

Agenda item 5

Activities with International Organization Partners
“Watching the Wetlands”

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to consider and provide comments on the proposed initiative.

Note by the Ramsar Secretariat

This working paper, referred to in DOC. SC35-3, provides information on the current and ongoing development by the Convention’s five International Organisation Partners (IOPs) of a joint initiative which would be designed to support the work of the Convention in various aspects of activity on wetland monitoring issues. It also provides an up-to-date review of wetland monitoring issues for the Convention. The paper has been provided by Dave Pritchard of RSPB/BirdLife International on behalf of the IOPs.

IOPs site monitoring initiative 3rd version Nov 2006

Watching the Wetlands

Wetland monitoring - existing processes, and future action ideas

A joint review by the Ramsar Convention International Organisation Partners

November 2006

Contents

- I. Introduction, IOP initiative concept and purpose of this paper**
 - II. The annexed details, and proposals for action**
 - III. Decisions the IOPs will need to take, informed by discussion with the Secretariat/Standing Committee/STRP, to move a “Watching the Wetlands” initiative forward**
 - IV. Conclusions and next steps**
-
- Annex A Overview of relevant Ramsar systems, provisions and requirements**
 - Annex B Existing IOP activities/processes that could be more targeted towards Ramsar purposes, or could be undertaken on a more coordinated basis**
 - Annex C Potential areas for new IOP activity**
 - Annex D Existing or potential future Ramsar-relevant wetland monitoring activities by IOPs, grouped according to geographical scale**

I. Introduction, IOP initiative concept and purpose of this paper

1. The Ramsar Convention International Organisation Partners, or IOPs (BirdLife International, IUCN – the World Conservation Union, the International Water Management Institute, Wetlands International, and the World Wide Fund for Nature) have proposed giving attention on a joint or coordinated basis, as appropriate, to aspects of monitoring of Ramsar sites, or possibly wetlands more generally.
2. This concept was mooted at a meeting of IOP senior staff with the Ramsar Secretariat on 28 February 2006, was then mentioned during the 34th meeting of the Convention's Standing Committee in March 2006, and has been under discussion since then. The present paper gives an updated position and reviews some aspects of monitoring in Ramsar more generally, as a basis for future action.
3. An IOP initiative of the type canvassed here would fit with a trend in the IOPs towards more coordinated actions. It could, moreover, exemplify an aspect of evolution which should be occurring in respect of Ramsar site activity in current times – from an emphasis on site identification and designation to an emphasis on management, and from an emphasis on deciding how to manage to an emphasis on verifying and evaluating results. There should be more focus on the policy-relevant purposes of monitoring and the ways in which its results trigger appropriate action responses. Several steps in recent years have in fact been bringing the Convention closer to having a properly interrelated suite of mechanisms for the operation of inventories, objectives, targets, implementation plans, monitoring, assessment, indicators, reporting and responses, as a coherent package.
4. The Convention has established a number of formal processes for setting standards and collating information on wetland monitoring by Parties. Each IOP is involved in different ways with activities that are relevant to wetland monitoring in relation to Ramsar sites and other wetlands, in the course of their existing work. Extensive contributions to delivering the Convention's agenda, including assistance to Parties, are therefore already being made.
5. This paper identifies elements of an approach that could take a more integrated overview of the issue, and would help to channel information and advice that IOPs can generate, or facilitate, in the most coherent and effective way. This would be done with a close eye also on the practical end-uses of the information resulting from monitoring, and on options for responding to what it reveals.
6. There is a distinction to draw between “monitoring” (which is related to objectives or a hypothesis) and “surveillance” (which can consist of watchfulness for the unexpected) – but for the purposes of this paper this distinction has been largely ignored, and (while not strictly correct) both concepts are addressed under the umbrella term “monitoring”.

II. The annexed details, and proposals for action

7. Annex A identifies the main Ramsar systems, provisions and requirements that appear to be relevant. This is the only such up-to-date overview of these that has been compiled, and hence this already constitutes a new information product offered from the IOPs to the Standing Committee and Secretariat, as well as being a partial contribution to consideration

by the Scientific & Technical Review Panel (STRP) of its tasks 52 (i) and 52 (iii) (sites information review).

8. Annex B refers to relevant existing activities of the IOPs. Some contributions to Ramsar goals are already being made through these activities, but there is also scope for enhancement, for example by greater targeting towards Ramsar-defined purposes and/or by greater coordination.
9. Potential new activities are described in Annex C. At this stage this is simply a range of options, with no judgement being expressed about priorities, or preferences, or relative feasibility. Obviously not all of these items could be activated at once, and most of them would require time and probably resources to activate. It is also by no means an exhaustive list. The items presented, however, plus one “enhancement” from Annex B that would also constitute new work, together comprise a set of **twelve “potential activity/project concepts”** that could be a basis for further exploration (including working up for presentation to potential funders). For any activities or projects undertaken on a joint basis (as opposed merely to undertaking coordination), issues of ownership, administration, branding and so on would of course need to be addressed, but this paper makes no attempt to discuss these issues.
10. Another possible way of characterising the monitoring sphere, and the IOPs’ (present and potential future) part in it, is given in Annex D – this is only an early indicative draft of a table that would need filling out, if it is seen as a useful tool.
11. Reference is made above to the fact that this paper may itself already constitute some kind of contribution to specific tasks in the current work programme of the STRP. There are opportunities for synergy too between some of the potential activities/projects suggested in Annexes B/C and other parts of the STRP programme (Resolution IX.2), including for example task 54 on monitoring (etc.) of ecological character, task 57 on a review of sites, and task 60 on indicators. This may be an important factor when it comes to considering priorities for taking forward IOP actions from this paper and considering options for resourcing such work.
12. Notwithstanding the synergies that are possible with the engagement of the Convention’s official structures, the concept advanced in this paper is that of an initiative by the IOP group, with whatever distinctive political, fundraising, galvanizing and coordinating added value such a concept may offer.

III. Decisions the IOPs will need to take, informed by discussion with the Secretariat/Standing Committee/STRP, to move a “Watching the Wetlands” initiative forward

13. Clearly, if there is a desire to move forward with the ideas set out in this paper, then a next phase of discussion will need to address the choice of priorities from among the list of suggestions, and address issues of realistic feasibility and resourcing, etc.
14. In discussions so far, some other strategic issues have arisen which pose questions of choice for the way forward, and it would probably be valuable to crystallise a view on each of these as well.

15. **Issue: Ramsar sites or wider?** The suggestions in this paper have arisen primarily from a consideration of needs in respect of Ramsar sites, which may be a way of keeping aspirations within bounds. However, it is for discussion whether the question should extend to all wetlands of international importance, for example, or to wetlands more generally (in which case a number of the specifics would change).
16. In any event, the Listed sites “pillar” of the Convention functions as something of an indicator of the effectiveness of the other two pillars, and monitoring of Ramsar sites is a legitimate part of “performance benchmarking” of the Convention’s aims. In other words, if measures for the “crème de la crème” are not succeeding, then it cannot be true that the Convention overall is succeeding.)
17. **Issue: enhanced targeting/coordination of existing activities, or new projects?** Further consideration by the IOPs is probably required before a clear corporate view can be confirmed on whether a wetland monitoring initiative should be embarked upon that would entail new areas of activity/ projects, or whether instead a concerted effort would be made to identify more clearly those existing activities that relate (or could be made to relate) to Ramsar purposes, and perhaps adding some value to these by more specific tailoring to those purposes, and/or more coordination/harmonisation among the IOP group.
18. **Issue: “coordination” or truly “joint” activities/project(s)?** There is a significant difference between coordination, sharing knowledge and results, giving mutual support, looking for synergies between respective efforts, opportunistic harmonisation of approaches, etc., on the one hand, and genuine joint/collective activity (branded as such, and so on – see para 9 above) on the other. It will need to be clear which of these the IOPs are able to commit to, in light of resourcing and other practical considerations. Intermediate approaches are also possible. One such might be where not all but rather a subset of IOPs participate in a joint effort (and it would need to be clear whether or not they do this in the name of/on behalf of the others, too). Another could be a version of the “harmonisation” approach where the IOPs would seek harmonisation of their respective efforts in a more pro-active sense (e.g., moving to harmonise technical field standards or data-sharing protocols).
19. **Issue: the role of IOPs vis-à-vis the responsibilities of Contracting Parties.** Ramsar Parties are the ones primarily charged with ensuring that various forms of wetland monitoring takes place to fulfil the agreed aims of the Convention. If the IOPs are to engage in an organised way in this arena, there would be a question to decide in relation to how far they would wish to provide primary data and analyses in response to Convention requirements (for global overviews, data for problem-solving, etc.) alongside or in lieu of that provided by Parties, or whether the IOP contribution should instead be channeled towards assisting Parties to do these things, by providing methodological advice, political encouragement or other support. There is a spectrum of perspectives across the different IOPs on these issues.

IV. Conclusions and next steps

20. Irrespective of what proves to be possible with the ideas for potential future activity outlined in this paper, the paper itself already comprises an IOP contribution to the Convention by being an up-to-date review of wetland monitoring issues and a benchmark

for strategic thinking on this issue, especially in the context of STRP work on relevant topics.

21. This paper is being made available to the Secretariat, STRP and Standing Committee so that their views can be received and taken into account.
22. A focused discussion will then be required to arrive at some decisions on the strategic issues identified above, and on aspects worth taking forward (perhaps one or two of the highest priority “activity/project concepts” from Annexes B/C). Following that, a chosen strategy could be worked up and presented in terms of an IOP “initiative”, in order to confirm support within the IOP organisations themselves and from the Ramsar Convention.
23. Throughout, it needs to be borne in mind that taking forward any of the ideas presented here is subject to the availability of capacity and resources.
24. Overall, and as ever, it seems from this review that opportunities exist for the Convention’s International Organisation Partners to set a pioneering lead in this area, and to provide an example of mature institutional functioning fit for 21st Century agendas.

Annex A

Overview of relevant Ramsar systems, provisions and requirements

- A.1. The following is a list of relevant provisions which Parties have adopted or operated to date (noting that some allow for contribution of information that IOPs may be able to provide):
- i) the Framework for designing a wetland monitoring programme (Annex to Resolution VI.1);
 - ii) the Wetland risk assessment framework (Annex to Resolution VII.10) including guidance on early warning indicators;
 - iii) the Guidelines for the rapid assessment of inland, coastal and marine wetland biodiversity (Annex E(i) to Resolution IX.1);
 - iv) monitoring undertaken at individual sites in the framework of management plans for the sites, according to Ramsar management planning guidance (Resolution VIII.14);
 - v) the six-yearly updates of Ramsar Information Sheets (according to Resolution VI.13), while not strictly designed as a monitoring mechanism, will increasingly become an important method for systematically documenting changes, including changes in ecological character, at Ramsar sites;
 - vi) a requirement for monitoring is implied by the Convention text itself, in Article 3.2, and “Article 3.2 reports” should in theory be transmitted when change in the ecological character of Ramsar sites is occurring or is threatened (this process is amplified and reinforced in Resolution VIII.8, which includes reference in its para 12 to the fact that information from NGOs may be a basis for Art 3.2 reports by Parties);
 - vii) the Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the Ramsar List (annexed to Resolution VII.11) includes objective 4.1: “to use Ramsar sites as baseline and reference areas for national, supranational/regional, and international environmental monitoring to detect trends in the loss of biological diversity, climate change, and the processes of desertification”;
 - viii) the Montreux Record and the Ramsar Advisory Missions track events in selected cases;
 - ix) at a strategic level, the performance of the Ramsar site network as a whole can be described in relation to the objectives and targets in the Strategic Framework for the Ramsar List and the Convention’s overall Strategic Plan, and Parties have also been asked to set national-level targets for these;
 - x) Parties’ national reports to each COP often capture both system level and site-specific information on status and changes at sites (a role reinforced by Resolution VIII.8 para 12), information which is reflected in summary in the regional

implementation reports compiled by the Secretariat and in some cases also taken forward into COP Resolutions;

- xi) three of the indicators of effectiveness of implementation of the Convention adopted in Resolution IX.1 Annex D (indicators B, D and E) relate to aspects of the condition of wetland sites;
- xii) qualitative assessments of the kind piloted in 2004 in the MedWet region would also be relevant (no specific proposals advertised at present; but this may feature in operating some parts of the indicators in (x) above);
- xiii) under Resolution VIII.13 paras 12-13, data which is additional to that supplied by Parties (including information on site condition and threats) can be “managed” by the Ramsar Sites Information Service as part of maintenance of the Ramsar Sites Database and of links between it and other sources;

A.2 Two tasks have been mandated concerning strategic reviews of information processes such as those mentioned above:

- i) Resolution VIII.8 para 17 requested the STRP to prepare consolidated guidance on the overall process of detecting, reporting and responding to change in ecological character – this has been incorporated into the “high priority” STRP task defined in para 54 of Resolution IX.2 for the current triennium;
- ii) Resolution VIII.13 para 20 requested the STRP to review sources of information on Ramsar sites, including RISs, site management plans, and data collected under other international instruments, to review the reporting and use of such information, and to make recommendations on opportunities for harmonisation and efficiency – this has been incorporated into the STRP task defined in para 52 (i) of Resolution IX.2 for the current triennium (to which task 52 (iii) is also related).

Annex B

Existing IOP activities/processes that could be more targeted towards Ramsar purposes, or could be undertaken on a more coordinated basis

Some relevant contributions made by IOPs at present

- B.1 The IOPs already make, and historically have made, contributions to several of the processes mentioned in Annex A of this paper (as well as having assisted in designing and securing adoption of several of them).
- B.2 There is a range of involvements in assisting Contracting Parties and others at national level with site monitoring and collation of material for national reports, participation in problem-solving missions, development of national science and policy systems to enable better information management and analysis, and of course field surveys, including relating the findings of the International Waterbird Census to sites.
- B.3 At international level IOPs often assist with transmission of information about changes to sites which can result in mobilisation of responses by or through the Ramsar Secretariat, attention from the COP (including “sites” Resolutions), updating of global datasets, and development of overviews of issues and trends.
- B.4 In the African-Eurasian flyway, the recently commenced “Wings over Wetlands” GEF project, a partnership involving two IOPs (Wetlands International and BirdLife International), will provide a means for carrying out status checks of critical wetland sites for migratory birds at a regional (African-Eurasian) site network level.

Existing activities that could be made more Ramsar-targeted, or could be undertaken in a more coordinated way among the IOPs

- B.5 Concerning potential future developments, a first category to consider might be IOP activities which are currently in place, or are provided for, which could be relevant but are at present not explicitly or fully being directed towards Ramsar site monitoring end-uses; or are not being actively coordinated among the IOPs.
- B.6 **Potential activity/project concept (i): Contributing to Ramsar’s indicators of effectiveness.** One potentially strong area for what is described in para B.4 above would be the contributions that IOPs can make to the Convention’s indicators of effectiveness. Contributions are being made by some of the IOPs at present in respect of conceptual leadership and project management. In future some or all of the IOPs may contribute also in relation to provision or custodianship of data, analysis and reporting.
- B.7 Two examples of the latter are BirdLife International’s Important Bird Areas (IBA) monitoring system (new global protocols recently agreed), and WWF’s site management effectiveness tracking tool. Ways of drawing on both of these for informing a picture of status, trends and performance of Ramsar sites have been discussed over the past year. IBA data are envisaged as feeding in to indicator D (frequency of threats to Ramsar sites), and the WWF tool data to indicator E (sites with successfully implemented conservation or wise use management plans), with a contribution also to indicator D on threats. Details

of this remain to be elaborated in the course of the STRP's continuing indicators work in the current triennium.

- B.8 Wetlands International, under the Ramsar Sites Information Service contract with the Secretariat, undertakes analyses which will help to underpin indicator H (proportion of candidate Ramsar sites designated so far for wetland types/features). WI is also developing indicators on peatlands and on waterbirds and is investigating links between wetland biodiversity and poverty/livelihoods indicators.
- B.9 Work by IOPs on remote sensing in relation to changes in land cover and land use, and potentially also water quantity and quality, may also have application to the Ramsar indicators. The scope for this remains to be clarified.

Annex C

Potential areas for new IOP activity

- C.1 The following initial set of ideas for potential future activity is identified for discussion purposes at this stage. A next step will be to collect views about priorities among these, and about their feasibility and resourcing requirements. “Potential activity/project concepts” are presented here on the following twelve topics (the first of which is the one already described in para B.5 of Annex B above):
- i) Contributing to Ramsar’s indicators of effectiveness
 - ii) Strategic policy-oriented overview
 - iii) Assisting Ramsar Parties to implement monitoring
 - iv) Developing model case examples of coordinated monitoring in practice
 - v) Efficient knowledge and data-sharing among the IOPs
 - vi) Status & trends reviews
 - vii) Alignment of IOPs’ field methods/data management standards & protocols
 - viii) Coordinated response mechanisms
 - ix) IOP data augmenting Ramsar Party data
 - x) “Early alert” information on sites potentially meriting Article 3.2 reports and/or Montreux Record listing
 - xi) Analysing the results of monitoring
 - xii) Communicating the results of monitoring
- C.2 **Potential activity/project concept (ii): Strategic policy-oriented overview.** One possibility might be for the IOPs to take some collective responsibility for animating an agenda for wetland monitoring as a whole, informed both by global perspectives and on-the-ground engagement. There is scope for a more integrated overview to be developed of all the ways in which such monitoring currently happens in the Convention, how it can link to best effect with what happens under other international instruments and processes, and how the full suite of relevant activities might be organised (and if necessary modified) to operate in the most effective way. The scope of monitoring sites vis-à-vis monitoring landscape-scale areas (e.g., river basins) is another issue needing attention. This could be undertaken by means of inputs to the STRP work referred to in paras 7 and 11 of this paper above. The scale and dimensions (and resourcing) of such inputs would need further discussion. (Presentation of para A.1 above may already represent one helpful step!).
- C.3 **Potential activity/project concept (iii): Assisting Ramsar Parties to implement monitoring.** A further area to consider might be the activities referred to in paras 4 and B.2 above where IOPs assist Parties at national level with site monitoring systems or data. This is largely ad hoc, opportunistic and devolved at present. There may however be scope for developing some more “joined-up” thinking about principles, involvement criteria, methods, minimum standards, best practice, demonstration examples, data-sharing protocols, “assistance menus”, etc., to operate in a more explicit way and more consistently over time and among different parts of the world, led by a coordination effort of some kind at global level. Delivery would be by the IOPs’ network presence in-country.
- C.4 **Potential activity/project concept (iv): Developing model case examples of coordinated monitoring in practice.** An alternative approach might be to construct an

initiative for making some more “in-depth” efforts in a sample of situations where capacity would allow, to model approaches for cooperation that others might then choose to emulate elsewhere in due course. (Qualitative surveys such as the MedWet one in 2004 referred to above might be one kind of focus for such an approach, with the Convention’s effectiveness indicators as a potential end use of the results. Long-term “fixed site” monitoring programmes at a few sites, to offer a benchmarking sample-based narrative, might be another – see item (vii) in para A.1 above.)

- C.5 **Potential activity/project concept (v): Efficient knowledge and data-sharing among the IOPs.** There might be measures the IOPs could take in relation to their own coordination (i.e., internally to the group of five organisations), for example to set up some kind of “clearing-house” mechanism or “portal” arrangement for being able to link up knowledge about their respective site monitoring activities or the resulting datasets. Relevant individuals or offices could be charged with seeking enhanced synergies or efficiencies based on what is revealed. (Efforts should perhaps be made in this direction irrespective of the outcome of prioritisation of projects in the present paper.)
- C.6 **Potential activity/project concept (vi): Status & trends reviews.** The IOPs could decide to compile for the Convention (and for wider audiences) an IOP digest of aspects of the “state of Ramsar sites” at intervals, e.g., every COP or every other COP. This could offer a valuable “semi-external” reflection, like a consultancy review, to complement the picture presented by the official organs of the Convention. A discussion would be needed on what material to use as the basis for this, what process to follow for its compilation (including resourcing), and whether it would be designed to meet needs defined by Parties or go further than that. Emphasis could alternatively be put on promoting methodologies for others to use, or peer-reviewing the results of other assessment processes.
- C.7 **Potential activity/project concept (vii): Alignment of IOPs field methods/data management standards & protocols.** Some of the IOPs operate monitoring processes on similar issues to each other (e.g., site threats, management effectiveness) but in which field recording methods and data handling approaches have evolved in parallel. Some alignment, or “translation” cross-referencing, or even harmonisation of such methods and approaches might be achievable. This could in turn lead to coordinated or joint reporting (e.g., to Ramsar COPs) on issues addressed in common (including perhaps the status & trends reviews envisaged by concept (vi) above).
- C.8 **Potential activity/project concept (viii): Coordinated response mechanisms.** The IOPs might consider developing some kind of “rapid response coordination mechanism” in respect of cases of sites where monitoring (in whatever form) reveals problems requiring action. Questions of prioritisation, delegation/division of labour, consensus opinion, creative solution-finding, resource-finding, publicity, participation in Ramsar Advisory Missions, etc., could be addressed in a (loosely) pre-planned way, instead of having to be addressed on a case-by-case reactive basis each time. The IOPs have shown on a number of occasions that the potential for mature cooperation on such things exists, but no anticipatory mechanisms or structures to facilitate it in the most effective way have been put in place.
- C.9 **Potential activity/project concept (ix): IOP data augmenting Ramsar Party data.** More specifically, and bearing in mind paras A.1 (vi) and A.1 (xiii) above, IOPs should be a reliable source of information to supplement that which Parties can generate about issues

at individual sites from time to time. A more systematic approach to activity on this front, and a greater overall level of such activity, should probably be considered. Characterisation of types of relevant information and their availability, procedural protocols, dissemination of advice to networks, coordinated central processing of reports, etc., could form part of this.

- C.10 **Potential activity/project concept (x): “Early alert” information on sites potentially meriting Article 3.2 reports and/or Montreux Record listing.** As an extension of the line of thought in para C.9 above, it would be possible for the IOPs, based on information from within their own networks or on governmental information, to operate a list of cases identified as potentially meriting inclusion in any list of “problem sites” operated more formally by the Convention, such as the Montreux Record or an “Article 3.2 Record”. This could help to pre-organise information needed for these formal decisions. (Some messages on how the official listing might evolve were contained in COP8 DOC. 20 and Resolution VIII.8).
- C.11 **Potential activity/project concept (xi): Analysing the results of monitoring.** It may be that a good use of IOP effort could also lie in the area of analysis of the results of monitoring, whether from work by themselves or by others. This could include the effectiveness indicators issues mentioned above; investigations of what the condition of Ramsar sites in a given country indicate about the state of wetland issues there more generally (potentially against benchmarks devised by the IOPs for this purpose); and so on.
- C.12 **Potential activity/project concept (xii): Communicating the results of monitoring.** In a similar vein to para C.11 above, IOPs may be able to contribute in the area of collation, management and promotion of the results of monitoring, whether from work by themselves or by others. There might for example be scope to assist with ensuring that relevant data gathered through Ramsar-based processes is also used to best effect, e.g., in reporting under other MEAs, or to assist with disseminating reports in different forms appropriate for different/additional wider audiences (i.e., a “CEPA” function), including reports derived from the operation of indicators. It might be appropriate to use such reports in particular to highlight success stories and good practice (i.e., a concept which would be complementary to that described in para C.10 above).

Annex D

DRAFT

**Existing or potential future Ramsar-relevant wetland monitoring activities
by IOPs, grouped according to geographical scale**

It has been suggested that it would be useful to present a tabulation of types of activities, perhaps in the form below. This is an initial draft of categories only at this stage, and they are open to amendment. If it proves feasible, IOP activities would be entered later.

TYPE OF MONITORING ACTIVITY	BIRDLIFE	IUCN	WI	WWF	IWMI
<i>Global level</i>					
Status & trends reviews					
Data for indicators of ecosystem extent					
Aggregated data on site threats					
Aggregated data on site management effectiveness					
Progress with designation of Ramsar sites (including by wetland type)					
Changes in land use/land cover (remote sensing)					
<i>Regional level</i>					
Updates of regional inventories eg MedWet					
Progress with designation of Ramsar sites (including by wetland type)					
Changes in land use/land cover (remote sensing)					
<i>National level</i>					
Status & trends reviews					
Support for implementation of Art 3.2					
Updates of national inventories					
Aggregated data on of site threats					
Aggregated data on site management effectiveness					

Progress with designation of Ramsar sites (including by wetland type)					
National Biodiversity Action Plan targets monitoring					
Indicators adopted at national level					
Changes in land use/land cover (remote sensing)					
<i>Site network level</i>					
Monitoring elements of Flyway initiatives, eg Asia-Pacific, AEWA GEF project					
Input to government monitoring & reporting on Natura 2000 network in EU					
Progress with designation of Ramsar sites					
<i>Basin/ catchment level</i>					
Monitoring elements of basin/catchment projects					
Changes in land use/land cover					
<i>Site level</i>					
Support for implementation of Art 3.2					
Vigilance for activating problem-solving responses (basis for casework; either ad hoc or systematic)					
Other forms of threat monitoring					
Implementation of management objectives, management plans					
Management effectiveness					
Updates of RIS					
Demonstration or flagship site monitoring schemes					
Monitoring outcomes of restoration/compensation projects					
Monitoring outcomes of					

other wise use projects					
Implementation of RAM recommendations					
Status of Montreux Record cases					

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