

World Wetlands Day Commemoration

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World Wetlands Day 2010 Message

1. Honoured Guests & Fellow Wetland Scientists and Managers, it's a pleasure to be here on World Wetland Day 2010 to represent the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.
2. It's especially pleasing to myself to be doing this in Africa – in Botswana. I say this as I believe that African countries, African scientists and wetland managers will play a bigger role in the Convention in the future: they can drive the future of the Convention.
3. Here in Botswana we have HOORC – the Harry Oppenheimer Okavango Research Centre that is an increasingly influential scientific institute and has the capability to lead our scientific efforts to manage wetlands both locally and through international processes, such as the Ramsar Convention.
4. I have been allocated a lot of time, so let me tell you what I intend to cover – there are only three things. [And Curt Richardson from the US will keep count and ensure I do not go over time.]
 - i) What is the Ramsar Convention
 - ii) What is World Wetland Day
 - iii) And how do these relate to Botswana and this conference.
5. I propose to make some official or formal comments about the Convention, but will also add a few unofficial comments or stories.....these will not appear in the official record of the meeting as they are based on hearsay and may have been embellished by myself to make a point beyond the original context, but I hope you find them interesting and useful.
6. I must first convey to you a greeting from the Secretary of the Convention – Mr Anada Tiega. Unfortunately he had a previously arranged engagement on World Wetlands Day – the Convention's Secretariat gets many invitations to attend World Wetlands Day. Mr Tiega directs us towards the theme of World Wetland Day 2010 – Wetlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change.
7. Mr Tiega also points out that 2010 is the International Year of Biodiversity when the international community will assess progress towards the 2010 Biodiversity target to reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity. Initial expectations are that where we have sufficient data we can show that we have not met this target. This is shown by some of the waterbird data being compiled by the Convention. But in most cases we do not have sufficient data or information – we do not have sufficient data to know whether or not we have or have not met the target!

8. So, what is the Convention? It is an international agreement signed in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar – hence the name of the Convention. [The Convention may well have had another name if progress towards the Convention had not been disrupted by Cold War politics in the late 1960s and the schedule of meetings and expectations being changed.]
9. The official title of the Convention is “The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat”. The ‘especially as waterfowl habitat’ has since informally been dropped and the emphasis placed on wetlands in a wider context than waterbirds. In fact, the phrase was not originally intended to be there....it was added at the last moment to ensure the USSR was able to sign the Convention and retain responsibility for its implementation with the conservation authorities: the water resources agency may have had responsibility for a wetland convention. The story behind the negotiations to agree on the text and title of the Convention has been told by Geoffrey Matthews. [There are also anecdotes about how the organisers and hosts responded to various difficult moments in the negotiations with mutterings about eavesdropping and phone tapping, but we can leave that to the unofficial historians and storytellers.]
10. A key point that came from the story about the USSR request was that wetland management is complex – it involved many agencies and interests. The situation in 1971 was probably not that much different from that today.....we are still battling in many countries with the sectoral basis of wetland management. Disagreements occur regularly between water, agriculture, fisheries and conservation agencies. And in some places we now have to deal with tourism and minerals ministries or agencies.
11. It seems everyone has an interest in wetlandsits complex. But, back to the Convention. I’d like to now read several quotes from the 1971 meeting in Ramsar.
12. What were they saying in 1971? These quotes are from Geoffrey Matthews and contained in the official record of the meeting.
 - i. “We must not let the coming generations judge us negligent for failing to advance the international conservation of natural resources.....”
 - ii. “Conservation in the absence of skilful research will result in irretrievable mistakes. Conservation without reference to the realities of social and economic requirements is a recipe for heartbreak.”
 - iii. “We must never forget that Conservation is made necessary by Man, is for Man and carried out by Man.”
13. These quotes reinforce the original intent of the Convention – it was the wise use of wetlands. It was led by waterfowl experts, but they were saying in 1971 that we needed Wise Use of wetlands, not strict nature conservation that too often excluded people.
14. This is an important message, particularly for African wetlands, but for many years the Convention seemed to struggle with this concept. It is a difficult concept and for some years the Convention seemed to focus more on waterbird conservation and listing Ramsar sites than wetland wise use – it started to be seen as a waterbird convention, not a wetland wise use convention.
15. This started to change in 1987 in a meeting in Canada when some (then) young wetland people wanted to make wise use the main focus of the Convention. [Edward Maltby who is in the audience today was part of this group and can elaborate on the dynamics and interchanges of that meeting.]

16. They did not fully succeed, but they started something that culminated in 2005 in a meeting of the Convention in Uganda where the concepts of wise use and ecosystem services became more central to the Convention. Some countries opposed this, but the influence of African countries was starting to be felt within the Convention - wise use, or people and wetlands is certainly important for the Convention.
17. So, the Convention is now focussed more and more on wetlands and wise use, wetlands and people, and wetlands and ecosystem services, as was intended in 1971. The people who founded the Convention had remarkable foresight – it has taken us almost four decades to work through the complex challenges that they placed before us.
18. The Convention’s success can also be measured in other ways, for example, 159 countries are now Contracting Parties to the Convention and they have nominated 1886 sites as Ramsar wetlands of international importance. These 1886 sites cover 185,156,612 hectares or 15% of global wetland area if you take the figures Ramsar has published on wetland area; it’s more than 15% if you use the figures in Bill Mitsch’s famous wetland book. [We need to talk further about these figures and establish a better global inventory base for managing wetlands – the Convention has recognised this, but not been able to invest sufficiently to resolve the issue.]
19. Now [as Curtiss Richardson is still counting and watching the time], what is World Wetlands Day? It’s a global celebration of wetlands and is held each year on 2 February which commemorates the agreement reached in 1971 which gave us the Convention.
20. Each year since 1977 governments, non-government organisations and others have undertaken activities to raise public awareness of wetland values and benefits, and of the Convention. From 2003 to 2007 inclusive there were 1,304 reports from 124 countries about World Wetland Day activities. It has proven particularly popular in France, India, Mexico and Kenya.
21. The Secretariat of the Convention develops a theme for each World Wetlands Day and provides materials to assist those who want to celebrate the Day. This year the theme is Wetlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change.
22. This theme is important as we know that wetlands are economically important and important for biodiversity, but we are losing them, for example:
 - i. 17% of waterbird species are threatened
 - ii. 38% of wetland mammals are in decline
 - iii. 33% of freshwater fish
 - iv. 72% of turtles.....
 - v. 43% of crocodiles.....
 - vi. 26% of freshwater amphibians.....

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment showed that the decline of wetland species was greater than that for other ecosystems.
23. There are also claims that 50% of wetlands globally have been lost. This is an impressively depressing figure and can have an impact on politicians and decision-makers, but be careful in case they ask for the evidence – I don’t think it is there. I like the figure, but it is a guess – by all means use it, but keep in mind that we still lack sufficient inventory to corroborate it.

24. At the same time many ecosystem services provided by wetlands are being lost, with dire consequences for many people, particularly those who rely most directly on wetlands.
25. We need to ask ourselves – can we afford this level of environmental, social and economic loss? And, what can we do about it? World Wetlands Day is about raising awareness and it has been successfully doing this for a decade. We should encourage more of this, and get involved.
26. We know the reasons for wetland loss and degradation – nutrient loading and pollution, habitat infilling and drainage, siltation, water extraction, invasive species, over harvesting, and the list continues. We know all about these problems, the causes and the effects. We also know that climate change will bring another layer of complexity – how should we respond to this?
27. To relate this message to this conference – a gathering of scientific experts – of clever and dedicated people. How can scientists contribute more effectively to solving the problems we face?
28. One of my messages is to cut the erudite and interesting and focus on the real and everyday needs facing the people who manage wetlands, and ensure that our scientific information gets to those who need it – most of our scientific papers do not do this. So, what else can we do in our jobs to support the communication and outreach that is needed?
29. World Wetlands Day provides one opportunity. We need more and we need to use them well.
30. Now, I'll get to my third point. [As I know that Curtiss Richardson is still counting and reading his watch.] Namely, how does what I have been saying relate to Africa, Botswana and to this Conference. For myself it is very clear.
31. Africa - African voices have been influential over the last decade or more in guiding Ramsar to focus on wise use, to focus on maintaining the ecological character of wetlands, to restore degraded wetlands, and to focus on climate change. In 2002 Ramsar chose not to focus on climate change – there were other priorities. At the time though the voices of African countries were drowned by the voices of developed countries who did not want the Convention to address in any depth the issues of climate change. This should not happen again – wise use of wetlands and climate change are important for Africa and for the world.
32. Botswana – this country has one of the jewels of the global wetland heritage – the Okavango is a marvel. There are also many other wetlands, smaller wetlands and important wetlands. Your efforts are being noticed and heeded and we wish you every success in the pursuit of wise use of your wetlands.
33. This conference – gatherings such as this are important. I went to my first international conference in 1984 – there are eight scientists from that meeting here today and it is wonderful to renew connections with them. All of us are from developed countries – one way or another we can afford to attend such conferences. This conference has a lot of power and influence – it has brought people together not only from around the world, but most importantly, from across Africa – not just from developed countries. This represents the power of the conference – African scientists have the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas. I congratulate Professor Ringrose and her colleagues at HOORC and the Government of Botswana for holding this conference – it is a lot of work to host

a conference of this size. It's wonderful to be here and after we have gone and they have rested I encourage them to do it again.....

34. With that in mind I again congratulate the organisers and sponsors and the delegates for attending and wish you all a successful World Wetlands Day 2010. Thank you.
