

INTRODUCTION

The wetlands of the greater Himalayan region (Hindu Kush-Himalaya and Pamir-Alay) such as lakes, marshes, peatlands and rivers provide important ecological functions and services to sustain livelihoods. They play a vital role in livelihood support in the mountains, especially in rain shadow areas. River flow regimes and quality of ten major rivers of Asia namely Amu Darya, Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Yellow and Yangtze are to a large extent determined by these wetlands, in turn affecting water resources in more populous and agriculturally/industrially valuable areas downstream. In addition they have a high value for local and global biological diversity such as providing halting points for migratory birds. Many of these wetlands also play important roles in the religious and social fabric of life in the Himalayan region. Despite their importance, the uniqueness of the wetlands of greater Himalayan region, they have not received appropriate recognition by the national and international communities. These wetlands are extremely vulnerable to a wide range of human and environmentally-driven threats, including overgrazing by livestock, water diversions for agriculture and human use, increasing pollution due to change in lifestyle of the local inhabitants and increased tourism. Furthermore climate change and variability will dramatically affect these wetlands and the provision of their services as it will change the water cycle on which these wetlands depend. This will in many cases magnify the effects of other threats. Conservation and wise use of these important ecosystems needs special efforts. Some of the high altitude lakes and wetlands are extending into more than one country, while in other places the catchments are shared by more than one country. A regional cooperation and collaboration is needed to improve the economic and social welfare of the people in the high altitude areas without degradation of the critical wetland ecosystems on which most of them are dependent. To address this need a regional forum called 'Himalayan Wetlands Initiative' is in the process of development since 2002 under the framework of Ramsar Convention. This proposal is prepared for submitting to Ramsar Convention seeking formal recognition of the 'Himalayan Wetlands Initiative' as a regional initiative (Resolution VIII.30).

*AIM OF THE HIMALAYAN WETLANDS INITIATIVE (HIMWET)**1. Implementation of the Ramsar approach*

The main aim of the 'Himalayan Wetlands Initiative (HimWet)' is to **promote the objectives of the Ramsar Convention and implement the Ramsar Strategic Plan** through cooperation and collaboration among the countries sharing the greater Himalayan region (Hindu Kush-Himalaya and Pamir-Alay region) for the conservation and wise use of the wetlands and their complexes in the region.

The overall goal of HimWet is '*Conservation and wise use of the wetlands in the Himalayan-Hindu Kush-Pamir-Alay region*'. It aims to contribute to enhance ecosystem services, conservation of biodiversity and achieve sustainable development in the region.

The objectives of HimWet for the triennium 2009-2011 include:

Objective 1: Develop a regional wetlands database through inventorying and sharing of information.

Objective 2: Develop mechanism and facilities for regional cooperation, networking and capacity building.

Objective 3: Promote joint research and generate information on Himalayan Wetland functions and values, valuation of wetland ecosystem services as a tool for informing decision-making.

Objective 4: Promote wetlands management with emphasis on community driven participatory approaches.

Objective 5: Develop CEPA (Communication Education Public Awareness) programme for awareness of the wetlands, and encourage participation of all stakeholders in the initiative.

Objective 6: Develop and implement policies for conservation and management of the Himalayan wetlands.

SUBSTANTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE REGIONAL INITIATIVE

2. Complete regional adherence and bottom-up approach

Bottom-up approach:

In order to promote regional cooperation for the conservation and wise use of the wetlands in the greater Himalayan region, a series of regional meetings and workshops (Urumqi, 2002; Kathmandu, 2003; Sanya, 2004; Evian, 2004; Delhi, 2006 and Changwon, 2007) have been organized since 2002, which has taken the form as 'Himalayan Wetland Initiative' forum. Through these meetings, the forum has successfully achieved regional dialogue that involved all governments in the region except Afghanistan and Uzbekistan (i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan), inter-governmental organizations such as Ramsar Convention Secretariat and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), international environmental organizations (WWF-International, Wetlands International, and IUCN), as well as universities, academic institutions and civil society partners. Apart from these regional dialogues, many actions have been taking place at local, national and regional levels. Constructive and participatory process promoted by the forum resulted into a common agreement to gain the forum as formal regional initiative of Ramsar Convention. In 2005, Ramsar COP9 officially recognized 'Himalayan Wetlands Initiative' as an important potential regional initiative defined by Ramsar Resolution VIII 30, and has encouraged this initiative to be further developed for its official recognition towards Ramsar COP10 in 2008. The Asia Regional preparatory meeting for COP10 held in Bangkok, 2008 agreed to submit a proposal for Himalayan Wetlands Initiative to the Ramsar Secretariat for official recognition by the COP10. A summary of development of 'Himalayan Wetlands Initiative' forum is attached as Annex 1.

Countries in the HimWet initiative

The Himalayan Wetlands Initiative aims to cover all countries sharing the greater Himalayan region. Currently, it covers the countries such as Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. In the initial phase, the initiative will start with the national organizations from the region present at the Ramsar COP10, Changwon, P.R. Korea in Oct-Nov 2008. Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have not participated in the HimWet development process till date; these two countries will be invited to join the initiative in near future.

Countries to join Ramsar Convention in near future

Afghanistan has submitted the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) to the Ramsar Secretariat and the accession instrument is with the Ministry of Justice in Afghanistan. Bhutan actively participated in previous regional meetings of HimWet. However, it is still in a process of dialogue for joining the convention. The initiative will encourage these two important countries of the region to become contracting parties of the Ramsar Convention and provide support for necessary preparation.

3. Active involvement of all relevant stakeholders

The initiative has an intention of creating network from the moment of inception with the national, international and inter-governmental institutions including government institutions, NGOs, CBOs, private sectors working in the Himalayan region on topics relating to wetlands conservation and wise use (e.g. biodiversity and water management, culture, and livelihoods).

Key relevant stakeholders actively contributing for the development of the HimWet include:

- Ramsar Administrative Authorities and other relevant government agencies in the region.
- Inter-governmental organizations such as ICIMOD and Ramsar Convention Secretariat.
- International NGOs: Wetlands International, WWF, IUCN.
- Academic and research institutions related to the conservation and wise use of Himalayan wetlands (e.g. Chinese Academy of Sciences).
- National and local NGOs working in the region.

4. Development of collaboration based on commonly agreed terms

The HimWet will work as an open partnership of national organizations (government as well as non-government), international organizations, NGOs and research institutions for enhancing local community's livelihood while achieving wise use and conservation of the wetland ecosystems. It will work under the overall framework of the Ramsar Convention on wetlands but with particular focus on wetlands in the region. In the first triennium (2009-2011) the HimWet will focus on High Altitude Wetlands covering areas above sub-alpine zones.

The partnership will start with the national organizations present at the COP10 in Changwon, P.R. Korea. It can be expanded to other national and international organizations from the greater Himalayan region interested in becoming member of the initiative who have relevant programmes and activities towards the goal and objectives of the initiative.

An 'Interim Committee' will be formed during the COP10 meeting for coordinating follow up activities of the initiative. The committee will finalize a strategy document for the partnership to deliver the initiative's objectives and goal. Draft strategy is being prepared by ICIMOD.

5. Involvement of other regional partners

Relevant inter-governmental and international institutions operating in the region include:

- ICIMOD – independent intergovernmental organization supported by 8 member countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan
- Ramsar International Organization Partners - WI, WWF, IUCN, IWMI, Birdlife International.
- In addition UNDP, UNEP, EU, ADB, World Bank etc. are also operating in the region.

HimWet has established common activities and strong linkages with ICIMOD, WWF, WI and IUCN. These key international institutions have been implementing complementary activities for the development of the initiative such as:

- WI/ICIMOD pilot project on Asian Wetlands Inventory approach and stakeholder-led catchment management approach to support the conservation and wise use of high altitude wetlands. The project has developed a framework for regional database, risk based vulnerability assessment of wetlands and is in the process of developing a capacity building concept for the region in integrating wise use of wetlands in river basin management. A draft strategy/action document for the Himalayan Wetlands Initiative is also prepared as part of the project.
- WWF-International through its national programmes in China, Nepal, India, Pakistan supporting Ramsar National focal points in identification and preparation of potential High Altitude Ramsar sites. WWF jointly with the Ramsar Administrative Authorities in Nepal and Pakistan developed national wetlands database.

- Himalayan Water and Nature Initiative programme of IUCN.
- ICIMOD is working on “Assessment of Climate Change on Vulnerabilities of Mountain Ecosystems in the Eastern Himalaya” which includes wetlands assessment.

6. Scientific and technical backing

Initially, WWF-International, IUCN, Wetlands International and ICIMOD will be the main scientific and technical partners. It seeks scientific and technical backstopping from other Ramsar international organizations partners (IWMI and Birdlife International) and academic and research institutions working for the conservation and wise use of the wetlands in the region.

7. Targets of the initiative and their links with Ramsar

The strategic and operational targets for the period 2009-2011

- Establish governance and management mechanism
- Prepare inventory of high altitude wetlands and establish regional knowledge base on Himalayan wetlands
- Improved monitoring and assessment of high altitude wetlands using remote sensing to provide updated information on change in wetlands status
- Initiate the interpretation and dissemination of the wetlands information in systematic way
- Support/encourage countries to increase number of high altitude Ramsar sites
- Develop and initiate joint research projects and short training courses
- All countries from the region becomes signatory of Ramsar Convention
- Collaborative research initiated to promote wetlands covering multiple countries as Ramsar site
- Initiate process towards establishing regional wetlands resource and facility centre

The strategic and operational targets of HimWet is expected to comply with the five goals of the Ramsar convention’s strategic plan that includes ensuring wise use of wetlands, wetlands of international importance, promoting international cooperation, increasing implementation capacity to achieve convention’s mission, and progress towards membership of all countries (Resolution IX.8). It will favour implementation of Resolution VIII.12 and VIII.30 as well as compliance with the operational objectives specifically paying attention to the designation of under-represented wetland types in the Ramsar list (Action 10.1.2).

8. Raising awareness of Ramsar objectives

A website, a web based working space, and an email group of members will be created to facilitate networking, communication and dissemination of materials in initial development of the initiative. The website will be linked with the regional database system (framework or test version of the information system already prepared by ICIMOD and WI). HimWet will use local cultural events/festivals, national, regional and international workshop and conferences on environment and water management for disseminating it’s outputs and raise awareness about the services and value of the wetlands in general and Ramsar objectives in particular. HimWet will also use local event (festivals) for awareness rising. ICIMOD will coordinate the regional activities. HimWet will facilitate to produce awareness raising materials poster, fliers, documentary particularly on services and value of High Altitude Wetlands for such event.

The awareness and HimWet facilitation will encourage the remaining countries in the region to join the Ramsar Convention. Additional high altitude wetlands are expected to be declared as Ramsar sites. Effective regional coordination for conservation, wise use and ecosystem services from the wetlands will be brought about.

FINANCIAL AND OTHER SUPPORT FOR THE REGIONAL INITIATIVE

9. Who provides political and financial support?

Political support

The Ramsar Administrative authorities in the participating countries are the key members of the HimWet. As it aim to work under the overall framework of Ramsar Convention, the participating countries will be the political support providers

Financial support

In 2009, financial support will be provided mainly from the ongoing programmes and projects of the international and national member institutions of HimWet. During the first year of the initiative, main activity will be on developing strategy and formal governance structure, establish a coordination unit and develop joint research project and capacity building packages.

ICIMOD will financially support from it's programme the following activities, which complements to HimWet strategic and operational targets:

- Prepare draft strategy for the initiative (before COP 10) and organize a workshop (first quarter of 2009) to discuss the draft strategy and agree upon a common vision for the partnership.
- Prepare project document in consultation with partners for implementation of the strategy.
- Improve monitoring/survey of High Altitude Wetlands using remote sensing.
- Interpret and disseminate information in a systematic way for the management of wetlands and related issues.
- Intensify programme development for HimWet in the context of Climate Change based on information generated by RS techniques and assessment of ecosystem services for increasing the environmental and societal resilience.
- Provide logistics for the coordinating unit.

For the triennium 2009-2011, the Ramsar core fund is requested mainly to cover operation cost of the HimWet that includes staff time of the executive officer (partly) and database manager, operation and maintenance of the regional database system, annual meeting/workshop, travel and networking in the region, and production and publication of dissemination materials.

In 2009, project proposal will be developed by international partners in consultation with national institutions for conducting capacity building courses of national organization and wetlands managers, and initiating joint research project.

10. Financial planning

Climate Change and variability is a global concern in recent decades. Because of it's vital role in global water cycle and climate modulation, the higher Himalayas particularly the high altitude wetlands receive increasing attention of international funding agencies. However, such funding agency might not be interested in operation cost of the initiative. International organization in consultation with national government and non government institutions will develop projects and programmes to attract such funds for contributing to the HimWet initiative. By 2011, it is expected that there will be enough project funding and contribution from the member institutions to cover the operation cost of the initiative.

Main budget lines, expenditures plan for 2009:

| Budge head | Amount (US\$) | Remarks |
|---|---------------|--|
| 1. Staff time – executive officer | 12600 | |
| 2. Operation, maintenance and updating regional knowledge base system (database) | 10500 | Including database manager cost |
| 3. Meeting/workshop | | |
| 3.1 Workshop to discuss draft strategy | -- | ICIMOD |
| 3.2 Annual meeting/workshop | 36700 | |
| 4. Travel and networking in the region | 5200 | |
| 5. Production and publication of promotional and dissemination materials | 10500 | |
| 6. Logistics | -- | ICIMOD |
| 7. Programme cost (regional) | -- | Complemented by ongoing programme of ICIMOD and other international partners |
| 7.1 Consultant to draft strategy and project document in consultation with partners | -- | ICIMOD |
| 7.2 Improved monitoring/survey HAW using Remote Sensing | -- | ICIMOD |
| 7.3 Develop training courses | -- | Ongoing programmes of the international partners WWF, WI, ICIMOD |
| 7.4 Develop joint research projects (ensure role/major stake of national partners) | -- | international partners WWF, WI, ICIMOD |
| 8. Programme cost (national and field level) | -- | Ongoing programme and projects |

11. Request for Ramsar core budget support

Tentative budget requested from Ramsar core budget from 2009-2011

| Budget head | Amount (US\$) | | | Remarks |
|--|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------|
| | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | |
| 1. Staff time – executive officer | 12170 | 13387 | 14726 | |
| 2. Operation, maintenance and updating regional knowledge base system (database) | 10142 | 11156 | 12272 | |
| 3. Annual meeting/workshop | 35497 | 39046 | 42951 | |
| 4. Travel and networking in the region | 5071 | 5578 | 6136 | |
| 5. Production and publication of promotional and dissemination materials | 10142 | 11156 | 12272 | |
| 6. Logistics | -- | -- | -- | ICIMOD |
| Annual total | 72000 | 79200 | 87120 | |

12. Governance mechanisms in place

HimWet will work as an open regional partnership of national and international organizations. It will start with a simple and evolving governance and coordination structure at first, and then further develop as and when resources become available. Initially, an 'Interim Committee' will be formed among collaborating countries and key international organizations present in the COP10. ICIMOD will take the responsibility of initial coordination. The key international organization including WWF-International, Wetlands International and ICIMOD will be the technical advisors of the initiative as they are already supporting the development of the initiative.

By 2009, HimWet will establish a formal governance structure, which will be addressed by the strategy of the initiative. The advisory mechanisms will also be considered in the strategy.

13. Coordination with the Ramsar Secretariat

Ramsar Secretariat's representative will be co-opted as one of the members of the "Interim Committee" of the initiative. The co-opted member will also take the function of communication and coordination with the Ramsar Secretariat on behalf of the 'Interim Committee'.

Currently, ICIMOD is providing coordinating/facilitating role of the initiative. Hence, the interim focal point of the HimWet at ICIMOD will be:

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Annex 1: Summary of 'Himalayan Wetlands Initiative' development process

The development of Himalayan Initiative forum is mainly based on the needs identified by the regional countries through the series of regional workshop/meetings that was attended by governments of the countries sharing the region, intern-governmental organizations, I/NGOs supporting wetlands initiatives, universities and scientist and experts from the region and outside.

In 2002, WWF International, the Ramsar Bureau and the Government of the People's Republic of China, organized a regional workshop in Urumqi, China on 'Conservation of High Altitude Wetlands in the Himalayas'. This workshop marked the initiation of a regional cooperation on wetland conservation in the high mountain areas with a wide range of participation from countries in the Himalayan-Tianshan continuum. The workshop resulted in the 'Urumqi Call' for 1) exchanging information and experiences in conserving high altitude wetlands; 2) initiating

methodologies and tools for identification of suitable Ramsar sites; and 3) strengthening regional cooperation with specific steps to continue the process.

In 2003 WWF International, the Ramsar Bureau and ICIMOD jointly organized a follow-up workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal. This meeting reconfirmed the urgent need for high mountain wetland conservation in the context of climate change for sustaining life essential services provide by them. It was agreed the high mountain wetlands has been poorly documented and lack of scientific knowledge and information was a key hindering conservation of these important ecosystem and in getting these wetlands on the Ramsar list. Need of regional collaboration and coordination in gathering and exchanging of knowledge and data on the mountain wetlands was also highlighted during the meeting. The meeting discussed the specific needs of the participating countries and agreed that a regional centre for high mountain wetlands with thematic focus on highland wetlands need to be established to promote regional cooperation.

The third workshop was held in Sanya (February 2004), P. R. of China. This workshop was a technical follow up workshop after the previous two meetings. The workshop was jointly organized by ICIMOD, WWF International, Ramsar Convention Bureau, and Government of P.R. China. This workshop agreed the overall goal of the initiative '*Conservation and wise use of the high altitude wetlands in the Himalaya-Hindu Kush-Pamir-Allay region*' and identified six specific objectives to achieve the goal. A follow up meeting on developing Himalayan regional initiative was held during the Evian Encounter 2004. Several priority issues were discussed during the meeting. The meeting suggested to focus on the broad Himalayan region high-altitude wetlands and water management, and start with a simple and evolving coordination and governance mechanism for the Himalayan Initiative.

The forth workshop was held in Delhi India (June 2006) discussed the specific progress on high altitude wetlands conservation. During the meeting participating countries and the institutions discussed a preliminary action framework for complementing the six objectives of Himalayan initiative agreed in Sanya (2004). In Ramsar COP9 (Kampala, 2005), the Himalayan Initiative received preliminary recognition as potential Ramsar regional initiative.

The sixth meeting, held in Changwon, S. Korea (2007) re-affirmed for developing the initiative as Ramsar regional initiative and set a target to receive formal recognition by COP10. During the meeting Ramsar Convention bureau invited country and institution from the region for facilitating and coordinating the regional initiative.

The Asia regional preparatory meeting for COP10 (Bangkok, 2008) agreed for processing this important initiative to Ramsar convention for gaining formal recognition by COP10. The group agreed that ICIMOD will facilitate the process and draft proposal for submitting to 37th meeting of Ramsar standing committee. ICIMOD was selected as the communication point for the regional initiative to Ramsar convention bureau for this purpose.

Since 2002, many significant progresses have been made by countries and supporting institutions towards the six objectives of the initiative. Formal recognition as Ramsar Convention's Regional Initiative by COP is deems necessary to meet the targets and to achieve the goals as set by forum.