

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

25<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee  
Gland, Switzerland: 23- 27 October 2000

**DOC. SC25-18**

Agenda item 19

**Report of the Subgroup on Ramsar's Strategic Plan 2003-2008 and  
status of the drafting process (Decision SC24-13)**

**Action requested: The Standing Committee is requested to receive the advice of the Subgroup on the Strategic Plan concerning the attached second draft, and approve a third draft for further consultations within the Ramsar constituency and collaborators.**

1. Decision SC24-13 of the Standing Committee reads as follows:

“The Standing Committee adopted the following drafting procedure to prepare the Strategic Plan 2003-2008:

- i) the Ramsar Bureau prepares a first draft, engaging, if necessary, external consultants from the Ramsar network, by 30 June 2000;
- ii) the Bureau mails the draft to the Drafting Group members for comments, with a deadline by 31 August 2000, and incorporates the input received;
- iii) the Drafting Group meets in Gland two days in advance of the Standing Committee meeting in 2000 and reports progress to and incorporates input from the Standing Committee;
- iv) the third draft is translated into French and Spanish and is distributed for comments to all Contracting Parties, other conventions, and relevant intergovernmental institutions and NGOs in January 2001, with a deadline for comments by 30 April 2001;
- v) the Bureau compiles the input received and circulates a revised draft to the Drafting Group by the end of May 2001;
- vi) the Drafting Group holds a meeting in late June/early July 2001 and adopts a final draft for submission to the Standing Committee meeting in 2001;
- vii) the Standing Committee considers and approves the final draft at its meeting in 2001 for submission to COP8 in 2002.”

2. In implementation of point 1) of the above Decision, the Bureau engaged Dr Bill Phillips to prepare the elements of a first draft of the Strategic Plan. Dr Phillips, apart from having served in the Ramsar Bureau as Deputy Secretary General until February 2000, was actively involved in drafting the first Strategic Plan. He was a member of the drafting

group established by the Standing Committee in the lead-up to Ramsar COP6, which adopted the first Plan. The Bureau prepared a document providing Dr. Phillips with guidance on the overall structure and content of the new Strategic Plan.

3. Dr Phillips prepared a very helpful first draft which was discussed and revised by the Ramsar Bureau. The Bureau distributed the first draft of the Strategic Plan 2003-2008 for the consideration of the members of the Subgroup on 30 June 2000, with a deadline for comments on 31 August 2000.
4. It should be noted about the first draft that:
  - a) it is divided into two main sections: Section I containing the Strategic Plan itself, with the introduction, General Objectives and Operational Objectives, and the rationale for them; and Section II containing the Implementation Plan, with the list of actions under each Operational Objective;
  - b) the General Objectives have been reduced to five (from eight in the current Strategic Plan): the first three deal with the “three pillars” of the Convention: wise use, the Ramsar List, and international cooperation, and the other two deal with universal membership and implementation capacity;
  - c) the Operational Objectives in General Objective 1, Wise Use, have been grouped into four major clusters, to facilitate understanding and use of the document.
5. The Standing Committee Subgroup on the Strategic Plan includes: Algeria, Australia, Slovak Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda (Chair), and USA, plus the STRP Chair and representatives of the International Organization Partners. (Representation from Asia was left pending; the Bureau has sent copies of the first draft to India and Japan, but at a later date.)
6. Comments on the first draft were received from Australia (indicating that New Zealand and Papua New Guinea were also consulted), Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, USA, BirdLife International, and the Greek Biotope/Wetlands Centre (EKBY, a member of the MedWet Team).
7. On the basis of the comments received the Bureau has prepared the attached second draft, showing where changes have been introduced in relation to the first draft. Comments received that were not introduced in the second draft are summarized below, for consideration by the Subgroup at its meeting on 24 October 2000. In a small number of cases the Bureau has not introduced the proposed changes because it considered that they were not applicable.

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM SUBGROUP MEMBERS THAT WERE NOT INCLUDED IN THE SECOND DRAFT OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

### AUSTRALIA

1. Operational Objective 3.7 - It is noted that this Operational Objective is included in the current Plan, but in some countries, including New Zealand, the implied different treatment of foreign and domestic investment will be problematic.
2. Para 5.2.3 and Para 5.2.4: Australia supports this fully.

### UGANDA

1. VISION. I am not sure if a *Vision* was developed for the first strategic plan or not. [Bureau note: yes it was.] I believe that there is a need to set the Strategic Plan in the wider context. How do we envision wetlands in the next ten years in view of the growing population, the looming water crisis, and poverty in the developing countries and countries with economies in transition?
2. Operational Objective 4 – Universal membership. Whilst the objective in the first SP was to progress towards universal membership, I believe this has been achieved to a large extent. [Bureau note: more than 50 UN member states are not yet Parties to Ramsar.] The crucial issue now and in the future will be how to service these many members. This needs to be addressed in the new SP.

### USA

1. Some general comments:
  - Length: We note that this draft is 39 pages, compared to the previous plan's 17 pages. We recommend that if the Parties want a more readable and usable text, that its length be limited to 20 pages.
  - Introduction: This is longer than in the previous plan and harder to follow. Better to use a narrative and bullet format and keep it short.
  - General objectives: These should simply be listed and clearly stated as in the previous plan. There is no need to refer to the Convention or resolutions.
  - Rationales: A new added element, but very lengthy. Better to include short one-paragraph rationales under each general objective.
  - Operational objectives: The lay out in the previous plan with the operational objectives immediately following the general objectives is a better model.
  - Advocacy of Positions: Care should be given to not state in the Strategic Plan positions that should first be debated and decided upon by the CPs. This is

particularly important regarding financial issues; notable examples are Actions 5.2.3 and 5.2.4.

2. Specific recommendations for changes follow in the draft text via the “track change” function. Some illustrative deletions are marked as examples of where text can be shortened. These deletions do not include all that should be made to the text.

## **BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL**

[Bureau note: The Bureau has not attempted to translate the comments below into specific changes to the draft, since most of them would require a discussion in the Subgroup. It will be useful if BirdLife could bring to the Subgroup meeting specific text for consideration.]

### **Section I**

#### **Introduction**

1. There are some general orientation points which we would like to see set out here. For example, questions of emphasis regarding the Convention’s role in the next Plan period, where appropriate compared with those in the first Plan period, should be addressed. It would be useful for the Introduction to comment on the things which are currently perceived as distinctive about Ramsar, and what its particular strengths and weaknesses currently are.
2. Ramsar has become a superlative global forum for evolving wisdom on wetland issues, and this should continue. We would like to restore a higher awareness that it is also a treaty, and that Parties have accepted and must seriously honour contractual commitments. The nature of some of those commitments might bear more pointed attention in the next Plan period. For example, Article 3.2 (on which BirdLife offers detailed thoughts elsewhere) has in our view been an under-appreciated provision. If basic treaty obligations on safeguards for the most important sites still need attention, then the rest of the sophisticated development of technical and other agendas cannot be taken to indicate total success of the Convention.
3. In this context therefore we are pleased to see early emphasis (e.g., in para 12 (a)) on policy and law frameworks, and reference to formal procedures for environmental impact assessment. This may also be a place to refer to establishment of systems of protected areas, with statutory objectives for such systems to achieve (i.e., not just each site), legal/policy tests to be met by competing legitimate public interests before they can prevail over those objectives, and a range of officially-enshrined mechanisms for responding to threat.
4. Inevitably a prominent sign of what the Convention represents will continue to be the number of Contracting Parties and the number and hectareage of sites. These are great achievements, but are only a surrogate indicator of the extent to which the Convention’s aims are being achieved. While we do not underestimate the difficulty, we consider that in the next Plan period it will be important to seek significantly more development of qualitative measures of wetland status. This could be expanded on in the Plan, in relation

to aspects of inventory and assessment which relate to wetland “condition”, and in relation to wise use.

5. We note and welcome the reference in para 5 of the Introduction to greater involvement of NGOs and of the private sector. Here we would also wish to see an aim of much greater involvement of all sectors of government, i.e., beyond the lead Administrative Authority, to include other significant spending departments, economic development and infrastructure ministries, local government, executive and advisory agencies at all levels, and so on. Another aspect of this is the links between national focal points for different Conventions (mentioned in section 1.3.1.2, but important also in this introductory context). In effect what we would advise is a considerable enhancement, in relation to the Plan overall, of the issue which is raised in section 1.13.2.

### **General Objectives**

6. The regimes which should apply to the conservation, management and protection against threat of the values represented by the strategically selected suite of special sites in the Ramsar “List”, seem to belong best under the objective (2) concerning “Wetlands of International Importance” rather than Objective 1 concerning wise use of wetlands generally. This indeed appears to be the logic followed in the Plan, where it is Objective 2 under which for example Articles 3.2 and 4.2 of the Convention are dealt with. Paras 37-40 confirm the same thing.
7. Para 17 of the Introduction which describes General Objective 2 simply in terms of implementing the *Strategic Framework* for the List of sites may therefore need amending. The main emphasis of the *Framework* concerns putting in place the right suite of sites, rather than the special measures required for (and Convention obligations applying to) their treatment once listed.
8. In fact it may be worth analysing or clarifying the way in which the boundary is seen between these two “pillars” of the Convention, viz “wise use” and “wetlands of international importance”. There is obviously actual and potential overlap, and the way this works is fundamental to the structure of the Convention.
9. We would urge that the different “pillars” of the Convention, presented here as the General Objectives, be presented in terms of the fundamentals of the Treaty. For example, Objective 1 is based on Article 3.1. Objective 3 is based on Article 5, and we would prefer it to be presented in that way, rather than (as at present) being about the application of a set of guidelines.
10. General Objective 5 in our view requires less ambiguous presentation, or possibly even re-thinking. We understand it to be about “capacity” in relation to Convention institutions at the international level, but including also the network of national focal points for the STRP and the outreach programme (see 5.1.6). In paras 26-27 of the wise use section (Objective 1) there is reference to capacity issues in relation to Contracting Parties at national level. If these two kinds of “capacities” are to be dealt with in such a separated way, then the fact of this and the logic for it should be explained, and cross-references made between the two sections.

11. In line with views we have developed more fully elsewhere, we suggest that in paras 38-39 under General Objective 2 it would be better to lead in to the “ecological change” issue by underlining the basic treaty obligation on this (Article 3.2), and relating the references to the Montreux Record and Ramsar Advisory Missions more closely to the role they play in that regard. This approach in fact is already taken later in the Plan, in Operational Objective 2.4.
12. We note the reference in para 48(e) linking sustainable harvesting with trade, and references to CITES in 1.11.4 and 3.4.4. This seems to represent a new area of development of the Convention, and some explanation of the significance of this could usefully be given.

## Section II

### Operational Objectives and Actions

13. Operational Objective 1.2 and its Actions are of concern. They have the effect of weakening the previous Plan’s encouragement to Parties to develop National Wetland Policies, which is all the more regrettable coming so soon after adoption of the COP7 guidelines. We would prefer to revert to the sentiments expounded hitherto, e.g., “promote much greater efforts to develop national wetland policies (Strategic Plan Action 2.1.2, 1996) or “urge those Parties that have yet to develop such policies to give this activity the highest attention” (Resolution VII.6 para 9, 1999).
14. The collaboration with IAIA mentioned in 1.4.4 (valuation) probably belongs more properly in 1.4.3 (impact assessment). It is also not clear why the other collaborations mentioned in 1.4.4 should not feature in 1.4.3 as well. 1.4.4 in any case reads somewhat opaquely, and should perhaps be re-written to make its scope clearer.
15. Para 1.5.3 is of concern. It appears once again to introduce the approach, rejected by the STRP, of human use values featuring in site evaluation/selection criteria rather than as factors guiding wise use. Something on the subject of social, cultural, scientific, etc., values might well be said in this section of the Plan, which is indeed the “wise use” section, but it should not relate to site criteria. In any case any site criteria matters belong under Objective 2, not here.
16. We are further concerned by the introduction in this paragraph of a concept of “primary” and “second tier” criteria. This has dangers, and the implications of it for the fundamental concept of the “international importance” standard would need thorough debate. In our view the standard cannot be subdivided in a way that would allow sites to have different “grades” of international importance.
17. This issue is in fact worth debating in relation to the system of criteria as it stands at present. There is no commonly understood policy on whether the criteria have additive effect, i.e., whether a site qualifying on several different grounds can be regarded as more “internationally important” than a site qualifying on a single ground. In our view such an approach should be explicitly rejected. Any site which is “internationally important”, irrespective of the reasons why, is, by virtue of this, in a mutually interdependent network such that loss of any one listed site has an equally significant effect on the integrity of the

network as would loss of any other listed site. We see this as the legally correct way to interpret the provisions of the Convention. “Multiple values” may certainly have implications for management action, but in our view they do not have implications for the official status of sites.

18. In the context of the welcome reference to transboundary impact assessment in 3.1.3, it would be appropriate to mention the Espoo Convention (on impact assessment in a transboundary context), which, while applicable to the European region, may also be of wider interest (in the same way as the Plan cites examples from the Medwet Initiative).
19. In para 3.4.8, we believe that over the period 2003-2008 the Bureau could be expected to do more than merely “explore the concept” of modular national reporting. We suggest it would be reasonable to amend this to read “develop modular-style national reporting formats”.
20. Para 4.1.1.6 refers to the possibility of regional economic integration organisations becoming Contracting Parties to the Convention. While some would wish this to come about, BirdLife is among those who see disadvantages. If the prospect is to be raised, a considered debate will be needed. We therefore consider that it is pre-judging the issue for the Plan to specify “investigating the feasibility” of this, without first reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of it. We suggest that the text be amended accordingly.
21. We consider that para 5.1.4 should go further than merely reviewing the financial resources available to the STRP (which conceivably could do no more than concluding that there are insufficient resources!), and should instead specify reviewing “ways of financing” the Panel’s work.
22. Reference in 5.2.2 to “undertaking of Ramsar Advisory Missions for sites included in the Montreux Record and other Ramsar sites” indicates that RAMs may be undertaken for sites which are not included in the Record. It is true that the adopted procedures (Recommendations 4.7 and 4.8) do not strictly require that RAMs be limited only to Montreux Record sites, although 4.8 does instruct the Bureau to give priority to such sites. Empirically, the factors which commend a site for RAM attention are also those which commend it for inclusion in the Record, and the prospect of a RAM may indeed act as a welcome incentive for first listing a site in the Record. It is thus perhaps curious that there is not more complete alignment between the two. It may at least be worth ensuring a common understanding about the kind of circumstances in which it may be appropriate to undertake a RAM for a non-Record site.
23. At present the text of 5.3.3 effectively presents a decision actively to seek to expand the number of International Organization Partners, in an open-ended and unqualified way. The pros and cons of this may need further thought. It would in our view be preferable for this para to read “Welcome eligible organizations seeking the status of International Organization Partner of the Convention”.

### **EKBY (MedWet)**

1. Wetland restoration and rehabilitation: We believe that this issue is very much downgraded. It merits the “rank” of a separate General Objective. At least it is worth

mentioning as a Operational Objective. Wetlands of International Importance are certainly the Convention's flagship. However, one could add another flagship, i.e., the re-created wetlands. We think of few stronger arguments for the conservation of existing wetlands than a wetland which has been re-created in the same place of a drained wetland.

2. The Strategic Plan makes no reference to constructed wetlands as low-cost means to treat domestic effluents. We understand that such a Plan cannot cover all special cases. On the other hand, constructed wetlands for effluent treatment may be used as public awareness tools, i.e., to demonstrate to the public the importance of natural wetlands.
3. Politicians become very good listeners when we put to them the argument that "wetland conservation can open new jobs especially in remote rural areas". Of course the Strategic Plan speaks about wetlands and local development, but perhaps the key words "opening of new jobs" could be added, too.
4. We wonder whether the Convention can do more to embrace the wetland managers and help them to do their job better. Changing unsustainable soils and water policies is absolutely essential, but one hopes that some day these changes will reach the fisherman, the crop farmer, the animal farmer, the hotel keeper and all other users of the resources of the wetland and their hydrological basins.