

Agenda item 8.12

The Ramsar Convention and the conservation and sustainable use of fish resources

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to consider and approve the attached draft Resolution for consideration by COP9.

Note by the Ramsar Secretariat

1. Action 1.2.6 of the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2003-2008 calls for an assessment of “the contribution of Ramsar sites and other wetlands to the maintenance of fisheries, including utilizing information available from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) and other assessment programmes, and [recommendation of] sustainable management practices which can contribute to the WSSD target of, where possible by 2015, maintaining or restoring depleted fish stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield.”
2. In its 2003-2005 Work Plan, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) identified fisheries and wetlands as an important strategic issue which has yet to be substantively considered by the Convention, and decided that it should seek to undertake a task (STRP task 1.10) to respond to Action 1.2.6 of the Strategic Plan.
3. In order to assist the STRP in responding to this action, IUCN, WWF and the WorldFish Centre generously provided initial funding for the preparation of a background report, which it is anticipated will be published after further review by the STRP as a *Ramsar Technical Report*, and have worked with the STRP to prepare a draft Resolution on the issue, along with sustainable fisheries management practice recommendations.
4. The 12th meeting of the STRP reviewed these materials and (in Decision STRP12-13) agreed that the draft Resolution text should be brought to the 31st meeting of the Standing Committee as a separate text focusing on its wise use aspects. The STRP considered that other issues relating to the efficacy of applying current fish Criteria (7 and 8) for the designation of Ramsar sites should be incorporated in the Ramsar site designation aspects of the proposed COP9 DR on future scientific and technical implementation priorities (DOC. SC31-16).
5. The Standing Committee may also wish to note that an element of the increasing collaboration with the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in the coming year will be the preparation by the Institute of a specific report to the Ramsar Convention as part of its Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture (CA). The STRP has prepared a list of questions from a Ramsar perspective to guide this work, which covers, *inter alia*, capture fisheries and aquaculture issues.

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COP9 DR4

The Ramsar Convention and the conservation and sustainable use of fish resources

1. RECOGNIZING the important role that inland, coastal and near-shore marine wetlands play in supporting fish populations and fisheries;
2. CONSCIOUS that fishing is of great social, cultural and economic importance throughout the world;
3. RECOGNIZING that fish are a vital food source for people everywhere, and CONCERNED that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) has reported that fish yields in many parts of the world are declining due to unsustainable harvest, habitat degradation, and loss of fish spawning and nursery grounds, as well as feeding and refuge areas;
4. CONCERNED by the loss of fish species and the increasing number of fish species recognized in the IUCN Red List as globally threatened, and AWARE of the important role that some Ramsar sites play in the conservation of endangered fish fauna;
5. RECALLING the relevance of the guidance adopted by the Convention on integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management (Resolution VII.18) and coastal zone management (Resolution VIII.4) to securing the integrated management of wetland ecosystems upon which fish and fisheries depend;
6. ALSO RECALLING that Resolution VIII.2 “ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties, wherever possible and appropriate, to take the necessary steps in order to maintain the migration access for indigenous fish and other species past dams”;
7. COMMENDING those Parties that have taken actions to conserve or restore native fish populations through habitat restoration, the provision of fish passages around in-stream infrastructure, the control of invasive alien species competitors, and/or the reduction of water pollution impacts;
8. NOTING the widespread growth in aquaculture, its potential benefits and environmental costs, and the need for careful planning and management to avoid negative impacts upon native fish stocks and wetland ecosystems;
9. AWARE of the adoption by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the *Code of conduct for responsible fisheries* (1995) and its subsequent associated range of Technical Guidelines, and the recognition that these give to the need to promote sustainable use of fish resources and to mitigate impacts of aquaculture practices;
10. ALSO AWARE of the ongoing work of the Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture (CA) led by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and its relevance to issues of wetlands, capture fisheries and aquaculture;

11. NOTING the ongoing preparation of the *Principles for a Code of Conduct for the Management and Sustainable Use of Mangrove Ecosystems*, including the review of the draft Principles at Ramsar COP9 regional preparatory meetings for Africa, the Americas and Asia, and RECOGNIZING the importance of reflecting several of these principles in national legislation and policies;
12. RECALLING that Action 1.2.6 of the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2003-2008 calls for an assessment of “the contribution of Ramsar sites and other wetlands to the maintenance of fisheries, including utilizing information available from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) and other assessment programmes, and [recommendation of] sustainable management practices which can contribute to the WSSD target of, where possible by 2015, maintaining or restoring depleted fish stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield”; and
13. NOTING the role played by The WorldFish Center as advocates and technical advisors in relation to fish resources and sustainable fisheries; and THANKING The WorldFish Centre, IUCN and WWF, working with the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, for their financial support for the implementation of Strategic Plan Action 1.2.6 through the preparation of a Review of Ramsar Sites and Fisheries Maintenance, to be published as a *Ramsar Technical Report*, and the outline issues and recommendations concerning wetlands and the conservation and sustainable use of fish resources annexed to this Resolution;

THE CONFERENCE OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES

14. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties and others to take into account the recommendations annexed to this Resolution, adapted as appropriate for national and local conditions, when addressing issues of the sustainable use of fish resources in relation to the conservation and wise use of Ramsar sites and other wetlands;
15. URGES Contracting Parties to review their policy frameworks and institutional arrangements, in line with Resolutions VII.6 on National Wetland Policies and VII.7 on reviewing laws and legislation, so as to ensure that fisheries management authorities and those involved with conserving and/or managing aquatic biodiversity are aware of, complement and support national, subnational and local efforts to implement the Convention;
16. REQUESTS fisheries authorities responsible for managing fisheries within, adjacent to, or associated with Ramsar sites to ensure that the ecological character of the Ramsar site (or sites) is maintained;
17. URGES Contracting Parties and others to use the habitat and species conservation provisions of the Convention to support the introduction and/or continuance of spatial management approaches for fisheries, particularly in coastal and marine fisheries;
18. REQUESTS those responsible for the management of Ramsar sites to incorporate into their management planning processes, in line with Resolution VIII.14 on management planning, measures to maintain the ecological services of wetlands in support of ecologically sustainable fisheries;

19. REQUESTS Contracting Parties to review and, where necessary, enhance national and regional programmes for the systematic collection of data on fisheries, including artisanal fisheries, and data on aquaculture, of relevance to Ramsar sites and associated areas;
20. URGES Contracting Parties to take the necessary steps within their frameworks for integrated river basin and coastal zone management to maintain or reinstate fish migration pathways, to reduce the impacts of point source and diffuse pollution in all its forms, to establish and implement environmental flow allocations supporting the conservation of fish, to protect critical spawning and nursery grounds, and to restore relevant habitats where these have become degraded, taking into account the guidance adopted in Resolutions VIII.1 on water allocation, VIII.4 on ICZM, and VIII.32 on mangrove ecosystems;
21. URGES Contracting Parties carefully to control aquaculture (pond and cage culture) practices in Ramsar sites and in areas that are liable to impact on Ramsar sites and other wetlands so as to prevent damage to resident fish stocks and to the aquatic environment, applying the provisions of the 1997 FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries – Aquaculture Development and the 2000 Bangkok Declaration and Strategy for Aquaculture Development (Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA)/FAO)) and taking into account the draft Principles for a Code of Conduct for the Management and Sustainable Use of Mangrove Ecosystems;
22. STRONGLY URGES each Contracting Party to fully enforce existing policies and legislation to suspend any promotion, creation of new facilities, or expansion of unsustainable aquaculture activities harmful to coastal wetlands, in line with Resolution VII.21 on intertidal wetlands;
23. REQUESTS Contracting Parties with mangrove ecosystems in their territories, taking into account the provisions of Resolution VIII.32, to review and, as appropriate, to modify any of their national policies and strategies that have or could have harmful effects on these ecosystems, and to implement measures to protect and restore the services of these ecosystems for human populations, recognizing their rights, uses and traditional customs and the maintenance of biodiversity, and to cooperate at the international level to agree regional and global strategies for the maintenance of these ecosystems;
24. STRONGLY URGES each Contracting Party to review its policies, laws and programmes for regulating the import of fish for aquaculture and the aquarium trade to avoid introduction of invasive alien species, and to undertake the necessary measures to prevent the introduction or spread of known invasive fish species, in line with Resolution VIII.18;
25. REQUESTS the Ramsar Secretariat to draw attention to the important role of wetlands in fish conservation and sustainable use through its ongoing CEPA activities, and in particular through future World Wetlands Day celebrations and events;
26. REQUESTS the Secretary General to pursue appropriate partnerships with expert bodies or organizations, such as The WorldFish Center and FAO, that are concerned with fish conservation and sustainable use so as to further expand and gain prominence for the role of the Ramsar Convention in this area; and

27. REQUESTS the STRP to consider ways and means of elaborating the annex to this Resolution, taking into account the findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), the Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture (CA), and other relevant assessments, in order to provide further guidance for Contracting Parties on wetlands and sustainable fisheries.

Annex

Issues and recommendations for Contracting Parties concerning the management of sustainable fisheries in Ramsar sites and other wetlands

Note: these recommendations cover issues in both inland and coastal fisheries, but do not directly address off-shore fisheries.

Issue 1: Aquaculture

- Aquaculture is practised in many Ramsar sites and in the waters adjacent to such sites, and is sensitive to social, economic and technological changes that can impact on the nature of associated wetlands. Aquaculture also carries with it many risks to the environment and to fish, and conversion of, for example, natural mangrove systems to aquaculture can greatly reduce the total economic value of the ecosystem services to people.

Aquaculture (pond and cage culture) practices in Ramsar sites or in areas that are liable to impact on Ramsar sites should be carefully controlled. Specifically, governments should enforce relevant national legislation, apply the provisions of the FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries – Aquaculture Development (FAO 1997), the Bangkok Declaration and Strategy for Aquaculture Development (NACA/FAO 2000), and the Principles for a Code of Conduct for the Management and Sustainable use of Mangrove Ecosystems.

Issue 2: Rice cultivation

- Rice cultivation is practised at many Ramsar sites, and there are opportunities to improve the total yield of such areas by “rice-fish” systems in these and other wetlands cultivated for rice.

The significance for fisheries of rice cultivation within Ramsar sites should be further explored and documented and a more efficient combination of “rice-fish” management practices promoted.

Issue 3: Management of fisheries

- Fisheries management based on central governmental control has generally failed to halt the degradation of fished stocks. Co-management systems are an alternative that allows better participation of stakeholders in the management process.

Participatory management in appropriate sites should be encouraged and facilitated by revising any existing laws and regulations that exclude it, supporting research, and establishing suitable management systems at international, national and basin levels.

- Co-management systems are frequently difficult to establish because of social traditions, land and water use practices and legislation.

Fisheries legislation and regulations should enable stakeholders to participate in formulation of policies for the management of the resource and to ensure that the benefits of the fishery are distributed equitably among stakeholders.

- Growing numbers of entrants to a fishery can mean that the resource is increasingly overfished.

Measures should be adopted to control access to fisheries of Ramsar sites and other wetlands where they are not already in place.

- By-catch of globally-threatened and other wetland-dependent species in fishing gear (such as turtles and waterbirds in gill-nets) continues to threaten the survival of these species.

Measures should be put in place to minimize or prevent by-catch through the use of appropriate fishery techniques.

- Ecologically damaging fishing gear continues to be used in many fisheries.

Ecologically damaging fishing gear, including explosives, poisons, electric fishing gear, cross channel barrages that interrupt migration, and dragged gear that destroys the structure and faunal integrity of the bottom, should be banned in Ramsar sites (as everywhere) and such bans enforced.

Issue 4: Management of the fish

- Many inland and coastal fisheries rely increasingly on introductions of exotic fish species and regular stocking programmes. Both these practices involve risk and should be carried out with caution.

A code similar to the ICES Code of Practice on the Introductions and Transfers of Marine Organisms and the GEF/UNDP/IMO International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments should be applied rigorously so that Ramsar sites are not placed at risk through unplanned introductions of aquatic species.

Reasonable practices should be adopted to reduce the risks from unregulated stocking programmes.

Issue 5: Sustainable management of wetland ecosystems for fish

- There is a general decline in the environmental health of most inland and coastal ecosystems caused by the impacts of human uses, declines found by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) to be already more severe and to be occurring at faster rates in these ecosystems than in others. An area of major concern is the increasing withdrawal of water from inland systems that is affecting the functioning of rivers and the hydrological balance of lakes and coastal waters.

Environmental flow assessments in all rivers and associated wetlands that are threatened by flow-modifying activities such as the construction of dams, leveeing of river channels, and water abstractions should include specific attention to fish and fisheries related aspects (see also Resolution VIII.1 and [COP9 DR1 Annex C]).

Strategies for the mitigation of negative impacts on the environment from the activities of other users of the aquatic resource should be formulated. Where such impacting uses have ceased, the possibility of rehabilitation of damaged ecosystems should be explored (with reference to COP8 Resolution VIII.16).

The establishment of formal conservation and harvest reserves within selected sites of importance to fisheries should be considered.

Issue 6: Conflicts and multi-purpose use

- A number of human uses compete with fisheries for water and aquatic environmental resources at Ramsar sites.

Local, national and international mechanisms should be established whereby allocation of essential resources for the protection of fish and fisheries are negotiated among all users of the resource. Similar mechanisms are needed for the resolution of conflicts between competing uses.

Issue 7: Increasing awareness of the importance of wetland management for fisheries

- There is an urgent need to ensure wider and better understanding of the importance of maintaining both coastal and inland wetlands for the benefit of fisheries maintenance.

Training programmes should be carried out under the Convention's programme on communication, education and public awareness (CEPA) to promote mutual understanding of the problems of the diverse sectors involved with wetland management and conservation including fisheries.

- Coastal and inland water fishers are often small scale and need support.

Self-motivated initiatives such as community outreach, wildlife monitoring, codes of conduct, certification and education, and awareness raising should be fostered within fishing communities fishing within, adjacent to or in ways which impact upon Ramsar sites.

Issue 8: Enhancing international cooperation

- Maintenance of fisheries in shared wetlands and seas needs the countries concerned to develop enhanced collaboration.

Countries sharing rivers, coastal lagoons, seas and lakes with significant fisheries should seek to establish common mechanisms for research, information sharing and management of their fish and fisheries. If possible such mechanisms should be incorporated into existing institutions, but where no such institutions exist, measures should be taken to establish them.

Issue 9: Applying existing international agreements

- The application of a number of international agreements and existing guidance can help to ensure that fisheries in or affecting Ramsar sites and other wetlands are sustainable.

The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (FAO, 1995) and its various Technical Guidelines should be taken as the guiding principles in regulating marine and freshwater fisheries and aquaculture. Technical guidelines cover: 1. Fishing operations (1996); 2. Precautionary approach to

capture fisheries and species introductions (1996); 3. Integration of fisheries into coastal area management (1996); 4. Fisheries management (1997); 5. Aquaculture development (1997); 5. (supplement 1) Aquaculture development: good aquaculture feed manufacturing practice (2001); 6. Inland Fisheries (1997); 7. Indicators for sustainable development of marine capture fisheries. (1999); 8. Responsible fish utilization. (1998); 9. Implementation of the International Plan of Action to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (2002), and 10. the ecosystem-approach to fisheries.

Management strategies for the conservation of fisheries and fish species especially in relation to Ramsar sites should take into account any endangered species listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), in accordance with the application of Criterion 2 of the Ramsar Strategic Framework and Guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Resolution VII.11)], as amended by COP9 DR1 – Annex D].

Issue 10: The status of fisheries in Ramsar sites

- Information on most fisheries pursued in or affecting Ramsar sites, as supplied in Ramsar Information Sheets, is sparse and generally qualitative. However, the information which does exist confirms that fisheries are practised in many Ramsar sites or in the larger wetland ecosystems with which Ramsar sites are associated. It is clear that Ramsar sites and their associated systems also provide employment to many commercial fishers and subsistence fishers and collectors. Available evidence suggests that inland and small-scale coastal fisheries, of the type that presently dominate in Ramsar sites, are generally heavily exploited and are over-fished.

National and regional programmes for the systematic collection of fisheries data at Ramsar sites and associated areas should be initiated or reinforced. As a minimum this should include data on weight and size of catch, numbers and effort of fishermen, and social and economic aspects of the fishery.

Issue 11: Coverage of the Ramsar site network for fish

- Since Criteria 7 and 8 for the designation of Ramsar sites for fish were adopted at the 6th Conference of the Contracting Parties (1996), 264 Ramsar sites have been designated using these Criteria (as of 21 April 2005), although these occur in only 77 of the current 145 Contracting Parties. It is clear that for fish the Ramsar site network is not yet the coherent and comprehensive national and international network envisaged by the 1999 *Strategic Framework*. Some systems lack representative sites to cover essential habitats for some important fish species.

Additional Ramsar sites should be designated, especially by those Contracting Parties that have not yet designated Ramsar sites under Criteria 7 and/or 8, to complete the global network of sites of international importance for their fish populations.