

# Wetland cultural heritage and the Ramsar Convention

It is evident from the other information sheets in this folder that, since the dawn of civilization, people around the world have lived in close contact with wetlands, have used their natural resources, and have managed their water in a variety of ways. This close and long-standing relationship has resulted in the evolution of strong cultural links and structures that have developed from the social dynamics of each century. Water and wetlands have long shaped how people live their lives.

In turn, the traditional links of people to their wetlands have determined customs and beliefs that still continue to influence the attitudes of contemporary local societies. But, in most parts of the world, these linkages have weakened as increasingly technological solutions to water and food security, and an increasingly urbanized population, have led to the widespread deterioration and loss of wetlands. Regrettably, there is still insufficient recognition by many decision-makers and wetland managers of the important role that socio-cultural aspects can and should play

in the sustainable management of wetlands, and so far cultural aspects have generally been little taken into account in wetland conservation programmes.

It is gratifying to observe, therefore, that in recent years the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention have recognized the need for a greater, widely-shared understanding of the interrelationships between the natural and cultural values associated with wetlands. They have also come to see the need to provide guidance to wetland managers and to the

custodians of the world's cultural heritage on how to work together in pursuit of shared objectives. As early as 1996 and 1997, the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) urged that questions of the "human significance" of wetlands be built into the



For these Bozo fishermen in the Inner Niger Delta, Mali, fishing is a way of life; trips may take many days and involve the whole family.

Convention's wise use and management guidelines. In Resolution VII.8 (San José, 1999), the Parties adopted *Guidelines for establishing and strengthening local communities' and indigenous people's participation in the management of wetlands*, noting the crucial importance of "ancestral values and traditional knowledge and institutions" in the wise-use management of wetlands. Ramsar's Mediterranean Wetlands Committee (MedWet/Com) has already made a beginning in the development of guidance for wetland managers by holding a Technical Session at its meeting in Tunisia in April 2000 on the "Cultural aspects of Mediterranean wetlands and their potential contribution to the sustainable use of wetland resources" which identified a basic set of "guiding principles" which will be broadened and developed further by other bodies within the Convention.

Most significantly, the Convention's Standing Committee has designated "Wetlands: water, life, and culture" as the theme and focus of the 8th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP8), and one of the COP's Technical Sessions will be devoted to "Cultural aspects of wetlands as a tool for their conservation and sustainable use". The Session will consider a draft guidance document for discussion and possible adoption by the Parties, which will

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lay out fundamental understandings – many of which are considered in the other information sheets within this folder – and recommend ways in which wetland authorities and managers can encourage teamwork at national and site levels with cultural agencies and institutions that share overlapping objectives.

In preparing a draft resolution and guidance for the COP's consideration, the bodies of the Convention are bringing their experience and knowledge of the natural values of wetlands to fruitful collaboration with a number of institutions on the cultural side of resource management. The European Archaeological Council (EAC), which is advising on both cultural and technical aspects of wetland archaeology, has adopted "A strategy for the heritage management of wetlands" which promises increased partnership with the Convention and participation in Ramsar's COP8; the strategy is included in EAC's recently published book, *The Heritage Management of Wetlands in Europe* (2001), which suggests additional avenues of collaboration with the Convention. SEHUMED (the Sede para el Estudio de los Humedales Mediterráneos), at the University of Valencia in Spain, is also working very closely with MedWet and other bodies of the Convention in a number of ways, as is ARC (the Alliance of Religions and Conservation) and UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. The latter, with its advisory bodies IUCN, ICOMOS, and ICCROM, is in discussions with Ramsar experts as it develops its own *Management guidelines for cultural landscapes*, due for publication in 2002, so that this work can be reflected in the planned Ramsar guidance as well.

## HUMEDALES



Wetlands: Water, life and culture

World Wetlands Day 2002, on 2 February, provides the opportunity for wetland managers and enthusiasts around the world to look at the cultural heritage of wetlands in their own areas, and at the key questions of management for cultural as well as natural values. It can be hoped that a great deal of useful material should be forthcoming for study as these WWD activities are reported to the Ramsar Bureau and made available to the public.

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CONVENTION ON WETLANDS  
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)