



*“People and Wetlands: The Vital Link”*  
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**Guidelines for establishing and strengthening local communities’  
and indigenous people’s participation in the management of  
wetlands**

**I. Introduction**

1. Community involvement and participation in management decision-making for sites included in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites) and other wetlands have been recognised as essential throughout the history of the Ramsar Convention, but very little guidance on this topic is available to the Contracting Parties. In recognition of this, Recommendation 6.3 of Ramsar COP6 (1996) called upon the Contracting Parties *“to make specific efforts to encourage active and informed participation of local and indigenous people at Ramsar listed sites and other wetlands and their catchments, and their direct involvement, through appropriate mechanisms, in wetland management”*, and assigned the Bureau of the Convention (secretariat), working with IUCN-The World Conservation Union, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Caddo Lake Institute (USA) and Kushiro International Wetlands Center (Japan), the task of commissioning case studies and developing guidelines to assist the Contracting Parties in such efforts.
2. These guidelines were conceived with the premise that local and indigenous people’s involvement in wetland management can substantially contribute to effective management practices that further Ramsar’s wise use objectives. As defined by Ramsar COP3 (1987), wise use of wetlands is *“their sustainable utilization for the benefit of mankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem.”* Evidence from the 23 commissioned case studies and other experiences in participatory management indicates that local and indigenous people’s involvement can, if carried out within the full framework of actions encouraged by the Convention, contribute significantly to maintaining or restoring the ecological integrity of wetlands, as well as contributing to community well-being and more equitable access to resources. In practical terms, the Ramsar Convention concept of “wise use” is equivalent to “sustainable use”.
3. These guidelines are intended to assist Contracting Parties in involving local and indigenous people in wetland management in a manner that furthers the wise use objectives of the Convention.
4. Experience has shown that it is advisable to involve local and indigenous people in a management partnership when:
  - a. the active commitment and collaboration of stakeholders are essential for the management of a wetland (e.g., when the wetland is inhabited or privately owned);

- b. access to the natural resources within the wetland is essential for local livelihood, security and cultural heritage; and
  - c. local and indigenous people express a strong interest in being involved in management.
5. The case for local and indigenous people's involvement is even stronger when:
- a. local stakeholders have historically enjoyed customary/legal rights over the wetland;
  - b. local interests are strongly affected by the way in which the wetland is managed;
  - c. decisions to be taken are complex or controversial (e.g., different values need to be harmonised or there is disagreement on the ownership status of the land or natural resources);
  - d. the existing management regime has failed to produce wise use;
  - e. stakeholders are ready to collaborate and request to do so; and
  - f. there is sufficient time to negotiate among stakeholders in advance of management decisions being made.
6. It is not possible to provide a definitive list of criteria that will guarantee successful establishment of local and indigenous people's involvement. The breadth of the term "involvement" (from consultation to devolution of management authority) and the variety of local contexts means that there are few if any prerequisites to establishing participatory management. One consistent factor, however, is the possession of beliefs and values that support the Ramsar concept of "sustainable utilization".
7. Involvement of local and indigenous people in resource management falls within the general resource management approach known as *participatory management*. Terms such as collaborative management, co-management, or joint management are more or less synonymous.
8. In the context of these guidelines, *stakeholders* are taken to be bearers of separate interests and/or contributions for the management of a wetland, with a particular focus on interest groups within local and indigenous communities and the government agencies responsible for wetland management.
9. Note that the reference to "local communities and indigenous people" has been shortened to "local and indigenous people." Also, the term "indigenous people" may vary from country to country. Furthermore, "local" is a relative term; some stakeholders may live at a distance from the wetland (such as migrating fisherfolk or pastoralists) and still have traditional claims to its resources.

## II. Summary of lessons learned from participatory management case studies

10. **Incentives for local and indigenous people's involvement and wise use are essential: everyone must benefit in the long term**
- a. Local and indigenous people benefit from participatory management arrangements through the maintenance of sustainable livelihoods, including activities such as:
    - i. fishing and hunting;

- ii. farming and haying;
  - iii. reed harvesting and collection of forest products;
  - iv. salt extraction;
  - v. recreational uses and ecotourism; and
  - vi. water for domestic consumption.
- b. Other benefits of participatory management for local and indigenous people include:
- i. maintaining spiritual and cultural values associated with a wetland;
  - ii. more equitable access to wetland resources;
  - iii. increased local capacity and empowerment;
  - iv. reduced conflicts among stakeholders; and
  - v. maintaining ecosystem functions (e.g., flood control, improved water quality, etc.).
- c. Government agencies benefit from participatory management arrangements through:
- i. improved ecosystem viability;
  - ii. reduced management costs;
  - iii. assistance with monitoring and surveillance;
  - iv. fewer infringements; and
  - v. enhanced social sustainability and quality of life for communities dependent on wetlands.
- d. Incentives such as tax concessions, subsidies, conservation easements, special arrangements for licenses, increased market access, financial compensation schemes, increased infrastructure, and development activities can, if appropriately structured, further wise use objectives when directed to local and indigenous stakeholders.

**11. Trust among stakeholders is essential and must be developed**

- a. Development of trust among stakeholders takes time, effort and attention. Elements that contribute to building trust include:
- i. a willingness to seek joint objectives cooperatively;
  - ii. mutual effort;
  - iii. mutual respect;
  - iv. open and ongoing communication;
  - v. clear and realistic expectations about process outcomes;
  - vi. satisfactory and timely completion of agreed tasks;
  - vii. following through on commitments; and
  - viii. participation of all sectors of the community.
- b. Participatory management works best when stakeholders' interests are openly stated.
- c. Clearly stated terms of reference and objectives assist in the establishment of management partnerships.

- d. Participatory management processes require strong facilitation that builds trust among stakeholders. Independent brokers with strong leadership skills are most effective (often this is a role for NGOs).
- e. Appropriate legal or policy frameworks (such as the right to organize, legal recognition of NGOs, conservation easements, etc.) assist in the establishment of participatory management arrangements.
- f. Forums, study groups, and workshops can be useful means to increase shared understanding of Ramsar principles and the value of resources being conserved or sustainably used.

**12. Flexibility is required**

- a. There is no one level of local and indigenous people's involvement that fits all contexts.
- b. There is no one approach or recipe that will make the process work in all contexts.
- c. For participatory management regimes to be successful, it may be necessary to meet basic development needs in the process of pursuing wise use objectives.
- d. "Learning by doing" approach (i.e., ongoing assessment of process and outcomes) allows for re-orientation as needed.

**13. Knowledge exchange and capacity building are fundamental**

- a. Government agencies often require capacity building in participatory management approaches, such as those specified below for stakeholders.
- b. Stakeholders often require capacity building in:
  - i. establishing and maintaining appropriate organizations;
  - ii. effective relations with government agencies;
  - iii. negotiating and contributing to decision-making;
  - iv. technical aspects of wetland management and Ramsar's principles;
  - v. monitoring of wetland ecology and identifying changes in ecological character;
  - vi. evaluation of participatory processes; and
  - vii. elaboration and design of project proposals to obtain funding.
- c. Local environmental knowledge can make a significant contribution to wetland management strategies, especially when blended with the best available science.
- d. Engaging local stakeholders in site monitoring and process evaluation makes a valuable and substantive contribution to achieving participatory conservation objectives.
- e. A multidisciplinary approach utilizing biological and social science expertise is vital for establishing participatory management regimes.

- f. Site monitoring can take advantage of a “marginal cost” approach: technical experts may be engaged, and established facilities (such as university laboratories) may be used at minimal cost.
- g. Networking mechanisms such as regular meetings, newsletters, and radio programmes fulfil information exchange and educational purposes.
- h. Basic Ramsar concepts, stewardship principles and ecological values can be conveyed through the educational curriculum of local schools.
- i. Wetland Centres can:
  - i. catalyse active and informed participation of local and indigenous people;
  - ii. serve as demonstration sites for sustainable wetland management;
  - iii. support formal, informal and non-formal educational programs that involve a wide range of stakeholders;
  - iv. help to bring local and indigenous people’s concerns to the attention of decision-makers; and
  - v. provide information and advice on wetlands and their management.

**14. Continuity of resources and effort is important**

- a. Establishing participatory management takes time.
- b. As with any management regime, participatory management may never be fully self-financing.
- c. Financing through donor and/or government channels is important for sustainability.
- d. Appropriate legal and policy frameworks at national and local levels contribute to continuity.
- e. High-level political support, ideally from a number of the appropriate Ministries, is important for maintaining government commitment to participatory management regimes.

**III. Engaging local and indigenous people**

15. When involving local and indigenous people in the participatory process, those who facilitate or coordinate such efforts should:
- a. Ensure that all stakeholders understand the role of the facilitators/ coordinators.
  - b. Regularly verify that all stakeholders agree upon the basic objectives of the initiative.
  - c. Raise awareness of wetland conservation and sustainability issues. Involve local and indigenous people in preparing and running awareness-raising activities.

- d. Ensure the involvement of influential individuals in the community and all sectors of the population, and especially the women and youth of the community.
- e. Encourage stakeholder ownership of the process and participatory management arrangements, ensuring that no key participants are excluded.
- f. Involve and strengthen local organizations and traditional structures that represent different stakeholders among local and indigenous people. Assist in the establishment of such organizations if they do not already exist.
- g. Develop local capacity including organizational and negotiating skills, keeping of records and financial accounts, and conflict management, and provide (as necessary) the meeting place, telephone access, basic equipment, and transportation.
- h. Ensure that persons acting as facilitators and coordinators are properly trained in participatory assessment and planning techniques and possess the necessary facilitation skills.
- i. Work with public-sector stakeholders to build capacity for developing and administering participatory management processes.
- j. Ensure that key parties have a clear understanding of each other's needs, responsibilities and limitations.
- k. Ensure that local and indigenous people learn participatory assessment and planning techniques so that they can be applied to other community concerns.
- l. Ensure that all commitments are met.
- m. Develop a site monitoring and process testing programme using local resources to check progress.
- n. Ensure that tasks taken up by various stakeholders are within their capabilities.
- o. Keep funding agencies aware of issues and progress of participatory management approaches.
- p. Establish networks among communities involved in wetland management and encourage regular contact and sharing of experiences.
- q. Support the application of traditional knowledge to wetland management including, where possible, the establishment of centres to conserve indigenous and traditional knowledge systems.

#### **IV. Measuring local and indigenous people's involvement**

16. The following list is a brief, non-exhaustive checklist of indicators that can assist to measure the extent of local and indigenous people's involvement. The sections below correlate with those in Section II (paragraphs 10-14) to assist cross-reference.

17. **Incentives**

- a. Local and indigenous people have achieved an economic stake or other interest in the wise use of wetland resources.
- b. The government agency has stated policies supporting participatory management.
- c. Appropriate legal and financial incentives for participatory management are in place.
- d. A more equitable sharing of benefits among stakeholders has resulted from the participatory management process.
- e. Stakeholders have expressed satisfaction with their involvement in the process.

18. **Trust**

- a. There is a clearly stated and widely known policy or legal document that makes a commitment to involving local and indigenous people.
- b. All key stakeholders (particularly government) acknowledge participatory management as legitimate and desirable.
- c. Local and indigenous people are now involved in making substantive decisions affecting the wetland resource use and management.
- d. Local organizations to advance participatory management are respected within the community.
- e. Representatives of the local and indigenous people are truly representative and accountable to them.
- f. There are resource use and participation rules which are appropriate to the local situation.
- g. A management agreement exists between stakeholders (oral or written, formal or informal).
- h. The management agreement has clearly defined boundaries and membership.
- i. The management agreement specifically defines stakeholders' functions, rights and responsibilities.
- j. The management agreement has been approved by at least the resource-using stakeholders and key decision-making groups.
- k. Parties to the agreement meet their commitments.
- l. Non-compliance with approaches, rules, rights, and responsibilities outlined in the management agreement is deemed to be at an acceptable level.

- m. Any system of graduated sanctions for infringement of rules has been agreed upon by all key parties.
- n. There is evidence that resource management controls are being implemented.

19. **Flexibility**

- a. There is the potential for collective modification of the rules relating to resource use by those affected.
- b. There are “nested” management units (different bodies at different levels).
- c. There is evidence that the local and indigenous people can influence the speed and direction of change in relation to the resources with which they are concerned.
- d. Facilitators/coordinators practice “learning by doing” and adaptive management.

20. **Knowledge exchange and capacity building**

- a. There is an awareness among stakeholders of new management approaches, rules, rights, and responsibilities.
- b. There is a two-way flow of information and communication between local and indigenous people and relevant government agencies.
- c. Information reaches local and indigenous people in a timely and accurate manner, and in a form which is readily understandable.
- d. Local and indigenous people participate in site monitoring and in evaluation of the participatory process.
- e. There is evidence of respect by key government agencies for local human systems and local ecological knowledge.
- f. Stakeholders are demonstrating necessary skills and empowerment (e.g., capacity to make decisions, monitoring skills, etc.).
- g. Measurement methods, established by the stakeholders, demonstrate and quantify the degree to which local participation was intended to, and actually has improved or conserved the recognized “functions and values” of the wetland and its wise use.

21. **Continuity**

- a. There are one or more organizational structures that facilitate local and indigenous people’s involvement (e.g., a council, management body, women’s group, etc.).



- b. A random sample of local and indigenous people are able to identify the community's role in wetland management, and the individuals who are directly involved can accurately describe the objective of their involvement.
- c. The government agency and its staff have a demonstrated commitment to participatory management, and can accurately describe the objective of local and indigenous people's involvement.
- d. There is an appropriately long-term source of funding for ongoing participation and resource management.
- e. Local and indigenous people have provided in-kind support (time, labour, traditional knowledge and expertise) to implement the participatory management agreement.
- f. Conflict management mechanisms exist, and there is an appeals process in case of conflicts within the management partnership.
- g. There is integration between local wetland management and management of the entire catchment.

## V. Testing the participatory approach

22. Local participation in wetland management is a tool for advancing the Convention's objective to achieve wise use of all wetlands. Administrative Authorities of the Ramsar Convention, managers, and process facilitators and coordinators need to be aware of existing wise use guidance and need to continuously apply this guidance in the participatory management decision-making process. The decision-making process should, at each stage, consider the implications of actions in terms of the following Ramsar standards and principles:
- a. Ramsar's Wise Use Guidelines (Recommendation 4.10 and Resolution 5.6);
  - b. Ramsar's Management Planning Guidelines (Resolution 5.7);
  - c. Monitoring ecological character of the site (Article 3; Recommendation 5.2, Resolution VI.1, and Resolution VII.10).
  - d. Standards for managing for wise use:
    - i. there is an increase or maintenance of species diversity, size of wetland area, and water quality;
    - ii. resource use is sustainable;
    - iii. the precautionary principle is being applied;
    - iv. cost-benefit analyses consider wetland functional values;
    - v. the participatory process takes a catchment perspective and decisions within that framework consider what is best for the wetland(s); and
    - vi. degradation of wetlands has been replaced by efforts to restore and rehabilitate them.