

"Wetlands: water, life, and culture"
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to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)
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Guidelines for Global Action on Peatlands (GAP)

(Resolution VIII.17, 2002)

Peatlands and the Ramsar Convention

1. Peat is dead and partially decomposed plant remains that have accumulated *in situ* under waterlogged conditions. Peatlands are landscapes with a peat deposit that may currently support a vegetation that is peat-forming, may not, or may lack vegetation entirely. The presence of peat or vegetation capable of forming peat is the key characteristic of peatlands.
2. In recent years peatlands have become increasingly recognized as a vital part of the world's wetland resources. Approximately half of the world's wetlands, spread across six continents, are peatlands such as bogs, fens, swamp forests and converted peatlands. They are found in all biomes, particularly the boreal, temperate and tropical areas of the planet.
3. Peatlands are recognized throughout the world as a vital economic and ecological resource, though until recently they have received little attention from the international conservation community. Peatlands are ecosystems contributing to biological diversity, the global water cycle, global carbon storage relevant to climate change, and other wetland functions valuable to human communities.
4. Peatlands, especially active peatlands that are accumulating peat, are irreplaceable palaeo-environmental archives from which to reconstruct past landscape change and previous climates, and determine human impact upon the environment.
5. There is a wide range of threats to peatlands that require urgent national and/or international action. The opportunities for wise use, conservation and management (hereafter referred to as 'wise use') of the world's peatland assets are constrained not only by limited scientific and technical information but also by the effects of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors. Contracting Parties and partners need to evaluate the significance of these constraints at various scales and within appropriate national frameworks. For example, peatlands in the high Andes of South America are modified by overgrazing, drainage for agriculture, trade in dry peat, and changes in the natural water courses for human use.
6. Peatlands have a wide international significance and their wise use is relevant to the implementation of the Ramsar Convention, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and other international instruments and agreements.
7. Peatlands play a special role in conserving global biodiversity because they are the refugia of some of the rarest and most unusual species of wetland-dependent flora and fauna. The

CBD-Ramsar Joint Work Plan provides the opportunity to highlight the global contribution of peatlands to biodiversity.

8. Peatlands globally have been identified as a major storehouse of the world's carbon, exceeding that of forests. Peatlands that are actively accumulating organic matter are carbon sinks. Both aspects are worthy of attention by the UNFCCC.
9. It is recognized that the ecosystem approach, underpinned by the Malawi Principles and adopted as a framework for implementation of the CBD, also provides a valuable approach for implementation of these *Guidelines for Global Action on Peatlands (GAP)*. This would be consistent with Decision IV/15 at COP4 of the CBD and Resolution VII.15 of Ramsar COP7 referring to the use of an ecosystem approach.
10. In addition to their significance for biodiversity, in many parts of the world peatlands are the predominant wetland type for cultural heritage, notably through their capacity to preserve archaeological remains and the palaeobiological record under waterlogged and deoxygenated conditions. This has been recognized by the European Archaeological Council's 2001 Strategy and Statement of Intent for the Heritage Management of Wetlands, which drew attention to the importance of the wise use of wetlands and the Ramsar Convention for the preservation of these cultural features, and argued that there is much common ground in the wetland biodiversity and cultural heritage management of peatlands.
11. Ramsar Contracting Parties have recognized the global significance of peatlands through Recommendation 6.1 which called for further cooperation on the conservation of global peatlands. These *Guidelines for Global Action on Peatlands* have been developed from the draft Global Action Plan for the Wise Use and Management of Peatlands endorsed by Ramsar Recommendation 7.1. In line with Recommendation 7.1, the guidelines have been further developed through the work of the Convention's International Organization Partners, international peatland conservation organizations, notably the International Peat Society (IPS) and the International Mire Conservation Group (IMCG), and interested Contracting Parties, assisted and evaluated by the Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and its expert Working Group on Peatlands.
12. These Guidelines recommend a series of priority approaches and activities for global action on the wise use and management of peatlands under seven themes:
 - A. Knowledge of global resources
 - B. Education and public awareness on peatlands
 - C. Policy and legislative instruments
 - D. Wise use of peatlands
 - E. Research networks, regional centres of expertise, and institutional capacity
 - F. International cooperation
 - G. Implementation and support
13. The guidelines form the basis for the development of a global action plan for peatlands by Ramsar Contracting Parties, the Convention's bodies, and International Organization Partners and other organizations working to address peatland issues, so as to implement Operational Objective 3.2 of the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2003-2008.

14. The overall aim of the guidelines and their implementation is to achieve recognition of the importance of peatlands to the maintenance of global biodiversity and the storage of the water and carbon that is vital to the world's climate system, and to promote their wise use, conservation and management for the benefit of people and the environment.
15. Taken together the guidelines provide:
 - a) a framework for national, regional and international initiatives to promote the development of strategies for peatland wise use, conservation, and management;
 - b) guidance on mechanisms to foster national, regional and international partnerships of government, the private sector, and non-government agencies to fund and implement actions in support of such strategies; and
 - c) approaches to facilitate adoption and support for implementation of global action on peatlands through the Ramsar Convention, the CBD, the UNFCCC, and other appropriate national, regional or international instruments.

A. Knowledge of global resources

Development and application of standardized terminology and classification systems

16. Many classification systems for peatlands have been developed in different parts of the world, and there is a range of different terminologies that have been developed to define peatlands and peatland processes. When seeking to describe the character, extent and status of peatland resources worldwide, an essential step is to seek to compare and harmonize terminologies and classifications as the basis for achieving a globally consistent view of these resources.

Guidelines for action

- A1. In order to review and standardize peatland terminology and classification systems, the Ramsar Convention is encouraged to establish a Working Group on Peatland Terminology, Classification and Biogeography, involving peatland conservation organizations, Contracting Parties, and other interested bodies.
- A2. Regional and international workshops and symposia should be convened by the Working Group to review and build consensus on terminologies, classifications, and biogeography.
- A3. To assist Contracting Parties and others in compiling information on peatland resources, the Working Group should develop and publish a *Glossary of Peatland Terms*.
- A4. The Convention should review the Ramsar Classification System for Wetland Types with regard to peatlands in the light of the Working Group's report on standardized terminology and classification systems.

Establishing a global database of peatlands

17. Inventory and assessment information on peatlands varies from country to country. It is generally patchy, inconsistent, and often difficult to access for those needing to use this vital baseline material for ensuring the wise use of their peatlands. This hinders the recognition of the importance of the peatland resource, its values and functions, and the application by Contracting Parties of measures to ensure the wise use of their peatlands, including the identification and designation of peatlands as Wetlands of International Importance.
18. Ramsar Resolution VII.20 on priorities for wetland inventory urged Contracting Parties to give highest priority to undertaking inventory activities for those wetland types identified as at greatest risk or with poorest information in the *Global Review of Wetland Resources and Priorities for Wetland Inventory* (GroWI) report. The GroWI report identified peatlands as a priority wetland type noting, in particular, that they are threatened by drainage for agriculture and afforestation in Europe, Asia and North America despite their importance as a global carbon sink and economic resource. Peatlands are poorly known in tropical regions such as Southeast Asia.

Guidelines for action

- A5. In order to emphasize the importance of the peatland resource, and to provide the baseline information necessary to assist Contracting Parties and others in their delivery of Global Action for Peatlands, a global database of peatlands should be established and made widely accessible to Contracting Parties and others. The database should be compiled in the first instance from sources of existing information, brought into line with the agreed standardized terminology and classification systems for peatlands, and should include baseline information on the distribution, size, quality, ecological characteristics and biological diversity of the resource.
- A6. Contracting Parties, based on national capacity, are urged to provide national information on carbon stored in their peatlands for incorporation in this database.
- A7. Contracting Parties, through their National Reports, should report to each Conference of the Parties on their progress in contributing information to the global peatlands database.
- A8. The data and information compiled in the global peatlands database should be made available to, and used by, Wetlands International in its role of advising the Convention on the application of the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance*. This advice should be designed to assist Contracting Parties in their identification and designation of peatlands as Ramsar sites, noting that peatlands have been identified by the Convention as under-represented in the Ramsar List and urged as a priority for future designations. To assist in such further designations, the database should include information on the biogeography of peatlands.

Detecting changes and trends in the quantity and quality of the peatland resource

19. Since peatlands have been recognized by the Convention as a particularly threatened wetland type, priority should be given to monitoring changes in their status and trends so as to assist Contracting Parties in taking the necessary actions to safeguard their wise use. In addition to on-the-ground assessment and monitoring, modern earth observation remote sensing techniques offer considerable potential for such appraisals over large geographical scales, using a variety of techniques.

Guidelines for action

- A9. A standardized monitoring system should be established for use by Contracting Parties in determining the status of, and detecting change in, their peatland resource.
- A10. Reporting the status and trends in national peatland condition should form an element of the triennial National Reports prepared by Contracting Parties for each Ramsar COP. Such information should be also made available by Contracting Parties for inclusion in the global peatlands database.
- A11. Opportunities for developing remote sensing tools and analyses to assess large-scale status and trends in peatland quality and quantity should be explored with earth observation organizations and agencies, as well as others expert in this field.
- A12. Based on the information provided on the status and trends in the peatland resource in National Reports, and the information available in the global peatlands database, regular summary reports of the status and trends of the global peatlands resource should be prepared for consideration by Contracting Parties.

B. Education and public awareness on peatlands

20. In order to ensure that the importance of peatlands as a global wetland biodiversity resource is fully understood, it is important to develop and implement environmental education, training and public awareness programmes focusing on peatlands. The Ramsar Convention's Communication, Education, and Public Awareness Programme (Resolution VIII.31) provides a comprehensive framework for the development and enhancement of wetlands education and public awareness through which peatland education and public awareness can be delivered.

Guidelines for Action

- B1. National or sub-national agencies responsible for environmental education should incorporate peatlands as an environmental theme in education programmes targeted at formal, continuing and outreach education, business and industry, as an important element of their implementation of the Ramsar Convention's Communication, Education, and Public Awareness Programme.
- B2. Teaching, learning and training resources on peatlands should be developed and promoted, which should explore the associated values of peatlands as well. The materials developed should include a broad base of understanding, experience and skills, with contributions from local communities, women and indigenous people, particularly in areas where peatlands form a significant component of the landscape and culture.

- B3. Programmes focusing on peatlands should be developed and promoted for professional and in-service training of wetland planners and managers, at both practitioner and trainer levels, including through the development of training modules in the Ramsar Wetland Training Service, once established.
- B4. Citizens should be provided with information and educational materials that will enable them to make informed choices concerning lifestyle and consumer behavior compatible with the wise use of peatlands.

C. Policy and legislative instruments

- 21. Ramsar Resolution VII.7 provides guidelines for reviewing laws and institutions to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands (Ramsar Handbook no. 3). These guidelines are designed to assist Contracting Parties in ensuring that they have in place the appropriate legal and institutional framework for effective delivery of their commitments under the Ramsar Convention for the wise use of wetlands (which include, *inter alia*, peatlands), and that other sectoral measures, for example water management mechanisms and legislation, are harmonized and consistent with their wise use objectives.
- 22. Contracting Parties have recognized that peatlands are an under-represented wetland type in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance and have afforded priority to the designation of peatlands as Ramsar sites. To assist Contracting Parties in the identification and designation of such sites, COP8 has adopted additional guidance on their designation (Resolution VIII.11).

Guidelines for Action

- C1. Contracting Parties should review their present frameworks of national policies, laws and incentive programmes relevant to peatlands utilizing the Ramsar *Guidelines for reviewing laws and institutions to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands* (Ramsar Handbook no. 3) so as to identify the main barriers to, and opportunities for, making wise use of peatlands more effective. These measures should be strengthened where peatlands are at significant risk owing to resource development or other pressures.
- C2. Contracting Parties should endeavour to ensure that national legislation and policies relating to peatlands are compatible with other international commitments and obligations.
- C3. Contracting Parties should ensure that the particular importance and requirements of peatland wise use are fully incorporated into national wetland and biodiversity strategies and plans and land use planning instruments, and that national wetland policies developed in line with the guidelines adopted by Ramsar Resolution VII.6 (Ramsar Handbook no. 2) fully incorporate the implementation of the wise use of peatlands.
- C4. Reviews of national networks of peatland protected areas should be undertaken. Where there is a currently incomplete network of peatland sites within a national

system of protected areas, as appropriate, the number of peatland reserves, parks or other types of protected peatlands should be increased.

- C5. The conservation of nationally, regionally and globally important and representative peatland types should be further secured through the expansion of the global network of Ramsar sites, applying the *Guidance for identifying and designating peatlands, wet grasslands, mangroves and coral reefs as Wetlands of International Importance* adopted by COP8 (Resolution VIII.11).
- C6. Contracting Parties should, in line with Resolution VII.17, establish policies to implement peatland restoration and rehabilitation, where appropriate seeking the assistance of countries, and the private sector, with knowledge in these fields, utilizing the *Principles and guidelines for wetland restoration* adopted by COP8 (Resolution VIII.16).

D. Wise use of peatlands

- 23. The wise use management of peatlands, including restoration and rehabilitation, should be treated as a priority by all Contracting Parties that have peatland resources within their territory. In order to assist Contracting Parties and all other bodies and organizations involved in peatland management and exploitation in ensuring that peatlands are used wisely, global guidelines for peatland wise use and management are being developed by a consortium of peatland organizations, including the International Peat Society (IPS) and the International Mire Conservation Group (IMCG). Such wise use and management guidelines are recommended as a source of further information and expertise for ensuring sustainable peatland management.
- 24. Given that the biogeography of peatlands is often regional in nature, Contracting Parties and others should consider the need for management guidelines and action plans that can be developed and implemented at appropriate regional as well as national scales and also, where appropriate, at the scale of whole catchment basins, in line with the *Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management* (Ramsar Handbook no. 4). Such implementation may be facilitated by the establishment of regional centres of expertise (see Guideline E4 below).

Guidelines for Action

- D1. Peatland wise use principles should be applied through the acquisition of information on the effectiveness of various socio-economic incentive measures and by enabling instruments to facilitate the equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of different management options.
- D2. Best management practices and peatland restoration should be promoted by Contracting Parties as an important input to Ramsar principles and other international conventions such as CBD and UNFCCC.
- D3. In developing their strategies and policies for the wise use of peatlands, and in particular their management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands, Contracting Parties should ensure that the cultural heritage significance of peatlands

is fully taken into account, and should work closely with their counterpart heritage management agencies and bodies to achieve this.

- D4. The development of local and community-based peatland wise use initiatives and actions should be fostered through land use planning programmes, with the support of the development assistance agencies, particularly those programmes affecting, and to be implemented by, women, indigenous people, and local communities, utilizing the Ramsar *Guidelines for establishing and strengthening local communities' and indigenous peoples' participation in the management of wetlands* (Ramsar Handbook no. 5).
- D5. Measures should be undertaken to restore peatland functions in those systems that have been degraded through human activity, drawing on experience and best management practices from different regions.

E. Research networks, regional centres of expertise, and institutional capacity

25. In order to improve implementation of the wise use of peatlands, it is necessary for countries to review and ensure that they have in place the necessary institutional capacity. It is also necessary to provide peatland managers and those responsible for policy related to the wise use and exploitation of peatlands with improved access to information and training facilities, in order to enhance their capacity.
26. The Ramsar Wetland Training Service being established by Wetlands International will provide a mechanism for developing training in peatland management and wise use, so as to support the priority afforded to peatlands under the Convention as a globally threatened wetland type that is under-represented in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

Guidelines for Action

- E1. Networks for research and programme cooperation should be established, involving research institutes and other peatland scientific organizations so as to share knowledge and information and improve understanding of the biodiversity, ecological character, values, and functions of the world's peatlands.
- E2. Research institutes and other peatland scientific organizations should seek opportunities for the development of cooperative scientific and management studies to fill the identified gaps in the knowledge required to implement peatland wise use. The GAP Coordinating Committee (see Guideline G1 below) should assist in this process by reviewing and identifying such gaps.
- E3. Opportunities should be sought for cooperative research to further elucidate the role of peatlands in mitigating the impacts of global climate change, in line with the gaps in knowledge identified by the comprehensive review of "Wetlands and climate change: impacts and mitigation" submitted to Ramsar COP8.
- E4. The creation of Regional Centres of Expertise in the wise use and management of peatlands should be promoted for training and the transfer of knowledge in order to

assist developing countries and those with economies in transition to increase their capacity for implementation of wise use of peatlands.

- E5. Peatlands suitable for restoration and rehabilitation should be identified following the procedures outlined in the *Principles and guidelines on wetland restoration* adopted by Ramsar COP8 (Resolution VIII.16), and research and transfer of technologies for peatland management and the restoration and rehabilitation of appropriate peatlands should be facilitated, particularly for local community use in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.
- E6. Contracting Parties should encourage the establishment and activities of national and local organizations with expertise in peatland management.
- E7. Research into, and development of, appropriate sustainable alternatives to peat in, for example, horticultural use, should be encouraged.

F. International cooperation

- 27. Peatlands are a widely distributed wetland resource worldwide, with many extensive systems crossing geopolitical boundaries. There is much to be gained by Contracting Parties and others sharing their knowledge and expertise in the wise use and sustainable management of this key component of the world's wetlands through international cooperation, in line with the *Guidelines for international cooperation under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands* (Ramsar Handbook no. 9).
- 28. Furthermore, efforts towards the wise use of peatlands can contribute to the delivery of not only the Ramsar Convention but other multilateral environmental agreements, including the CBD, in particular its programme of work on the biological diversity of inland waters, and the UNFCCC.

Guidelines for Action

- F1. Peatland wise use and management issues should be fully addressed in the discussions and resolutions prepared for the meetings of the Conference of the Parties and subsidiary bodies of the Ramsar Convention. These issues should also be taken into account, where appropriate, in other multilateral environmental agreements, notably CBD and UNFCCC, including consideration of joint action plans on peatlands.
 - F2. International cooperation between Contracting Parties and others for global actions developed to address peatland issues should be coordinated in cooperation with peatland stakeholders and other interested parties (see also guideline G1 below).
- 29. Implementation of Guidelines for Action E1-E5 above concerning cooperative action on research and technology transfer for peatland wise use also contributes to the delivery of international cooperation on peatland wise use.

G. Implementation and support

30. In order to assist and coordinate between Contracting Parties, the bodies of the Convention, specialist peatland organizations and others in developing actions for the implementation of these *Guidelines for Global Action on Peatlands*, it will be necessary to establish communication and coordination mechanisms, and for these to review regularly progress and future priorities for global action on peatlands under the Convention and report these to the meetings of the Conference of the Parties.

Guidelines for Action

- G1. A Coordinating Committee for Global Action on Peatlands should be established, as resources permit. The Coordinating Committee should be chaired by the Ramsar Bureau and comprise governments and invited partner organizations and be geographically balanced.
- G2. The GAP Coordinating Committee should develop a global implementation plan which specifies the actions needed for the implementation of these Guidelines, including initiatives and timetables to deliver the priority actions identified by the Guidelines, and track and review the progress of their implementation.
- G3. Contracting Parties and others should assist the GAP Coordinating Committee in identifying sources of funding in order to implement the actions identified in the implementation plan for global action on peatlands.
- G4. The Coordinating Committee should develop and implement a monitoring and reporting procedure to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation of these *Guidelines for Global Action on Peatlands* and their global implementation plan, and report to Ramsar COP9 on the progress, including the progress of the Working Group on Peatland Terminology, Classification, and Biogeography, once established (see Guideline A1 above), and improvements to knowledge of the global peatland resource (see Guidelines A7, A10 and A11).
- G5. The GAP Coordinating Committee should review and prepare for COP9 recommendations on future priorities and implementation of these Guidelines for the 2006-2008 triennium and for subsequent meetings of the Conference of the Parties as appropriate.