



Ramsar Advisory Missions: A mechanism to respond to change in ecological character of Ramsar Sites

The Ramsar Advisory Mission (RAM) is one of the most valuable tools available to Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. A RAM is a technical assistance mechanism through which a Contracting Party may request expert advice about how to respond to threats to the ecological character of a Ramsar Site and associated wetland issues.

This Policy Brief seeks to assist Contracting Parties to the Convention and, more specifically, decision makers in Ramsar Administrative Authorities¹ and National Focal Points² in further understanding the RAM concept, the value of RAMs, as well as lessons learned on their effective application. A Briefing Note on RAMs has also been produced to help Ramsar Site managers understand the use of the RAM process and to highlight selected case studies.

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- 1 The Administrative Authority is the agency or ministry tasked by the national government of a Contracting Party with implementation of the Ramsar Convention within its territory (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016). To find the list of the heads of the Administrative Authorities within each Contracting Party, visit: [https://www.ramsar.org/search?f\[0\]=type%3Aperson&f\[1\]=field_tag_roles%3A961&search_api_views_fulltext=](https://www.ramsar.org/search?f[0]=type%3Aperson&f[1]=field_tag_roles%3A961&search_api_views_fulltext=).
 - 2 The National Focal Point is the daily point of contact within the Administrative Authority for Ramsar Convention matters (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016). To find the list of National Focal Points within each Contracting Party, visit: [https://www.ramsar.org/search?f\[0\]=type%3Aperson&f\[1\]=field_tag_roles%3A482&search_api_views_fulltext=](https://www.ramsar.org/search?f[0]=type%3Aperson&f[1]=field_tag_roles%3A482&search_api_views_fulltext=).



Policy recommendations

This policy brief recommends that decision makers in Ramsar Administrative Authorities and National Focal Points:

- Recognize that a RAM is a positive initiative that provides independent recommendations for addressing actual and potential change in ecological character at Ramsar Sites.
- Understand that only a Contracting Party may initiate a RAM and that it is up to the Contracting Party to decide whether and how RAM recommendations addressed to it are to be implemented.
- Promote the use of RAMs when needed to gain access to international technical and policy expertise and to convene and engage local stakeholders.
- Appreciate that a RAM is an opportunity to highlight the value of Ramsar Sites and demonstrate a country's commitment to the Ramsar Convention.
- Explore synergistic opportunities for joint missions with other multilateral environmental agreements and intergovernmental agencies.
- Take the necessary actions to follow up on the RAMs including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
- Work with the Ramsar Secretariat, interested Contracting Parties, the Convention's International Organization Partners and the private sector to identify and mobilize funding sources for RAMs.
- Contact the Ramsar Secretariat to discuss the need for RAMs at specific Ramsar Sites and associated wetlands.

The issue

A primary obligation of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention is to designate sites as Wetlands of International Importance, known as Ramsar Sites. In designating a wetland, the Contracting Party is committing to maintain its ecological character, including the ecosystem services that it provides to people.

However, Ramsar Sites and other wetlands can face a variety of on-site and off-site challenges. For example, the threats may involve degradation of water quality, over-extraction of water and over-exploitation of species, introduction of pollutants and invasive species and conversion through drainage and filling. The threats may be related to developments in the agriculture, industrial, energy, infrastructure, urban residential, tourism and recreational sectors. Climate change can exacerbate the effects of these threats.

The Administrative Authority and National Focal Point(s) within a Contracting Party may find it beneficial to receive advice from international technical and policy experts when a Ramsar Site is being adversely affected by a completed or ongoing activity – or when the Ramsar Site is being threatened by a proposed activity.

What is a Ramsar Advisory Mission?

A RAM is a technical assistance mechanism through which a Contracting Party may request expert advice about how to respond to threats to the ecological character of a Ramsar Site and associated wetland issues. The mechanism involves a site visit by a multi-national, multi-disciplinary team of experts who assess the problems, consult with stakeholders and prepare a report and recommendations.

A Contracting Party initiates the process by requesting a RAM from the Secretariat, which works with the concerned authorities to determine the terms of reference and the expertise needed for the mission.





Ramsar Advisory Missions in practice

Since the mechanism was established in 1988, more than 80 RAMs have been conducted. A RAM may address single or multiple issues related to actual or potential change in the ecological character of a Ramsar Site, as the examples below illustrate.

- RAM63 addressed multiple issues at Bahía de Panamá and San San-Pond Sak, in Panama, including impacts related to banana plantations, dams, pollution, land conversion and extraction of sand.
- RAM74 was triggered by concerns about the possible impact of the development of tourism infrastructure in the area surrounding Parque Nacional Cabo Pulmo in Mexico, which is also part of a World Heritage Site.
- RAM75 was triggered by the disastrous impacts of severe flooding along the Indus River in Pakistan. The mission was primarily concerned with application of Ramsar's wise use provisions as a response to flooding throughout the Indus system.
- RAM78 provided advice on managing current threats to Parc national des Virunga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including oil exploration, illegal occupation, fishing and poaching of large mammals, as well firewood and charcoal exploitation.
- RAM79 reviewed the implications of the proposed development of road and rail infrastructure for the Nordre Tyrifjord Wetland System Ramsar Site in Norway.

The benefits of Ramsar Advisory Missions

The RAM process has a number of benefits:

- It provides an independent mechanism for assessing and addressing actual and potential change in ecological character of Ramsar Sites;
- It carries the endorsement and authority of a global intergovernmental treaty, yet is a flexible mechanism that can be adapted to particular circumstances;
- It may be accompanied by (limited) financial resources to support implementation, particularly in developing countries;
- It provides access to international technical and policy expertise;
- It helps to increase familiarity with aspects of implementation of the Convention in countries that are seeking capacity support;
- It convenes stakeholders; and
- It results in a publicly available report, building buy-in and transparency, and also enabling Contracting Parties and other stakeholders to share their experience and lessons learned.

Considerations for the effective use of Ramsar Advisory Missions

The Contracting Party and the Secretariat should agree to concise terms of reference before each RAM. A clear statement of objectives and an approach establishes expectations, assists communication with site managers, stakeholders and other interested third parties and enables progress to be assessed during the implementation and follow-up phases.

Consider harnessing the expertise of the Convention's International Organization Partners. When acceptable to the Contracting Party, such an approach could help to ensure the most effective use of limited financial resources and Secretariat capacity.

RAMs should involve the Ramsar Site managers, Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) National Focal Points, National Ramsar Committees and other stakeholders. Such participation can help build capacity for implementation of the Convention, increase the robustness of findings and enhance "buy-in" on the RAM's recommendations.

Consider RAMs for Transboundary Ramsar Sites. Neighboring Contracting Parties can establish Sites on their territory as part of a bigger Transboundary Ramsar Site, which are managed collaboratively. Cross-border cooperation is necessary if such a shared resource is to be managed effectively.



A joint mission should be considered if the issues addressed by the RAM affect multiple international obligations. Additional experts from other multilateral agreements or related processes bring additional perspectives, and synergies may result.

Engage in discussions with potential funders. Although RAMs require funding, there are multiple sources to engage. Work with the Ramsar Secretariat, interested Contracting Parties, International Organization Partners and the private sector to secure funding sources for RAMs.

Plan for implementation. The RAM report is not an end in itself, but is a stepping stone in a longer-term process. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Contracting Party to follow up and decide whether and how to implement the recommendations addressed to it. It is good practice for RAM implementation plans to:

- Specify what actions should be taken to address each recommendation and the expected result;
- Identify who should undertake such actions;
- Document the timescale over which the actions should be undertaken;
- Indicate how and when implementation of RAM recommendations (and associated follow-up actions) will be monitored and communicated to the Secretariat and to the Conference of Parties, for example via National Reports or the Secretariat's report on the status of Ramsar Sites under Article 8.2 of the Convention.

An effective response to RAM reports requires national-level ownership of that response. One means of achieving this may be to follow up RAM reports with a nationally convened workshop or similar process, which could include participation by international experts, for translating RAM recommendations into a national action plan.

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Further reading

- Jones, T. & Pritchard, D.E. (2017). *Comprehensive review and analysis of Ramsar Advisory Mission (RAM)*

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- Ramsar Convention Secretariat. (2016). *An Introduction to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (previously The Ramsar Convention Manual)*. Ramsar Handbooks for the wise use of wetlands, 5th ed., volume 1. Gland, Switzerland: Ramsar Convention Secretariat. Available at: <https://www.ramsar.org/document/handbook-1-5th-edition-an-introduction-to-the-convention-on-wetlands>.

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- The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (1990). The 4th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties Montreux, Switzerland, 27 June–4 July, 1990. *Recommendation 4.7: Mechanisms for improved application of the Ramsar Convention*. Available at: <https://www.ramsar.org/document/recommendation-47-mechanisms-for-improved-application-of-the-ramsar-convention>.

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The Ramsar Convention



The Convention on Wetlands, also known as the Ramsar Convention, is a global inter-governmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. It is the only global treaty to focus on one single ecosystem.