

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

24th Meeting of the Ramsar Standing Committee
Gland, Switzerland: 29 November – 2 December 1999

DOC. SC24-7

Agenda item 9.1

7th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties – Lessons learnt and review of COP structure and organization

Action requested: The Standing Committee is requested to consider the Bureau's analysis of the organization of COP7 and weigh its recommendations for the planning of COP8.

Background

1. The Convention Work Plan 2000-2002 (Resolution VII.27) includes as a target for this triennium under Action 8.1.1: "The Standing Committee to review the structure and organization of the Conference of Contracting Parties and adopt changes to facilitate its implementation and effectiveness."
2. For COP7 the previous Standing Committee introduced some innovations designed to improve the effectiveness and smooth running of the Conference. The most fundamental of these was the move to non-concurrent Technical Sessions, each followed by regionally-based discussion groups. It is the Bureau's perception that this change to the *modus operandi* of the Technical Sessions was a great improvement which was much appreciated by delegates. It has to be said also that this change in operations for the Technical Sessions resulted in a range of very high quality Resolutions and Recommendations emerging from the meeting. **The Bureau recommends that this structure for the Technical Sessions be retained for COP8.**
3. In its review of COP7, the Bureau also examined each agenda item with a view to finding more efficient ways to consider the large volume of business required of the COP. One area that could be reconsidered is that of the presentation of the regional overviews of implementation based on the National Reports submitted by the Contracting Parties. While this is a valuable part of the agenda, the Bureau feels that it may be even more valuable if this review of achievements and priority-setting for the future at the regional level were done in regional meetings convened at an early stage in the COP (as was planned for COP7 but did not occur due to the need for special sessions), rather than in plenary sessions. Such a move would allow this plenary time to be dedicated to global reviews of key themes under the Strategic Plan. In the case of COP8, time will have to be allowed in the plenary for the proposed new Strategic Plan 2003-2008 to be debated. **The Bureau recommends to Standing Committee that this option be explored more fully and reconsidered at the next meeting, when a fully elaborated outline programme for COP8 will have to be tabled for consideration.**

4. Another area of COP7 which required substantial time was that of the budget of the Convention for the next triennium. It will be recalled that when the Subgroup on Finance introduced its recommendation for a budget for the next triennium in plenary, it was immediately apparent that not all Contracting Parties were comfortable with this option. At COP7 discussion and contact groups were introduced for the first time at a Ramsar COP, and these were largely successful in pre-empting problematic issues and language in draft decisions for several of the substantial papers under consideration. **The Bureau feels that for COP8 such a contact group should be established on Day One of the meeting to review budget issues and concerns before they are aired in the plenary.** This Contact Group could be chaired by the chair of the Subgroup on Finance with the intention of providing a more detailed and in-depth introduction of the budget to those who may have concerns.
5. A further issue emerging from COP7 was the time needed to resolve the issue of regionalization under the Convention. Many delegates expressed concern to the secretariat that the consideration of this essentially political issue had reduced the time available for discussion of more technical issues. While it is true that this was the case, it must be remembered that the Convention is an intergovernmental treaty and that from time to time such political issues will inevitably arise. Upon reflection it is difficult to see how this matter could have been dealt with more efficiently, other than possibly through a special sitting of the Standing Committee prior to the COP, involving the key players, so as to reach a level of consensus before the commencement of the COP. Should such issues arise again in the future, this option may have to be considered by the Standing Committee.
6. Overall, the Bureau believes that the Ramsar Convention continues to have one of the most efficiently run COPs. At nine days in duration, it is shorter than most others (which meet for two weeks) and continues to retain a stronger technical element than most others. The above recommendations, if implemented, should serve to improve further the efficiency of these meetings, but it is difficult to see how the duration could be reduced given the volume of issues that the Convention has on its agenda when it meets only at three-year intervals. It should also be said that Ramsar's three-year cycle of COPs means that every effort should be made to make best use of this opportunity to further the work of the Convention. The investment in hosting COPs is such that the Bureau believes that reducing the duration will require that some important issues receive but superficial consideration. **Consequently, the Bureau recommends that the duration of the COP be maintained at nine days, starting on a Monday and closing on Tuesday of the following week, with the Sunday in the middle left as a free day for delegates.**
7. The Bureau has also reviewed the process and results of raising financial contributions to support the participation of delegates and observers from developing countries and countries in transition, as well as the arrangements with the travel agency MKI to take care of this important component of the COP. The Bureau's conclusion is that the fundraising exercise was very successful and that the services provided by MKI were excellent, permitting a most efficient use of the resources available. (Donors have already received a detailed report on the use of their contributions.) Provided that no new elements come into play, the Bureau would keep this aspect of COP preparation, in general, unchanged.