

Agenda item 5.3

The Frequency and timing of the meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties and of regional meetings

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to review the background paper, which was prepared by Austria with input from the Secretariat, and then consider the draft Resolution submitted by Austria for transmittal to COP10.

Background

1. Resolutions of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention require a great deal of effort to be drafted, prepared, discussed in Standing Committee meetings, negotiated at meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COPs), and eventually adopted by the COP, but following the COPs there is a lengthy gap of implementation and a lack of follow-up activities.
2. While the year of the COP is an extremely time-consuming and overloaded one for engaged Contracting Parties (e.g., Standing Committee members) and for the Secretariat, because of two SC meetings, six regional meetings, and the COP meeting itself, and for Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) as well, the subsequent two years remain without comparable follow-up work with further meetings to continue what was prepared under such stress. Besides the SC meetings, there are no other international or regional coordinating meetings within the Convention for a long time period.
3. Many Parties feel that there is too much focus on drafting new global resolutions and guidelines while implementation of existing ones is still insufficient on regional and national levels. A mid-way regional meeting of Parties could help to solve many of these problems in a timely manner, provided that new regional meetings allow decisions and/or even formal recommendations to be made in future. Legal services should check if we would need Rules of Procedure for that purpose or not.
4. Future regional meetings should be mid-intersessional “orientation meetings” and clearly respond to decisions and Resolutions of the last COP. That would allow a more structured steering of the Convention and better knowledge of what happens in the regions, and it would allow a more responsive identification of gaps.
5. Future regional meetings should therefore at least have the opportunity for giving recommendations to the SC and the next COP. These Recommendations could be marked with the abbreviation of the region from which they derive and the year, for example, REC 4.AF.2012. Recommendations should then be subject to annual SC meetings, even to National Ramsar Committee meetings in the very region where they have been recommended, and to COPs.

6. The present proposals would not change anything for the COP meetings themselves – however, the proposal from Austria is to extend the frequency of the COP meetings from three to four years, in order to use this time for a better and more complete regional and national implementation.
7. In addition, it is proposed to let the Standing Committee meetings rotate to venues in the various regions, preferably close to scenic Ramsar sites in order to enhance the visibility of the Convention in Ramsar regions other than Europe.
8. Upgraded regional meetings would also help to implement the 2005 [or subsequent] modified modus operandi of the STRP, which refers very strongly to regional cooperation.
9. It should be considered that the problem indicated in paragraph 2 above is perhaps the most relevant one for those Parties whose involvement is not restricted to attending meetings of the COP but who help to implement decisions on national level. Or in other words, those Parties that take the Ramsar work seriously MUST have a problem, because in a period like 2007/2008 they are overloaded with three SC meetings, one regional meeting, and one meeting of the COP (which for an SC member means six weeks' travel for Ramsar missions alone). But there is more: in the best case, SC members are also national Ramsar coordinators. They have to organize National Ramsar/Wetland Committee meetings, too, and prepare national reports and national decisions regarding the COP. Therefore the timing of the regional meetings at mid-way in a four-year period would be a significant relief for Parties and for the Secretariat.
10. There is one more aspect to consider: in some countries, focal points or coordinators for Ramsar and for the Convention on Biological Diversity are the same persons. The enormous work load from the CBD creates additional pressures upon these focal points. Not without reason, among CBD people as well there are already discussions taking place about a possible shift of COP frequency from two to three years.

Budgetary matters

11. The COP would need to decide on a four-year budget instead of a three-year one.
12. Now: COP and regional meeting every three years. Then: COP and regional meeting every four years. This would mean that we save 25% (travel and staff) cost or capacity in four years. The 25% saved capacity and resources could be used for enhancing the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and for global wetland-related work in connection with Standing Committee meetings, regional meetings, and COPs.
13. If the SC will rotate in future to the regions, there will be an increase of travel cost for the Secretariat over 12 years by almost 100%. To determine what that would mean, the Secretariat should refer to travel costs to COPs 8 and 9 in Valencia and Uganda and find an average. NOW: in 12 years : 4 x COP plus 4 x (regional meetings x 6) plus 12 x SC = 40 meetings. LATER, in 12 years: 3 x COP plus 3 x (regional meetings x 6) plus 12 x SC = 33 meetings. This would indicate a savings of 22%.
14. Travel costs for Parties would decrease by far and would also be more evenly distributed over the periods. If Standing Committee meetings were to rotate, participants from all

other regions would begin to get advantages. Cheaper venues (accommodation and food, drinks) could be found; the host countries could take over many aspects of the meeting preparation, etc.

15. The opportunity to combine a regional meeting of Parties with a Standing Committee meeting would bring further cost-saving opportunities.
16. Potential calendar of the frequency of meetings:

OLD				NEW		
2001	SC	RM		2008	SC	COP 10
2002	SC	RM,COP 8		2009	SC	
2003	SC			2010	SC	RM
2004	SC	RM		2011	SC	
2005	SC	RM,COP 9		2012	SC	COP 11
2006	SC			2013	SC	
2007	SC	RM		2014	SC	RM
2008	SC	RM, COP 10		2015	SC	
2009	SC			2016	SC	COP 12
2010	SC	RM		2017	SC	

Figure1: Old and proposed new COP and regional meeting frequency : better structure and saving 25 % of capacity.

Draft Resolution X.00

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Submitted by Austria

1. **UNDERLINING** the prime objectives of improving the operational procedures of the Convention according to the needs of the Contracting Parties and the Secretariat and of providing the Convention with better visibility in the regions and at national level;
2. **RECOGNIZING** that both the Administrative Authorities responsible for Ramsar implementation at national level and the Convention Secretariat have limited capacities to organize ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP);
3. **DESIRING** to minimize the additional work for the Secretariat and the Parties in preparing meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties;
4. **DESIRING FURTHERMORE** to make the best use of the limited capacities and financial resources at Secretariat and national levels by scheduling meetings of the COP at the optimal time of the year, in order to avoid disruptions in the preparatory process due to

annual holiday seasons and budget cycles, and by adapting the frequency of global and regional meetings of the Parties to regional and national needs;

5. STRESSING the need expressed by Contracting Parties to have sufficient time to implement COP decisions in a proper way during the following interval until the next COP and to coordinate the Convention's implementation in their regions and on national level in a proper way during the following interval until the next COP, as well as to gather sufficient experience with such implementation in view of the development of new or better adapted guidance for adoption by the next COP;
6. RECALLING that the Ramsar Convention, through its organization units the Standing Committee, Scientific and Technical Review Panel, National Ramsar/Wetland Committees, and through regional meetings of the Parties has, during recent years, established good preconditions for a smooth and suitable implementation between COP meetings; and
7. AWARE of Article 6.1 of the Convention which states that the Secretariat "shall convene ordinary meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties at intervals of not more than three years, unless the Conference decides otherwise";

THE CONFERENCE OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES

8. DECIDES to modify the intervals between meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to four years and to modify the budgetary and operational cycles of the Convention from three- to four-year intervals, and to extend the period covered by Ramsar Strategic Plans to two quadriennial cycles (e.g., 2009 to 2016);
9. CALLS upon Parties offering to host an ordinary meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to schedule such meetings, as far as possible, during the months of May to July, in order to minimize disruptions and complications of the preparatory activities due to annual budget and holiday cycles;
10. REQUESTS the Secretariat, with the support from the Standing Committee, to restructure the performance of regional meetings of the Parties in such a way that they allow participating Parties of a region to conclude formal decisions and/or recommendations, which should respond to the Strategic Plan and in particular to the Resolutions of the previous COP;
11. REQUESTS Parties to organize regional meetings midway through each interval between two COPs, in order to maintain international contacts, assess progress in the implementation of the Convention in each region, provide sufficient visibility to the Convention in the regions, and streamline the regional positions in view of future guidance and COP decisions needed;
12. WELCOMES the increasing participation of Parties of all regions in annual Standing Committee meetings and RECOGNIZES the high interest for Contracting Parties' participation at Standing Committee meetings as well as the high potential of Standing Committee meetings for addressing global needs, for providing immediate guidance to Parties when challenging issues arise, and for efficient involvement in and steering the global challenges of the Convention;

13. SUGGESTS that the Secretariat assess the possibility of selecting, together with interested Parties, the venues for future Standing Committee meetings in different regions all over the world, situated close to a famous Ramsar site whenever possible, so that Standing Committee meetings could move from region to region each year in a kind of rotation;
14. RECOMMENDS that the Secretariat and potential host countries for international Ramsar meetings, such as Standing Committee meetings, STRP meetings, and CEPA meetings, as well as Parties planning their own National Ramsar/Wetland Committee meetings, make the best possible use of all opportunities to make the Ramsar Convention more visible on those occasions, by arranging them close to another project event (e.g., finalization of another big water project in the region), by using those opportunities for awarding Ramsar diplomas for new sites, by inviting local site managers, selected regional and local politicians, and by arranging press releases and using the proper CEPA tools as far as possible;
15. REAFFIRMS the high potential of National Ramsar/Wetland Committee meetings to implement the Convention as well as to increase Ramsar visibility on country level and therefore REQUESTS all Contracting Parties that have not yet done so to establish or improve National Ramsar Committees, ideally involving relevant administrative authorities of water, nature conservation, agriculture, forestry and other sectors and, if possible, national bodies of the five Ramsar International Organization Partners (BirdLife International, IUCN, International Water Management Institute, Wetlands International, and WWF International) and other relevant NGOs, as well as national STRP and CEPA focal points; and
16. AGREES that the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties should be held during the period May-July 2012, a time fitting better with the UN budget cycles that are decisive for the determination of the annual core budget contributions of the Ramsar Parties.