

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

**Meeting of the Standing Committee Subgroup on COP9
Gland, Switzerland, 7-10 March 2005**

DOC. COP9 SG-7

Agenda item 7

***STRP modus operandi* for the 2006-2008 triennium**

Action requested: The Subgroup is invited to consider the review of the effectiveness of the STRP's current *modus operandi* undertaken by STRP12, as well as its recommendations for amendments to the *modus operandi* for the next triennium, and is invited to request the Chair and Vice-Chair of the STRP and the Secretariat to prepare a draft Resolution and revised *modus operandi* for consideration by the 31st meeting of the Standing Committee and COP9. The SubGroup on COP9 is also invited to transmit the budget issues raised in this review to the Subgroup on Finance in relation to its consideration of proposals for the core budget of the Convention for 2006-2008.

Note by the Ramsar Secretariat and Chair and Vice-Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel

Background

1. Since its establishment, the Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) has delivered a very significant amount of work to support implementation of the Convention, embodied in the Ramsar 'Toolkit' of Wise Use Handbooks, 2nd Edition (2004). This is a remarkable achievement, given the small size and very limited resourcing of the Panel and of the Ramsar Secretariat in support of it. Indeed, in comparison with the equivalent scientific subsidiary bodies of some other multilateral environmental agreements, the STRP could be regarded as highly efficient and productive.
2. Nevertheless, as the Convention as a whole has progressed, a number of limitations and confusions concerning the STRP's mode of working, and the roles and responsibilities of its various players, became clear during the last triennium.
3. In an attempt to clarify the purpose of the STRP and the roles expected of appointed members and other players in the STRP process, a significantly amended and strengthened *modus operandi* was approved at COP8 (Annex to Resolution VIII.28).
4. This Resolution also established the "STRP Support Service" as a mechanism to strengthen support for the work of the Panel. Although originally proposed to be implemented through the appointment of an additional member of the Secretariat technical staff to support the Deputy Secretary General, the Standing Committee and COP8 determined that this service should be out-sourced under contract, and invited the Convention's four International Organization Partners (IOPs) to consider offering to host the Service, a task which by their mutual agreement Wetlands International undertook.
5. The STRP Support Service, and in particular the electronic communication mechanisms, notably the STRP Support Service Web site it has established, have made a significant

contribution to facilitating the work of the Panel during this triennium. Nevertheless, both Wetlands International and the Ramsar Secretariat have identified a number of constraints and limitations to efficiency inherent in running such an out-sourced service for a key Convention process. By mutual agreement, it is not planned to continue to out-source the main work of the Support Service for the 2005-2008 triennium. Instead, the Ramsar Secretariat will be proposing to the Standing Committee's Subgroup on Finance at its March 2005 meeting that the Service for the next triennium should be delivered from within the Secretariat.

6. Furthermore, in order to resolve an unrelated core budget issue identified at the 30th meeting of the Standing Committee in 2004, the Committee reluctantly decided that it had no option other than to significantly reduce the core budget allocation for the Support Service. It was stressed that this was in no way a reflection of the high quality of the service being delivered by Wetlands International. However, this reduction has meant that there have been no resources to undertake the planned role of the Support Service to work with and better engage the STRP National Focal Points, and the lack of capacity to engage this important network remains a serious concern.
7. Despite the establishment of the revised 2003-2005 *modus operandi* by COP8, a number of concerns about the current efficiency of the Panel in delivering its work during the present triennium have emerged, and it is becoming clear that some of the problems the COP8 *modus operandi* was designed to resolve have instead continued unabated.
8. These issues were raised by the Chair of the STRP in his progress report to the 30th meeting of the Standing Committee in January 2004. The issues concerned the level of engagement and involvement of the STRP's appointed members, the STRP Support Service, and funding for the Panel's work. These are further discussed in the summary of STRP12's review discussion below.
9. Resolution VIII.28 expected that the STRP *modus operandi* and the operations of the STRP Support Service would be kept under review. Given the anticipated proposal to no longer out-source the STRP Support Service in the next triennium, a COP9 draft Resolution will be needed, and some amendments to the current *modus operandi* concerning the STRP Support Service will need to be made as well. Other amendments may also be appropriate in the light of the STRP12 review. However, it should be noted that many of the STRP12's recommendations will be dependent on decisions on core budget allocations for the work of the Panel in 2006-2008.

STRP's review of its *modus operandi*

10. During its 12th meeting, the STRP reviewed a wide range of issues and concerns about its present operations, and in Decision STRP12-34 agreed that its recommendations should be reported to the Standing Committee Subgroup on COP9 and then incorporated into a draft COP9 Resolution for the 31st meeting of the Standing Committee in June 2005. These recommendations concern:
 - i. the contributions and roles of appointed members;
 - ii. the pattern and timing of meetings during a triennium;
 - iii. prioritisation of future STRP tasks;

- iv. a rolling six-year programme of work for the STRP;
 - v. assurance that best expert advice is available to the Panel and the Convention;
 - vi. the role of CEPA as a cross-cutting issue;
 - vii. funding of the work of the Panel;
 - viii. the role of the STRP Support Service;
 - ix. the role of the STRP National Focal Points (NFPs); and
 - x. other issues concerning the scope and focus of future STRP work.
11. The Panel identified a number of constraints and difficulties in undertaking its work under its present *modus operandi*. These include:
- the onus placed upon a few key people to ensure coherence across the suite of tasks;
 - the delay in building and implementing a work plan following the last COP, including the lack of funding to engage experts to prepare draft materials;
 - the loss of momentum after the first enthusiastic and ambitious work-plan session at the Panel's first plenary session of the triennium;
 - the limited expertise of each of the members appointed to the Panel;
 - the difficult role of observer organization representatives who must act as liaison with less motivated experts within their organizations; and
 - the excessive number of tasks assigned by the COP and SC, even within the SC's prioritization for this triennium.

Contributions and roles of appointed members

12. The Panel is a "review panel" whose members should therefore have appropriate expertise to review and approve the scope and approach to preparing the STRP's products and reviewing and approving final draft documents. However, this triennium has been no different from past ones, with too much new work expected to be led and delivered by appointed members and organizations who are volunteers.
13. Nominations and appointments of members are expected to be of people as wetland and water experts appointed in their own right for this expertise. However, nominations and appointments for this triennium have in a number of cases not been relevant to the expertise required for the work foreseen. Furthermore, despite the attempt this triennium to ensure nomination of people with expertise in the priority topics of the Panel's work, this occurred in relatively few cases. Likewise, despite the attempt to ensure on nomination forms that nominees and appointees had the appropriate level of English language skills (since as a scientific and technical body with limited resources, the Panel necessarily works only in English), the limited language skills of some appointed members have made it difficult for them to contribute and to fully understand the contents of the draft materials under discussion. This is a key but delicate issue that will need careful consideration and resolution.
14. Despite the creation of the STRP Support Service and its mechanisms designed to improve the ability of all STRP participants to contribute to its work intersessionally, out of 14 appointed members seven appear never to have visited the STRP Support Service Web site nor to have engaged in any of its many discussion forums on different aspects of the Panel's work. Furthermore, it is of particular concern that five of these appointed

members chose not attend STRP12, despite having agreed to be nominated and having made a commitment to the time needed for contributing to Panel work.

15. Likewise, several of the observer organizations invited by COP8 to participate in the STRP have not attended meetings, and others have (*contra* the terms of the *modus operandi*) sent different representatives to each meeting, thus failing to deliver the expected continuity of understanding and involvement.
16. Among the consequences of this situation are that a) much of the substantive work of the Panel has been undertaken by a small number of people (appointed members, IOP members, and representatives of observer organizations); and that b) given the very limited resourcing for the Panel, the high cost of bringing appointed members to plenary meetings who have neither contributed to the intersessional work of the Panel nor accessed and read draft documents prior to plenary meetings must be questioned for its cost-effectiveness.
17. **Recommendation.** Regardless of any further amendments to the *modus operandi* with respect to appointed members, the Panel recommends that it is essential that Parties considering nominating for the Panel experts in their own right, with the appropriate level of knowledge of wetland conservation and wise use, and with the necessary language abilities, so as to have the strongest possible Panel.

Pattern and timing of meetings during a triennium

18. The current *modus operandi* has in the triennium a first plenary STRP meeting, then mid-term workshops for any Working Groups and other processes established by the Panel, and a final plenary meeting to sign off on finalisation of materials for Standing Committee and COP consideration.
19. The Panel stressed the value of the mechanism of establishing Working Groups for specific topics and of having mid-term workshops for Working Group members to progress their work. It recognized that operating only by electronic means between the two plenary sessions is not an effective substitute for a mid-term face-to-face session.
20. There are both pros and cons to holding the first plenary meeting of the triennium in the present manner. There is recognized value to appointed members of such a meeting, in that when they are unfamiliar with the Convention and its processes, such a meeting is important for inducting new members into the process.
21. However, under the current construct, at its first meeting the Panel is expected to prepare its detailed work plan, including the scope and terms of reference for the preparation of each of its proposed substantive products. Given the limitations outlined above with respect to Panel membership, this is an unrealistic expectation.
22. Furthermore, the current process, whereby (since the Panel members are appointed by the first full Standing Committee meeting) it is not possible for the STRP to meet early in the triennium, and whereby it has to complete its work destined for the next COP at least nine months prior to the COP so that its materials can be reviewed by the Standing Committee, means that the Panel has little more than 18 months to undertake and deliver what is often detailed and substantive work. This presents a major challenge, especially since under

current core funding there are no funds available for rapidly initiating major work. In the current triennium, there was a further hiatus for those tasks needing expert consultancy work between the establishment of scope and terms of reference by the Panel and work actually being started, once some voluntary funds were generously made available by the government of Sweden.

23. In addition, the current triennial approach to the work of the STRP leads to a considerable period of time after its final plenary of the triennium when the Panel still exists but has no work required of it for the current triennium and no mandate to initiate new work. The Panel considers that this is a wasted opportunity to fully utilize its expertise for the benefit of Convention processes. The Panel formally remains “in office” until a new Panel has been appointed, currently by the Standing Committee at its first full meeting of the following triennium, so the advice of the Panel should be utilized up to and through the COP, and Parties are expected to find ways of including appointed STRP members in their COP national delegations. Proposals for how this period of each triennium might be better used are provided below, in relation to a rolling programme for the Panel.
24. The Panel has considered two options for ways of starting its work more rapidly in the triennium. One is to initiate work immediately after the COP through the establishment, under the guidance of the STRP Chair and Vice-Chair, of small expert Working Groups on each main priority task. Working Groups would then meet in mid-term workshops, and the full Panel with appointed members would meet once in the triennium to review and sign off on the draft materials prepared by the Working Groups, approximately eight months before the next COP.
25. The alternative option is similar, but has the Panel meeting twice in the triennium, with its first meeting approximately four to five months after the COP to review and approve the scope and contents of the guidances needed – these will by then have been prepared by each of the expert Working Groups established immediately after the COP. The Panel would then meet again to review and sign off on the draft materials prepared by the Working Groups, approximately eight months before the next COP. This has the particular advantage that the Panel would be then expected at both its meetings in a triennium to act as a ‘review panel’, rather than as a drafting group as in the current expectation for the Panel at its first meeting.
26. **Recommendation.** The Panel suggests that the *modus operandi* should be revised to allow for a mechanism to establish, immediately after COP, a set of expert Working Groups to develop the scope and contents of guidelines and other tasks allocated to the Panel, followed by a plenary Panel review meeting, mid-term workshops for expert Working Groups, and a final Panel plenary for review and approval of products. Such an approach would be facilitated by prior prioritization of STRP tasks by the COP on the advice of the Panel and Standing Committee (see below). There would also be some financial and other implications of this proposed approach, which will need further consideration.

Prioritisation of future STRP tasks

27. At present, the COP has delegated to the Standing Committee, at its first full meeting of the triennium, the task of indicating to the STRP the priorities for its work. In this triennium, the Standing Committee instructed the STRP to give high priority to six themes

of work, but still within these themes are a large number of individual substantive tasks, which the Panel has struggled to undertake.

28. The Panel, under its present *modus operandi*, is expected to provide advice to Standing Committee and COP on future scientific and technical implementation priorities and key emerging issues.
29. **Recommendation.** The Panel recommends that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Panel, working with Working Group Co-leads and the Secretariat, should present to the Standing Committee and COP for approval an outline programme for subsequent STRP work which would include recommended priorities (in terms of both themes and specific tasks, including recommendations on work to be carried over to the next triennium and emerging issues) and an initial estimate of the costs of undertaking these tasks.

A rolling six-year programme of work for the STRP

30. In view of a number of the above considerations, the Panel considers that running its operations only on a triennial basis, locked to the timing of each COP and intervening Standing Committee meetings, places undue constraints upon its ability to deliver timely and high quality advice and guidance to the Convention, especially given its limited resourcing. Furthermore, a number of the Panel's work themes can be anticipated to run for more than a single triennium, and a mechanism for Working Groups, as appropriate, to continue their operations across triennia would be valuable. The current *modus operandi* allows for some degree of continuity of Panel membership through the re-appointment of a proportion of existing members, on the advice of the STRP Chair.
31. There are a number of advantages in establishing a mechanism for a 'rolling programme of work' for the Panel, perhaps for six-year periods. This would be in line with the approach adopted for the Convention's Strategic Plan and with a continuous review of tasks and priorities as the years progress. Under this approach the Panel would advise on and receive from COP priorities for its work and would deliver products against these priorities for Parties, as and when its capacity permits, and these would be submitted for consideration to the next available COP. In that respect, it would be helpful if COP Resolutions instructing work for the STRP were formulated as "provide advice and guidance to Contracting Parties and the COP" rather than being overly prescriptive (such as "prepare guidelines for COP9").
32. The creation of the new *Ramsar Technical Report* series, for detailed scientific and technical reviews and reports, has already gone some way towards implementation of a rolling programme, since these will be published as and when peer-review and editing is completed, rather than being provided specifically to COP as Information Papers. Likewise, the current proposal being considered by the Standing Committee concerning implementation of Resolution VIII.45, whereby the STRP would be requested to provide advice on any draft COP Resolution submitted by a Party or Parties, would go some way towards filling the hiatus in STRP's activities in the run-up to the COP.
33. **Recommendation.** The STRP's *modus operandi* should be modified so as to create mechanisms for a six-year rolling programme of work for the Panel. Continuity of Panel work across triennia can be achieved through appropriate Working Groups, once established, continuing their work into the subsequent triennium, and with continuity of

appropriate appointed members of the Panel. Given also that at present there are no funds to cover consultancy work where the Panel needs such expertise, having a rolling programme would mean that as and when any such funds do become available, pending priority work can be initiated more rapidly.

Ensuring that best expert advice is available to the Panel and the Convention

34. As outlined above, the ability of the Panel to respond with high quality advice and guidance remains highly dependent on who happens to be appointed as members of the Panel, and which individuals participate in Panel work from the IOP Panel members and observer organizations. This means that the Panel as currently constituted cannot be guaranteed to have available the best global expertise on any particular topic for which it must give priority attention. Furthermore, it is clear that the ability of individual experts and organizations to provide voluntary time and in-kind support is diminishing in an increasingly privatized and competitive world.
35. In this and the last triennium, it was possible to bring in additional global expertise to prepare draft guidelines and other materials to a limited extent, owing to some voluntary funding becoming available from Parties in the course of a triennium. But the ability to do this remains a significant uncertainty when the Panel is constructing its work plan, and this is a frustration to all concerned. DOC. COP9 SG-4 lists the significant priority tasks which were scoped by the present Panel but which could not be pursued owing to lack of resources.
36. **Recommendation.** The Panel recommends that a mechanism be established to appoint an expert “Technical Advisor” (paid or unpaid) for each of the Panel’s priority themes of work. Such advisors would be tasked to advise on the scope and contents of products requested of the Panel within their areas of expertise, identify lead experts with the appropriate global expertise to prepare draft materials, and support and guide the work of any relevant Working Group established by the Panel. Budget implications of such a mechanism will need to be recognized.

CEPA as a cross-cutting issue

37. The current approach for incorporating communications, education and public-awareness issues into the work of the Panel, whereby Wetlands International’s CEPA Specialist Group acts as a cross-cutting advisory group, has not been greatly successful in this triennium owing to its lack of resourcing for the group to be able to respond to its responsibilities towards the STRP.
38. **Recommendation.** Consideration should be given to establishing a mechanism for the CEPA Specialist Group to act as a ‘standing advisory group’ to the Panel, perhaps through the appointment of the Chair of the Specialist Group as a “Technical Advisor” (see paragraph 37 above). This recommendation should be integrated with discussions under agenda item 13 (Resolution VIII.31 on the Convention’s CEPA Programme).

Funding the work of the Panel

39. The STRP12 review stressed the Panel’s continuing lack of funding for its work – a major concern given the recognized importance of providing high quality and “state of the art”

scientific and technical advice to Parties for Convention implementation. The lack of a clear budget for the preparation of the substantive required work of the Panel is a serious limitation, and it leads the Panel into difficulties and inefficient use of time whereby effort is spent on establishing scope and terms of reference for key work areas, only for aspects of this work not to be undertaken owing to lack of resources.

40. There would seem to be little point in having a budget for bringing appointed members to, and holding, plenary sessions if there is no guarantee of the Panel having any substantial products to review. The STRP Chair stresses to the Standing Committee the importance of this issue.
41. Consideration should also be given to providing an honorarium to the Chair and Vice-Chair, in view of the considerable amount of time they devote, currently on an in-kind or voluntary basis – given that there is no guarantee that those persons who may be appointed as future Chair and Vice-Chair would have such capacity.
42. The Panel will seek to indicate as part of its advice to Standing Committee and COP on its future work and priorities (see also para. 30 above) the estimated costs of each task, and what tasks will be, and will not be, undertaken given any available budget.
43. **Recommendation.** The Panel urges the Standing Committee and COP to consider the allocation of a core budget for substantive work, so that the Panel can initiate high priority work in a timely manner. The Panel stresses that it cannot guarantee future delivery of work expected of it, especially given the likelihood of diminishing voluntary and in-kind support upon which it has depended thus far for much of the work for which it has been applauded by Parties. The Panel will seek to provide estimates of the costs of the priority work given to it. The Panel also requests the Subgroup on COP9 to transmit these concerns and issues to the Subgroup on Finance and the Standing Committee with respect to core budget considerations for COP9.

STRP Support Service

44. The STRP12 review expressed great appreciation of the very valuable work of Wetlands International in their establishment and running of the STRP Support Service during this triennium, which was seen as very important by those members and observers who have utilized it to the ability of the STRP to progress its work. It has been agreed between Wetlands International and the Secretariat that the Support Service would better be brought back into the Secretariat, and the Panel's review supported this. There are likely to be considerable IT issues raised by this change, given the current capacity of the Secretariat, but these are considered to be soluble.
45. **Recommendation.** The Panel supports the proposal to operate the STRP Support Service from within the Secretariat in the next triennium, and recommends that core budget funding for continuing the operations of the Support Service be folded back to existing budget lines to support the Panel's future work.

STRP National Focal Points (NFPs)

46. Both the Panel and the Secretariat greatly regretted that there has been little capacity and opportunity to develop an engagement with the network of STRP National Focal Points

appointed by Parties, and the Panel expressed frustration that the budget element within the STRP Support Service designed to develop and support this engagement had been cut mid-term.

47. The review identified a number of possible further roles for STRP NFPs, which might include contributing to the collection of information on certain indicators of the effectiveness of the Convention and on site designation and management issues.
48. However, it was recognized that there is little point in energizing the STRP NFP network if the Panel itself lacks the capacity to undertake its substantive work, since there would not then be materials and draft guidances for the NFPs to review.
49. **Recommendation.** Developing the involvement and capacity of the STRP NFP network should be a priority in the next triennium, and the NFPs' current Terms of Reference should be reviewed and revised as appropriate.

Other issues – scope and focus of future STRP work

50. Some members of the Panel questioned whether with its present focus on preparing technical guidelines and other reports the Panel may have become too isolated from on-the-ground conservation and wise use of wetlands. There may be value in giving the STRP a stronger role in *inter alia* advising on site designation and management issues, reviewing the use of existing tools, identifying gaps in the Convention, and interaction with the work of other conventions. Such a broader role could be achieved through a balance between forward, proactive and strategic advice, and responsive problem-solving on emerging one-off issues. It was recognized, however, that increasing the scope of activities of the STRP members would not be feasible for volunteer STRP participants without additional resourcing.
51. **Recommendation.** The Panel requests the Standing Committee to consider the future scope and opportunities for widening its work, in line with the suggestions in paragraph 50 above.