

**Agenda item 12.7**

**Ramsar Sites Information Service**

**Action requested:** The Standing Committee is invited to note, and provide comments on, the approaches outlined for the further development of the Ramsar Sites Information Service.

1. The Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS), which includes the Ramsar Sites Database, is maintained and developed for the Convention by Wetlands International, under contract from the Ramsar Secretariat. A comprehensive progress report on the developments and future opportunities and priorities for the delivery and enhancement of the RSIS was provided to Contracting Parties at COP9 in COP9 DOC. 22 (*Enhancing the information on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites): the role of the Ramsar Sites Information Service*).
2. The designation of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites) forms the key second “pillar” of the implementation of the Convention. The RSIS serves to deliver topical and publicly-available information on the increasing network of designated Ramsar sites. At its core is the Ramsar Sites Database, which maintains a coded searchable and analyzable source of the information provided by Contracting Parties in their largely textual Information Sheets on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS) when designating or updating information on Ramsar sites.
3. During the past triennium, substantial developments of the RSIS took place, notably:
  - i) providing online Web access to the increasing suite of data and information available on designated Ramsar sites;
  - ii) making available online access to the searchable Ramsar Sites Database;
  - iii) making available online copies of the full RISs, including maps, for all Ramsar sites;
  - iv) creating access to all Ramsar site information through an interactive map-based open GIS system (“Web-mapper”); and
  - v) initiating the provision of Ramsar site boundaries on this ‘Web-mapper’.
4. The full Ramsar Sites Information Service is available on line on: <http://www.wetlands.org/RSDB/Default.htm> and a CD-ROM of the RSIS was distributed to Contracting Parties at COP9. Standing Committee members are urged to visit the Web site so as to familiarize themselves with the range of information and products that the Service currently provides.
5. A number of these developments, including the implementation of a wetland inventory meta-database as called for in Resolution VIII.6 and the ‘Web-mapper’, have been made possible through additional co-financing acquired by Wetlands International for the implementation of related projects which support Ramsar Convention implementation, notably the European Space Agency (ESA) “GlobWetland” project, which is developing remote sensing tools and information for wetland managers on 50 Ramsar sites worldwide.

6. The Ramsar Sites Information Service and its database provide the tool for a number of key Convention purposes, including:
  - i) acting as an important component of the Convention's communications, education and public awareness work, through providing publicly-accessible profiling of the suite of Ramsar sites as a widely recognized and high profile element of Convention implementation;
  - ii) delivering the Secretariat's reporting obligations to Contracting Parties at COPs under Article 8 of the Convention text and under COP decisions notably concerning Ramsar site designation and update status, matters related to Article 3.2 and Articles 3.5 and 4.2, and for global and regional implementation report analyses;
  - iii) providing an information source and library/archive function for maintaining and accessing the formal Ramsar site materials provided by Contracting Parties under their Ramsar site designation obligations;
  - iv) providing the source material for analyses of the distribution and characteristics of the Ramsar site network in support of Parties' application of and progress towards the objectives of the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance*;
  - v) providing the source material for the implementation and analysis of a number of the ecological 'outcome-oriented' indicators of the effectiveness of the Convention (see COP9 Resolution IX.1 Annex D) which are under further development by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel, and in relation to reporting on the status and trends of wetlands, which is assuming increased priority under the Convention notably in relation to the CBD/WSSD 2010 biodiversity target of "significantly reducing the rate of loss of biodiversity"; and
  - vi) providing the source material for an increasing number of related processes and fora seeking to access Ramsar site information as a key component of innovative analysis and assessment, such as the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) protected area analyses and assessment in relation to other socio-economic datasets, such as poverty mapping or river basin status and health.
7. It is planned that work under the Ramsar Sites Information Service contract during the next years will focus on:
  - i) maintaining and keeping up-to-date the core Ramsar Sites Database, and further developing its functionality including *inter alia* opportunities for linking with taxonomic data systems for species lists for sites, holding time-series information, and improving searchability for certain wetland habitat types;
  - ii) seeking to further acquire from Contracting Parties and to populate the 'Web-mapper' with the data layer of digital Ramsar site boundaries, at present available for only two countries – UK and Hungary (noting also that GIS-based site boundary data is one of the most sought-after aspects of Ramsar site information for onward analyses); and

- iii) increasing attention to delivering value-added products to Contracting Parties by utilizing the Ramsar Sites Database for more targeted analyses supporting Parties in their establishment of strategies and priorities for, and delivery of, achieving the coherent and comprehensive national and international networks of Ramsar sites as called for by objectives of the *Strategic Framework* and by Resolution VIII.10. These will include, *inter alia*, distributional and gap analyses of designated sites in relation to different features and types of the wetland resource, including wetland habitat types and wetland-dependent species.
- 8. The core budget funding available for the Ramsar Sites Information Service work this triennium is CHF 160,000 for 2006 and for 2007, and CHF 170,000 for 2008, lower than the budget allocations for this work in the previous triennium. To accommodate the above future work priorities under this level of funding, the preparation of the “Ramsar Sites Directory” entries for each Ramsar site will cease, as foreshadowed in COP9 DOC. 22. This secondary, interpreted, product summarizing available information on each Ramsar site has formed an increasingly costly and time-consuming element of the contracted work in the past triennium. Its utility has now been superseded by a combination of factors, notably the now well-established standard format RIS providing the primary information source for each site, and the Web access to this RIS information, and the Annotated Ramsar List with its short summaries of the key features of each Ramsar site available in hard copy and on the Ramsar Web site.
- 9. Resolution IX.12 paragraph16 “REQUESTS the Secretariat to investigate ways and means of managing the database needs of the Convention in a manner which reduces the line item for the Ramsar Sites Database.” As a response to the request, the Secretariat, Wetlands International, and the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) have initiated discussions on how a more consortium-based approach (involving these organizations and/or others) might be best developed in future to deliver the priority areas of Ramsar Sites Information Service work in a cost-effective manner. It is also likely that the Global Biodiversity Informatics Facility (GBIF) will become involved in the consortium efforts.
- 10. Issues under consideration include examination of the cost-benefits of the maintenance of the core Ramsar Sites Database continuing with Wetlands International in the Netherlands, moving it to another organization such as UNEP-WCMC, or managing it directly by the Ramsar Secretariat in Switzerland, in relation to each organization’s future priorities and capacity; and how best to develop the products outlined in paragraph 7. iii above, drawing on the expertise and knowledge-bases of each of these organizations and others.
- 11. Any further progress on these and related discussions will be reported to the Standing Committee during its 34<sup>th</sup> meeting.