

Report on the challenges and opportunities related to the submission and updating of Ramsar Information Sheets

Action requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to:

- i. note the challenges and opportunities related to the submission and updating of Ramsar Information Sheet identified by Contracting Parties; and
- ii. instruct the Secretariat on actions to be taken.

Introduction

1. This document is prepared by the Secretariat of the Convention pursuant to Decision SC62-53 taken by the Standing Committee at its 62nd meeting (SC62) in September 2023, in which:

“The Standing Committee instructed the Secretariat to submit a report to SC63 on the challenges and opportunities related to the submission and updating of Ramsar Information Sheets, including:

- systemic, procedural and other technical challenges and options; and
- financial challenges, needs and opportunities.

In doing so, the Secretariat will obtain and collate inputs in consultation with Contracting Parties, the STRP and other stakeholders. The Secretariat will develop the approach to undertake the task in consultation with Contracting Parties through written procedures and online session(s).”

2. The List of Wetlands of International Importance is maintained by the Secretariat. Information on Wetlands of International Importance provided by Contracting Parties through the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) is made available in the Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS)¹. The RIS currently in use was adopted in Resolution XI.8 on *Streamlining procedures for describing Ramsar Sites at the time of designation and subsequent updates*. The *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands*, most recently updated in 2022², provides guidance on completing the RIS.

¹ See <https://rsis.ramsar.org>.

² See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/strategic-framework-guidelines-future-development-list-wetlands-international-importance-2>.

3. Resolution VI.13 on *Submission of information on sites designated for the Ramsar list of wetlands of international importance* urges Contracting Parties to complete information sheets for all sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance, and to revise the data provided at least every six years for monitoring purposes. Resolution XIV.13 on *Status of Sites in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance* urges Contracting Parties that have not submitted a RIS or a map for Wetlands of International Importance that they have designated to provide such information, requests Contracting Parties to submit updated information at least every six years using the RIS, and instructs the Secretariat to contact the relevant Contracting Parties to offer technical support.
4. Activities undertaken by the Secretariat to assist Parties in updating RIS include: organization of nine training webinars between 2019 and 2021; production and publishing of video tutorials on the Convention website; and preparation of reports on the status of the List of Wetlands of International Importance to all Standing Committee meetings and the Conference of the Contracting Parties since 2000. However, the number as well as the proportion of out-of-date RIS is increasing, with 1,238 of the total 2,188 sites out of date as of COP12, 1,592 of 2,314 sites as of COP13, and 1,826 of 2,439 sites as of COP14.
5. Designation and protection of Wetlands of International Importance is a core provision of the Convention. Up-to-date information on Wetlands of International Importance, including for example total area of wetland and different wetland types they contain, potential threats, and their management status, is essential for credible monitoring of implementation of the Convention, as well as for preparation of flagship products such as the *Global Wetland Outlook*. It supports management planning, and is important for the integration of Wetlands of International Importance into broader efforts to promote wise use of all wetlands worldwide, including for example the protection of ecological networks for migratory birds at flyway scale. It is also a valuable resource for conservation organizations and researchers, as well as a resource for outreach and awareness raising.
6. Furthermore, Wetlands of International Importance constitute one of the largest area-based conservation networks in the world and therefore make a significant contribution towards global goals and targets related to area-based protection, including in particular Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), as well as relevant targets under Goals 14 and 15 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. RIS updating therefore also serves an important function in monitoring the implementation of the GBF and the SDGs, and in identifying the contribution made under through the Convention on Wetlands in this regard. Resolution VIII.13, paragraph 8 notes that there is a growing interest in and need to ensure access to more complete and accurate data on Wetlands of International Importance.

Process undertaken by the Secretariat

7. Through a notification sent on 17 October 2023, the Secretariat invited Contracting Parties to provide information on challenges and opportunities related to the submission and updating of RIS. Submissions were made by 11 Parties.
8. The Secretariat presented an overview of challenges identified and proposals made by Contracting Parties to the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) during its 26th meeting (STRP26) in February 2024, for discussion and in order to consult the Panel on possible actions. The Panel's input is reflected in this document

9. A summary of challenges identified and proposals made by Contracting Parties is presented in the table at Annex 1 below, organized into thematic categories relating to the RIS review process, the RIS updating cycle, the RIS format, and capacity needs for RIS updating. Proposed actions for consideration by Standing Committee include immediate measures to be taken by the Secretariat, activities that may be pursued in the near-term subject to approval by SC63, and potential long-term changes that require future approval by Contracting Parties.
10. Proposals made by one Contracting Party relating to review of the criteria for identifying Wetlands of International Importance and by one Contracting Party relating to review of the Ramsar Classification System for Wetland Type are not addressed here, as these issues are outside the immediate scope of Decision SC62-53. The Standing Committee may, as appropriate, request the STRP to consider the need for review of the criteria. It should be noted that the STRP, pursuant to Decision SC62-50, discussed the application of the classification system at STRP26 and will report to SC63 providing, if required, an outline of a proposed approach for a technical review of the classification system in consultation with Contracting Parties, International Organization Partners and other multilateral environmental agreements.
11. The Standing Committee is invited to consider the proposed actions identified in Table 1 and instruct the Secretariat accordingly.

Annex 1

Challenges and opportunities related to the submission and updating of Ramsar Information Sheets

Thematic area	Challenges identified by Contracting Parties	Proposals from Contracting Parties	Proposed actions by Secretariat for consideration by Standing Committee
RIS review process	The Secretariat's RIS review process involves too many steps/too many levels of review and approval and takes too long.	<p>The Secretariat should look at ways of streamlining the steps involved in reviewing the RIS (designation and update). RIS review by the Secretariat should place emphasis on ensuring completeness of the most relevant data fields rather than minutiae. Initial review of RIS should be sufficiently thorough so that review of resubmitted RIS does not result in new/additional comments in relation to information that was provided in the original submission.</p> <p>The Secretariat should explore options for securing additional human capacity to review RIS.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will update its Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for RIS review with a view to streamlining the process and enhancing efficiency, including reducing the number of steps, identifying key roles and accountability, and establishing indicative timelines for processing at each step.</p> <p>Contracting Parties may consider making budgetary provisions for the Secretariat to hire consultants (on a retainer or on a part-time basis) to support RIS review when required.</p>
	Communication with Contracting Parties during the RIS update process is at times insufficient	<p>The Secretariat should confirm receipt of RIS submissions, indicating expected processing time and providing information on potential delays.</p> <p>The Secretariat should inform Contracting Parties regarding the need to update RIS for individual Wetlands of International Importance, before and when the RIS becomes out of date.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will confirm receipt of a RIS update to the submitting Contracting Party.</p> <p>The Secretariat will notify Contracting Parties of the need to update RIS through automated notifications to be sent six months and three months before a RIS is due for an update, on the date the RIS becomes outdated, and annually thereafter.</p>
RIS updating cycle	Regular RIS updating and global reporting on the Site network are key to tracking implementation of the Convention, but making frequent comprehensive RIS updates presents a challenge especially for countries with limited technical and financial capacity.	<p>The current cycle of six years for comprehensive RIS updates is too short. Some data in the RIS do not change frequently or rapidly. A longer cycle of nine years may be considered for comprehensive updates, while more frequent updates may be made for the most relevant aspects/data fields.</p> <p>The Secretariat should continue to report on the status of the List of Wetlands of International Importance to the Standing Committee annually, as a key element in global collective review and to promote further RIS updating as well as designation.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will update relevant guidance to Contracting Parties as well as its SOP for RIS review to reflect a six-year cycle for RIS updates focusing on the most relevant information, noting that this is in line with e.g. Resolution XI.8 (Annex 1).</p> <p>The Standing Committee may consider repealing Decision SC62-54, and requesting the Secretariat to report on the status of the List of Wetlands of International Importance to the Standing Committee annually.</p>

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RIS format	<p>The RIS is long and updating is time consuming, placing a burden on Contracting Parties. In addition to low updating rates, the RIS format may also place some limitations on effective utilization of RIS data in technical reporting on the Site network, beyond tracking number of Sites.</p>	<p>Prioritize the RIS, identifying data fields that should be prioritized as part of an update, enabling faster review of RIS updates without compromising data quality.</p> <p>Make adjustments to data fields where relevant including enhanced use of drop-down menus and multiple-choice options, where appropriate in combination with text fields for additional information.</p> <p>Provide further guidance on “completeness of data to be submitted” for the RIS update (Resolution XI.8 does not define this) as well as more specific guidance or instructions on data to be provided in some sections/fields of the RIS.</p>	<p>The SC may consider requesting the Secretariat to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - identify key questions/data fields in the RIS for Contracting Parties to prioritize when submitting RIS updates, based on their relevance to tracking and reporting on changes in sites, implementation of the Convention and the Convention’s contribution towards relevant targets of the GBF and the targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda; as well as the work of the STRP including preparation of reports such as the <i>Global Wetland Outlook</i>. - make a clear distinction between data required at initial designation (to be updated when relevant), and key questions/data fields to be regularly updated, through labelling of fields and/or reorganization of the RIS; - further define input options for data fields in the RIS where relevant, with a view to enabling faster data entry as well as better synthesis and analysis of data. <p>In doing this the Secretariat will draw on existing information and guidance on completion of RIS including e.g. as contained in Resolution XI.8 (Annex 1) and COP11 Doc.22.</p> <p>The Secretariat will review and update existing guidance relating to completeness of data and data entry in the RIS.</p>

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		<p>Enable automated importing of data from other sources where possible, e.g. so that species information can be imported from Excel spreadsheets instead of being entered manually field by field for each Site.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will assess the feasibility of automating transfer of data to RIS from external sources for specific fields, including species lists, and report on findings to SC64 (also noting e.g. Resolution VII.13 paragraph 11 and XIII.10 paragraph 25 on direct database-to-database transfer of data and information related to the RIS).</p>
		<p>A number of specific suggestions were made by Contracting Parties in relation to individual questions and data fields in the RIS, including proposed additions, deletions, reformulations, and amendment of response options or data formats.</p>	<p>The Standing Committee may consider requesting the Secretariat, in consultation with the STRP, to prepare a draft updated RIS for consideration at SC64, with a view to further focusing, streamlining and improving RIS updating.</p>
Capacity	RIS updates require a significant amount of data as well as scientific support, including in relation to mapping, inventory and monitoring	<p>Explore peer-to-peer learning opportunities. The Secretariat could host an online webinar series where Contracting Parties share relevant experiences, e.g. processes or programs to generate data to facilitate RIS updates and experiences with Site management planning.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will invite parties to share experiences and best practice in the context of its regular/ongoing RIS-related training.</p>
		<p>Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs) could support Contracting Parties with RIS updates, and make provisions for this in their annual work plans.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will include a session on capacity building and support for RIS updating in the annual global RRI planning meeting.</p>
		<p>The Ramsar Regional Centre East Asia (RRC-EA) <i>Practical Guide for Ramsar Site Designation and Updating of Ramsar Information Sheets</i> could, with some updates, be used as a guidance document for Contracting Parties in RIS updating.</p>	<p>The Secretariat will work with RRC-EA and in consultation with STRP members/observers to update the Guide, reflecting as appropriate adjustments to RIS submission and review presented herein.</p>
		<p>Establish a support mechanism through which Contracting Parties may receive direct technical support for research, mapping, updating RIS and potentially other aspects such as developing site management plans. This may be similar to Ramsar Advisory Missions, and operationalized through the establishment of an “RIS fund”.</p>	<p>The Standing Committee may consider requesting the Secretariat to undertake an analysis and prepare an options paper on the establishment, operation and resourcing of a RIS support mechanism.</p>