

# Cultural heritage of wetlands – a management challenge

The rich cultural heritage of wetlands could not have been created or maintained without sound management of wetlands by the people living in and near them. These methods and practices are as much a part of our cultural heritage as are the physical structures and landscapes they have created. They have also ensured that some of the world's wonderful wetlands have survived to the present day. The importance of this heritage has been increasingly recognized as communities and countries strive to maintain sustainable exploitation practices in wetlands in the face of demands for high economic returns.

Some ancient traditional management practices continue to be used successfully today. Aboriginal communities have traditionally managed Kakadu National Park, a Ramsar and World Heritage Site in Australia, for thousands of years, and the area still plays a critical cultural, spiritual and social role for them. Similarly, the Mayas in the Pantanos de Centla Ramsar site in Tabasco, Mexico, have harmoniously exploited the resources of this great wetland since

A.D. 600. And in Algeria a complex cooperative management system for maintaining the *fougargas*, human-made underground water systems, has assured water supplies to oases since the 7th century.

An interesting traditional management practice for dealing with disputes is the consensual tribunal. In medieval times, the communities practicing irrigation in Valencia in Spain created a simple but effective system for settling disputes over

water based on quick, oral procedures and a high level of social consensus. Known as Water Tribunals (*Tribunales de las Aguas*), they have been in operation for more than a thousand years and are probably the oldest judicial institution still in use in Europe,



Fishermen in the Doñana saltmarshes, a Ramsar site in Spain.

with the tribunal meeting and delivering justice at the entrance to the cathedral once a week.

While there are numerous such examples of management practices that remain relatively unchanged, many traditional and customary practices are under threat as populations and urbanization increase and economies develop – the challenge today is to adapt these practices to current needs while continuing to make use of traditional knowledge and retaining cultural traditions. Innovative management strategies evolving from open dialogue between the local stakeholders and centralized government have often proved successful, and the importance of this has been highlighted in management guidelines adopted by the Ramsar Convention in 1999.

In the Inner Niger Delta in Mali, pastoralists, farmers and fishermen evolved a management system that had endured for generations, permitting each group to exploit sustainably the resources in the floodplain at different times of the year. In recent decades, however, human population increases and severe drought, along with the development of a more centralized government, have forced changes to traditional practices which have brought poverty, conflict and ecosystem deterioration. The solution

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has been for the local communities to modify their management practices with the help of international organizations working in collaboration with local and national government representatives. These community-led changes have ensured that traditional lifestyles – and cultural traditions – in the floodplain are being largely maintained.

Local fisheries have often evolved fascinating traditional management systems that have been in use for generations. For the Maori people in New Zealand, the coastal seas and their fishing grounds have been as important to them as the land, and they have evolved a highly organized set of customs – *tikanga* – to manage the gathering and handling of seafood, including both spiritual rules and strict fisheries conservation regulations based on a detailed understanding of fish ecology. In today's interlinked world this would be difficult to maintain, given the competing claims from other users of the sea's resources. Thus to sustain these traditional methods in some coastal areas, the New Zealand Government has given the Maori sole rights to areas where they can manage the harvest of seafoods (fish, shellfish and seaweed) for non-commercial purposes, thus preserving the viability of their customs and lifestyle.

In the Sine-Saloum estuary in Senegal traditional fishing practices, fully controlled by the local people, sustained populations for generations by providing a source of income and food. Following Senegal's independence, traditional practices gave way to modern, more centralized management methods which partly contributed to the degradation of coastal aquatic ecosystems, resulted in conflict between small-scale and large-scale fishermen, and ultimately led to the breakdown of a traditional lifestyle. Bringing together the local fishermen, fish processors and wholesalers, local religious and cultural authorities as well as researchers and government representatives, has subsequently produced a



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management plan that reconciles traditional practices with “modern” management rules (including new legislation), yet leaves local people in control and fully responsible for managing their fishery. An important consequence of this strategy has been to give women, who have traditionally taken on the role of fish processors, an equal share in the decision-making process. Similarly women play a substantial role in traditional fisheries management in Guayaquil in Ecuador and in some indigenous groups on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Colombia.

In many cases, it is a sad reality that traditional practices can no longer be maintained in the face of irreversible or uncontrollable changes in an ecosystem. This was the case in the Koshi Tappu Ramsar site in Nepal, where uncontrolled harvesting of fish depleted resources, deprived traditional fishermen of their livelihoods, and damaged the ecological character of the wetland ecosystem. Support from the Ramsar Small Grants Fund helped the local fishermen to learn fish stocking and cage fish culture techniques to provide an alternative way to generate income. In this case, the management solution does not maintain the traditional skills but in effect is developing new skills today, which, given time, will become the traditional skills and cultural heritage of tomorrow.

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