included in COP8 – DR 14, derived from Annex III of CBD's *Guidelines for incorporating biodiversity related issues into environmental impact assessment legislation and/or processes in strategic environmental assessment* (COP8 DR 9))

Production functions

Timber production
Firewood production
Production of harvestable grasses (construction & artisanal use)
Naturally produced fodder & manure
Harvestable peat
Secondary (minor) products
Harvestable bush meat (food)
Fish & shellfish productivity
Drinking water supply
Supply of water for irrigation and industry
Water supply for hydroelectricity
Supply of surface water for other landscapes
Supply of ground water for other landscapes
Crop productivity
Tree plantations productivity
Managed forest productivity
Rangeland /livestock productivity
Aquaculture productivity (freshwater)
Mariculture productivity (brackish/saltwater)

Carrying functions – suitability for:

Constructions
Indigenous settlement
Rural settlement
urban settlement
industry
infrastructure
transport infrastructure
shipping / navigation
road transport
rail transport
air transport
power distribution
use of pipelines
leisure and tourism activities

Processing and regulation functions

Decomposition of organic material (land based)
Natural desalinisation of soils
Development / prevention of acid sulphate soils
Biological control mechanisms
Seasonal cleansing of soils
Soil water storage capacity
Coastal protection against floods
Coastal stabilisation (against accretion / erosion)
Soil protection
Water filtering
Dilution of pollutants
Discharge of pollutants
Bio-chemical/physical purification of water
Storage for pollutants
Flow regulation for flood control
River base flow regulation
Water storage capacity
Ground water recharge capacity
Regulation of water balance
Sedimentation / retention capacity
Protection against water erosion
Protection against wave action
Prevention of saline groundwater intrusion
Prevention of saline surface-water intrusion
Transmission of diseases
Carbon sequestration
Maintenance of pollinator services