

Ramsar Information Sheet – 2012

Next steps

NOTE FOR STRP 17.

Most of this paper is unchanged from a consultation draft circulated in early February. The final section 'Moving towards a consensus' (page 6) summarises the present position and options for decisions at this meeting.

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Background

1. The Information Sheet (RIS) is the key instrument for describing Ramsar Sites and subsequently. It was first introduced in 1990 (Resolution 4.7) and has been updated periodically since then.
2. Over the last two triennia, a thorough overhaul of the RIS has been undertaken by STRP, involving extensive consultation and input from many specialists and Contracting Parties. The proposals for change were adopted by CoP 11.
3. Background on the rationale for change is at:
Information Paper COP 11/ DOC 22. [Background, rationale and issues for the 2012 revisions proposed for the Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance and Ramsar Site Information Sheet \(RIS\).](#)
4. The relevant Conference Resolution, with the new format sheet at Annex 1, and guidance on its use at Annex 2, is at:

Resolution XI.8. [Streamlining procedures for describing Ramsar Sites at the time of designation and subsequent updates.](#)

Annex 1. [Ramsar Site Information Sheet \(RIS\) – 2012 revision.](#)

Annex 2. [Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands – 2012 revision.](#)

5. The central elements of the agreed changes are as follows:
 - 5.1 A comprehensive re-structuring of the format of the RIS with the following objectives:
 - to better capture in the Ramsar Sites Database all data and information reported by Contracting Parties;
 - to create a format that facilitates on-line data-entry as part of a move to modernise data handling procedures associated with Secretariat processes;

- to facilitate data-handling, analysis and dissemination by moving from lengthy textual descriptions to categorical (presence/absence; yes/no) or numerical data and/or information;
 - to better capture information on species status on Ramsar Sites;
 - to better align the logic and format of the RIS with other Ramsar tools for site description, notably Article 3.2 Reports, and guidance on inventory; and
 - through these changes, to open the potential for data exchange with respect to Ramsar Sites with other international processes.
- 5.2 Updating and restructuring the guidance on Ramsar Sites selection and description contained within the *Strategic Framework*.
- 5.3 A mandate for the Secretariat, funding permitting, to redevelop the Ramsar Sites Database, and Ramsar Sites Information Service so as to be able to interface with the new format RIS, both in terms of data capture as well as subsequent analysis and dissemination.

Resolution XI.8

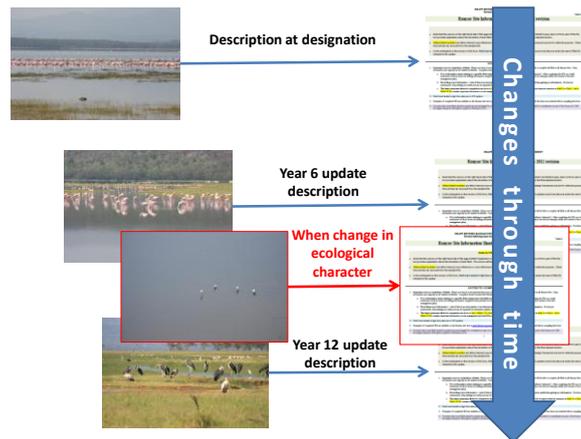
6. Annex 1 presents the operative paragraphs of Resolution XI.8. The key immediate task for STRP is:
- “to urgently consider scope for minor modifications to the RIS to support monitoring at Ramsar Sites through possible inclusion of sub-fields related to:
- change at the site, for example in fields 12a, 12c, and 16 relating to species composition and wetland type;
 - identification of thresholds of change in ecological character; and
 - monitoring indicators...”
7. The motivation of those Contracting Parties (CPs) requesting these additions was a foreseen benefit in being able to use the new RIS format for multiple functions – especially with potentially as a tool supporting management at the Site. Although the thinking was not clearly expressed, conceptually an expanded RIS might sit as a ‘user-friendly’ simple summary of more detailed site management plans – capturing the essence of why a site is important in a standard format.
8. The desire to be able to record ‘thresholds or limits of acceptable change’ (LAC) was also related to past COP requests to STRP for more background on this subject, and which had lead to an Information Paper on LAC to COP 11 (COP 11 Doc. 24 - <http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/cop11/doc/cop11-doc24-e-limits.pdf>).

Suggested approach

Uses of the Ramsar Information Sheet

9. There are a range of different uses and users of the information reported by CPs on Ramsar Information Sheets.

- 9.1 The primary rationale is to provide the bodies of the Convention (COP; Secretariat) and other interested parties with information as to, a) the reasons why particular sites are of international importance, and/or b) provide wider contexts (Regional, Global) related to the status of designated wetlands of international importance.
 - 9.2 The descriptive information provided by CPs within a RIS is of potential value for wetland inventory processes, either nationally or at wider scales.
 - 9.3 In some countries the RIS is used as a reference document (often having legal status depending on the implementation model adopted by the CP), including for management purposes.
 - 9.4 The RIS provides a definitive description of the ecological character of the Ramsar Site at the time of designation, a critical source of baseline information against which to assess future change.
10. Each of these (and other) uses will draw on different sub-sets of the data and information contained within the RIS.
 11. COP has previously recognised the conceptual overlaps between Ramsar's different data instruments related to sites of international importance, with Res. X.14 and especially Res X.15 outlining these. A number of conclusions come from previous considerations:
 - 11.1 There is strong advantage in moving to a common conceptual framework in relation to site description for purposes of inventory; assessment of change; management; and reporting. This allows multiple end-use processes to be fed by a single collection of data/information.
 - 11.2 Exact data needs typically depend on the scale at which users are operating. Global analyses typically use information related to whole sites or aggregations of sites, whilst individual site managers who typically have finer scale data needs either in space or time – for example being either concerned with small parcels of land within a large site, or information on short-term changes in environmental conditions or species status.
 12. The request from COP for additional fields in relation to change and thresholds of change of ecological character clearly relates to national scale uses of the RIS, such information being highly relevant to site management but having fewer, if any, uses at wider scales.
 13. **Change vs Limits of change.** There is potential ambiguity in the request between concepts of 'change' and 'limits of change'.
 - a. **Change** is an inevitable consequence of ecological and other processes. Recording such change (e.g. the size of a species population) will/should occur in the course of the routine update RIS cycle (and/or when there is change of ecological character reported) as outlined below:

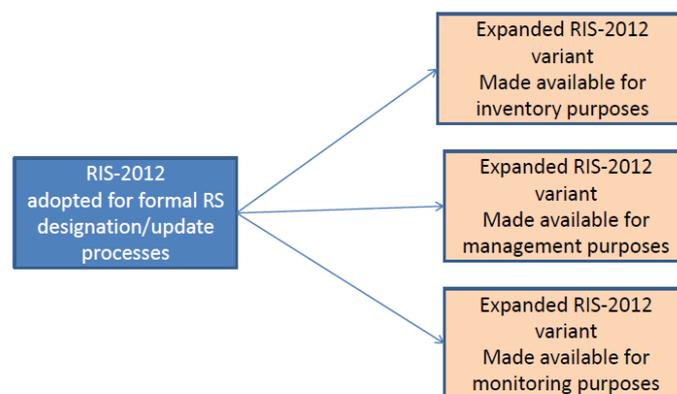


New population levels (or other changed attributes of the site) will be reported and the new Ramsar Sites database should have the functionality to extract – for each field – change over time. Thus the existing RIS format should currently be able to deliver change assessments – as derived information - through routine cycles of update without the further need for modification for the RIS format.

- b. **Limits of change** is a significantly different concept and not currently covered by the RIS format. The request to be able to record ‘change’ (first bullet of para 6 above) is thus interpreted below as relating to limits of change, rather than change *per se*.

14. Two ways this request might be taken forward are outlined below.

15. The first option might be to retain the RIS as agreed at CoP11 but to prepare ‘derived’ versions which might be available for use essentially for more management and/or inventory purposes – probably on a ‘stand-alone’ basis. These might be expanded versions of the existing format – fully compatible with the formal RIS, but with the addition of extra fields useful in the context of inventory, monitoring or management.



16. A second option might be the addition of change subfields to certain of the RIS fields. This could/should be done in a way that recognises that there is no requirement for Contracting Parties to report this information, but that acknowledges that it may be useful for others Parties to formally record this information as an attribute of their reporting to the Convention.

17. One way this might work is given in Annex 2.

Options for discussion

18. The Table below outlines issues associated with the two broad options outlined above.

Options	Arguments for:	Arguments against:
<p>1. Retain RIS as agreed at COP 11, but develop and make available a variant with additional functionality with respect to recording LAC</p>	<p>a) Ramsar Sites database would not collate information on change limits at individual sites – information of dubious international utility</p> <p>b) Provision of an additional tool for site managers as a summary document wholly matching RIS</p> <p>c) A first step that might see further developments of RIS as a (multi-scalar) tool for management and/or inventory purposes</p>	<p>d) Potential confusion as to different RIS formats?</p> <p>e) Potential confusion having any additional descriptive document which contains – in essence much of the same types of information as a site management plan (albeit in more summarised format)</p> <p>f) Relationship with Article 3.2 proforma?</p> <p>g) Potential confusion for CPs as to which RIS format they should use?</p>
<p>2. Develop further optional fields to capture LAC information within formal RIS format</p>	<p>h) Simple provision of additional functionality within core RIS allowing CPs to formally place LACs ‘on the record’ for their sites</p>	<p>i) Adds further complexity to RIS (albeit in the form of optional sub-fields)</p>

19. A more general issue for discussion is whether there is (still) a need for further technical guidance on establishment (and/or reporting) of LACs? This need may exist irrespective of the specific reporting solution adopted, and might be delivered by the development by STRP of simple guidance for site managers with worked examples or case-studies.

Moving towards a consensus?

Responses from earlier consultation on this paper in February 2013 are summarised below, and may form the basis for a decision at STRP 17.

- a. **Limits of change.** The RIS is not intended to substitute for detailed management planning, but text subfields can provide a useful (formal) record of where ‘limits of change’ (LAC) have been established at a site.
- b. The proposal in Annex 2 below for additional sub-fields in field 19 (Ecological character description) would provide for this and address the request in Res XI.8 for “possible sub-fields related to ... identification of thresholds of change in ecological character...”. Its completion would be voluntary, recognising that not all Contracting Parties will have established LACs.
- c. **Change.** The issue of recording ‘change’ is more complex and can (and is) addressed in two different ways in the RIS-2012 format.
- d. First, and most simply, change can be derived by a simple comparison of fields values in RIS submitted on different dates (*e.g.* RIS-Year 1 vs RIS-Year 6).
- e. However, for some fields (6, 17b, 18b, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 30) the RIS has a ‘change at update’ sub-field. The original logic for these was that these highlighted those sub-fields where change through time is most likely to be manifest (in contrast, for example, with physical or geographic description). These ‘change at update’ sub-fields also provide a prompt for those updating a RIS as to those features where change since designation is most likely.
- f. The question then is, if there are some ‘change at update’ sub-fields for some features – why not for all fields? Inherently this becomes an issue of complexity in terms of form and database design. The fields relating to species and wetland types (notably 12a, 12c & 16) are already complex. Multiple items of information are potentially requested for each entry. From a computing/data entry perspective, information on change in these multi-element fields is undoubtedly easier to *derive* from resubmitted field than to try and capture with sub-fields. The critical need is to ensure that the information in these fields is ‘date-stamped’ to allow such derivation.
- g. The two options are thus:
 - i. Retain the current format (where change is derived in fields 12a, 12c & 16). This avoids the need for build in further complexity to the form design whilst at the same time allowing change to be fully recorded at any RIS update simply by reporting ‘new’ information on species abundance *etc.*
 - ii. Add a ‘change at update’ subfield. As potentially any of the data items in these fields might be liable to change, this effectively would mean the field layout doubles in size with a marked increase in complexity of form and database design.
- h. The final question then is whether ‘change at update’ sub-fields are needed for fields 6, 17b, 18b, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 30? Could not this information be

derived also? In nearly all cases, these sub-fields request not just reporting that change has occurred but some indication as to the direction of that change. Thus basic completion of field 20 on water regimes requests presence/absence information about a number of types of water regime at the site. However, the change at RIS update sub-field requests information as to whether there has been no change, increase, decrease or indeed whether change is unknown (lack of monitoring). This gives additional information that could not be derived from the 're-entry' of presence/absence attributes.

- i. It is thus recommended that the 'change at update' sub-fields in fields 6, 17b, 18b, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 30 are retained in their current format as approved at COP 11.

Acknowledgements

20. Thanks to Lars Dinesen, Max Finlayson, Randy Milton, Dave Pritchard and Georgina Usher for ideas and input.

Annex 1. Operative paragraphs of Resolution XI.8 with implications for STRP and Secretariat activity

Res XI.8 operative paragraphs	Implications for STRP	Implications for Ramsar Secretariat
12. ADOPTS the <i>Ramsar Site Information Sheet (RIS) – 2012 revision</i> as annexed to this Resolution;		
13. ADOPTS the <i>Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands – 2012 revision</i> as annexed to this Resolution as guidance for the future selection and description of Ramsar Sites, both at the time of designation and subsequent updates;		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of the revised <i>Strategic Framework</i> into the next <i>Ramsar Handbook</i> series
14. CONFIRMS that the <i>Ramsar Site Information Sheet (RIS) – 2012 revision</i> and the <i>Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands - 2012 revision</i> as annexed to this Resolution supersede and replace the previously adopted <i>Strategic Framework</i> , RIS and other associated guidance for completing the RIS;		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop information for the relevant pages of the website outlining timetable and steps to implement Res. XI.8 through to CoP 12
15. AGREES that this <i>RIS – 2012 revision</i> format and its accompanying <i>Strategic Framework – 2012 revision</i> will formally enter into use from January 2015 for designations of new sites, extensions to existing sites and updates on existing sites, thus allowing adequate time for:		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above
a) Contracting Parties to complete any pending Ramsar Site designations or updates that are already in		

Res XI.8 operative paragraphs	Implications for STRP	Implications for Ramsar Secretariat
preparation using the previous RIS format;		
b) Contracting Parties to become familiar with the new format and to allow any adjustments, should this be necessary; and		
c) the Ramsar Secretariat to update the Ramsar Sites Database (RSDB) to receive Ramsar Site data and information in the new format, allowing for on-line electronic submission of Ramsar Information Sheets whilst ensuring that new systems allow for the submission of RIS from those areas where there is limited Internet access;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical advice to Secretariat and developers as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate project, funding permitting, to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) update database; and b) develop systems to allow on-line (and other electronic) RIS submissions
16. ALSO AGREES that under exceptional circumstances, following consultation with the Secretariat, and where sites are in a legal national process towards designation which involves the use of the current format RIS, these may be submitted in support of such designations after 2015 but only until COP12;		
17. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties, on a voluntary basis, to submit new Ramsar Site designations and updates on existing Sites using the <i>RIS – 2012 revision</i> format prior to January 2015, as their capacities allow and following discussion with the Secretariat;		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance to CPs as to when RIS-2012 will be available for voluntary use, noting the strong desire of many CPs to start using the new format and that some national review processes are on hold until this is possible
18. INSTRUCES the Secretariat to implement the terms of Resolution VIII.13 (2002) para. 11 regarding		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above. To be built in to project specification. Note that Res. VIII.13

Res XI.8 operative paragraphs	Implications for STRP	Implications for Ramsar Secretariat
upgrading the functionality of the RSDB to allow the on-line electronic submission of RISs by Contracting Parties and, in particular, to ensure that the RSDB captures all data and information provided by Contracting Parties in Ramsar Information Sheets, rather than just a subset of such data and information as at present;		notes the need for database to database transfer as well as the current 'one site at a time' WCMC model. This will require technical guidance to CPs as to appropriate means of bulk-transfer of relevant data and information
19. REQUESTS the Secretariat to work with the CBD, the UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), and other organizations to ensure that data and information on the status of Ramsar Sites are fully integrated into other appropriate databases, international processes and assessments;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • STRP could maybe help identify processes where there may be (better) use of data and information about Ramsar Sites by other international processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General task for Secretariat
20. REQUESTS the STRP to further consider the issue of recognizing the importance of ecosystem benefits/services in the future designation of Ramsar Sites, in relation to the terms of Objective 1 of the <i>Strategic Framework</i> and to assess the implications for the RIS, and INVITES Contracting Parties to work with the STRP to develop a more thorough understanding of the nature and extent of ecosystem benefits/services provided by Ramsar Sites individually and at national and global network scales and to report the outcomes of that work to the Standing Committee and the Conference of Parties;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary task for STRP in next triennium. Should aim for a substantive progress report to Standing Committee 47 (2014), and use any opportunities to open dialogue with Contracting Parties on issue. Joint task with STRP working group on ecosystem services 	
21. FURTHER REQUESTS the STRP, in the context of its work plan for 2013-2015 and resources permitting, to undertake further work related to the RIS		

Res XI.8 operative paragraphs	Implications for STRP	Implications for Ramsar Secretariat
and associated guidance as follows:		
i) to develop further practical guidance on the issue of defining Ramsar Site boundaries, reflecting that approaches used may depend <i>inter alia</i> of scale of site, the presence of ecological, national and other boundary situations, landscape type, land tenure, and national spatial planning laws and policies, and REQUESTS Contracting Parties to assist STRP in this task through the provision of information and case studies;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Task for STRP to report to CoP 12. Further guidance with respect to boundary definition (primarily for new sites) with case studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance from Regional staff would be valuable in identifying possible case studies and a range of approaches
ii) to urgently consider scope for minor modifications to the RIS to support monitoring at Ramsar Sites through possible inclusion of sub-fields related to: change at the site, for example in fields 12a, 12c, and 16 relating to species composition and wetland type; identification of thresholds of change in ecological character; and monitoring indicators. It is suggested that any minor modifications be provided to the Secretariat to provide to the Standing Committee for final endorsement of remaining minor details enabling them to be incorporated within the finalized format, agreed by COP11, by January 2015; and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary task for STRP – this paper. To go to Standing Committee 46 (April 2013) 	
iii) to prepare additional guidance concerning a) identification, boundary-setting and management issues related to very small wetlands which may nonetheless be of international importance, and b) zoning of sites in the context of management planning and especially in relation to uses of Ramsar Sites by people, including	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Task for STRP to report to CoP 12. Further guidance with case studies. Undertake with i) above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance from Regional staff would be valuable in identifying possible case studies and a range of approaches

Res XI.8 operative paragraphs	Implications for STRP	Implications for Ramsar Secretariat
implications for RIS reporting;		
<p>22. ALSO REQUESTS the STRP and the Secretariat to collaborate with IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas, Species Survival Commission, and other interested parties in considering the implications of CBD’s Decision X/31 in the context of supporting the application of the Convention’s long-established Criteria for the selection of Wetlands of International Importance, including any implications this might have for the identification of important sites for delivery of ecosystem services, whilst noting the undesirability of radical changes for the Convention’s established site-selection processes, as well as the delivery of Aichi Target 11 of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, and to report outcomes of this work to the Standing Committee and the Conference of Parties; and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task for STRP and Secretariat. Next meeting in Washington, 11-15 March 2013. • Progress report to Standing Committee 47 (2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task for STRP and Secretariat. Next meeting in Washington, 11-15 March 2013. • Progress report to Standing Committee 47 (2014)
<p>23. EXPRESSES APPRECIATION to the STRP, past and current Secretariat staff, and all those Contracting Parties and others (notably UK’s Joint Nature Conservation Committee, The Nature Conservancy, and Wetlands International) who have contributed to the delivery of the 2012 revisions to the <i>Ramsar Site Information Sheet (RIS)</i> and the <i>Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands</i>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to maintain an informal ‘Friends of RIS’ to provide further technical input, help identify best practise and help develop further guidance products as desirable. 	

Annex 2. Possible change fields for inclusion in RIS-2012 structure

For each of the following fields, the attached sub-fields would be added to capture information about limits of change for the fields/attributes concerned.

- 12a. Plant species related to the international importance of the site**
- 12c. Animal species related to the international importance of the site**
- 16. Wetland types present in the site**

In an electronic version of the RIS, visibility of sub-fields would be triggered by the following question:

Do you wish to add additional information about acceptable limits of change in this attribute? [Yes/No]

‘Yes’ would bring up three sub-fields:

a. What is the nature of these limits of acceptable change?

- Statorily or legally established
- Drawn from site Management Plan
- From another site or national advisory process
- Otherwise established/recorded
- Unknown

b) Upper limit of change

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c) Lower limit of change

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For recording upper and lower limits of change, it is probably not feasible to capture this information quantitatively as there may be many ways this is expressed in national processes. Thus for species, change limits might be expressed as an absolute number (no less than 5,000 individuals); or as proportion ($\pm 25\%$ of the numbers at the time of classification); or as a rate of change (alert triggered if decline of $> 2\%$ pa); or – for plant species – as some expression of area covered¹.

Pragmatically therefore, the change fields are probably best as simple text fields which would allow the Contracting Party to formally record this information with the Ramsar Sites description.

In principle, the approach might additionally be extended to records LACs for a number of other fields, although the priority would seem to be those fields (12a, 12c & 16) which are directly linked to the criteria related to the international importance of the site:

¹ Explanatory guidance will need to be developed for inclusion at appropriate points in the *Strategic Framework*.

- 17b. Invasive alien plant species [upper threshold only]
- 18b. Invasive alien animal species [upper threshold only]
- 20. Water regime
- 21. Sediment regime
- 22. Water pH (?)
- 23. Water salinity (?)
- 24. Dissolved or suspended nutrients in water (?)

COP also requested "...possible inclusion of sub-fields related to: ...identification of thresholds of change in ecological character,"

Options here might be similar. Following Field 13 (ecological character description):

Do you wish to add additional information about limits of change to the ecological character of this Site?
[Yes/No]

'Yes' would bring up [three] sub-fields:

a. What is the nature of these limits of ecological change?

- Statorily or legally established
- Drawn from site Management Plan
- From another site or national advisory process
- Otherwise established/recorded
- Unknown

- b) Upper limit of ecological change
- c) Lower limit of ecological change

In this context – given that ecological character is inherently multi-factoral, 'upper' and 'lower' might not be the best way of capture this information. **Views welcome!**