

Ramsar + Culture

Incorporating cultural aspects in the Ramsar Convention

When the Convention on Wetlands was adopted in Ramsar (Iran) in 1971, in its preamble the signatories affirmed their conviction that ‘wetlands constitute a resource of great [...] cultural [...] value’. Although the Convention is better known for its initial focus on wetland biodiversity, in this sense, cultural aspects have been taken into account in its work from the very start.

In multilateral agreements of this kind, however, concepts and principles are elaborated by slow and sometimes cumbersome processes in order to secure the global consensus that gives them their power. Serious attention to the incorporation of cultural aspects into the work of the Ramsar Convention began only in the late 1990s, and has been advancing slowly but positively since then as it progressively achieves more widespread acceptance.

Some early advances

It was in 1990 that a field concerning data on the social and cultural values of designated sites was added to the datasheet for Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites). Soon afterwards, a presentation was given at a major workshop in Thessaloniki on the cultural values of Greek wetlands. Some years later, the seventh meeting of the Convention’s Conference of Contracting Parties (COP7, in San José, Costa Rica, 1999) broached the issue of culture more prominently in its theme People and Wetlands: the Vital Link.

These developments coincided with a rise in discussions on the subject of cultural issues in the framework of the Mediterranean Wetlands initiative (MedWet), following proposals from SEHUMED, the Spanish wetland centre at the University of Valencia. The Mediterranean Wetlands Committee meeting (MedWet/Com) in 2000 in Djerba, Tunisia, featured a technical session on the subject, during which a draft Resolution presented by SEHUMED was discussed in detail. One year later, in Sesimbra, Portugal, MedWet/Com devoted its technical session to the cultural values of salinas.

For its part, the Ramsar Secretariat has produced a series of widely-disseminated Culture [information] sheets and published a pertinent article by the then DSG Nick Davidson.

First substantive deliberations by the Ramsar conference at the global level

In response to growing interest, the Convention’s Standing Committee determined in 2001 that there should be ‘a broad-ranging discussion on the role of cultural and socio-economic issues in the Convention, and ways to enhance that role (including the question of a potential site selection criterion)’.

A draft Resolution on culture was prepared for the eighth meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP8, in Valencia, Spain), backed up by a substantial information paper, prepared by Thymio Papayannis as Special Advisor to then Secretary General Delmar

Blasco. Considerable interest in the topic was generated during the COP, reinforced by a publication from Spain and a related exhibition organised by SEHUMED.

However, differences of opinion led to the establishment of a negotiating group under the chairmanship of Spain. In the lengthy debates that followed, one of the main arguments against dealing with cultural aspects within the framework of the Ramsar Convention was that these were already the responsibility of other international bodies such as UNESCO and the World Heritage Convention; additional concerns related to the implications for the world trade regime. Eventually, thanks to patient mediation and strong support from African countries and European Union member states, a Resolution on 'Incorporating cultural values in the management of wetlands' was adopted by the COP as Resolution VIII.19.

The Resolution includes a number of positive and far-reaching statements on the rationale for incorporating cultural values in wetland work, the need for broad collaboration with organisations and institutions responsible for cultural heritage, and the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. It encourages the Convention's Parties to take cultural values into consideration in managing their wetlands and in designating them as internationally important sites (Ramsar sites). The text incorporates a set of 27 guiding principles and included a request from the COP for the further elaboration of related guidance.

COP9 (Kampala, Uganda, November 2005)

Notwithstanding Resolution VIII.19 and the mandate it provided, very little official work was done during the period that followed. The issue was picked up again at COP9 in 2005, where a technical session on culture was organised by MedWet and reports on progress were presented, mainly from the Mediterranean.

A further Resolution on culture was submitted by the Ramsar Secretariat, and this again led to objections being tabled by a small number of countries. A contact group co-chaired by Norway and Trinidad & Tobago heard new concerns relating to the rights of indigenous peoples (in countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada and the USA) and the risk of cultural values being used to camouflage agricultural subsidies. A specific proposal to develop a stand-alone criterion of cultural importance for the designation of Ramsar Sites perhaps inevitably failed to win sufficient support (and the principles associated with this had on several occasions been critiqued by specialists in the STRP), but other elements eventually became adopted in Resolution IX.21 on 'Taking into account the cultural values of wetlands'. The text of this Resolution included a careful reference to respecting obligations under other international agreements.

One significant step arising from this process was the establishment of a Ramsar Culture Working Group (CWG), consisting of representatives of the various regions, of UNESCO and the Convention's International Organisation Partners (IOPs), with the main task of preparing a guidance document based on the original COP8 information text. Thymio Papayannis was appointed first as Secretary of the Working Group (chaired by then Secretary General Peter Bridgewater) and later as Coordinator. The Standing Committee endorsed continuation of the Working Group's work in its decisions SC35-1 (2007) and SC36-3 (2008).

COP10 (Changwon, Republic of Korea, October-November 2008)

The CWG worked on the Guidance document referred to above in 2007 and 2008, presenting drafts for review to the Ramsar regional meetings, two Standing Committee meetings and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). Most of the consultative input received was incorporated, and an officially dissenting viewpoint from Brazil was included verbatim as an annex. The document was widely disseminated in the Convention's three languages.

The Standing Committee decided not to present any further formal documents on culture to COP10, but to focus instead on positive work carried out during the preceding six years on the basis of Resolutions VIII.19 and IX.21. This was done at COP10 through a side event on culture, during which the Guidance document on 'Incorporating cultural aspects in the management of wetlands' was presented and widely distributed (and it remains publicly available for download). A second related side event was organised by Japan and Wetlands International on: 'The cultural values of wetlands: Case studies from Asia'.

The Standing Committee also agreed that the CWG should continue to operate during 2009-2012, focusing inter alia on providing further guidance, and on the analysis and presentation of successful case studies. Dave Pritchard was appointed by the Secretary General as Joint Coordinator of the CWG.

COP11 (Bucharest, Romania, July 2012) and way forward

On the occasion of the International Symposium on Water and Wetlands held in Agadir, Morocco, in February 2012, the CWG organised a thematic session on the cultural values and services of wetlands, in association with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (WHC).

A little later, at COP11, a special event was organised by the CWG with the support of the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (Med-INA). A colourful range of case studies was presented in an innovative audio-visual manner, with music, dancing and local gastronomy, and a draft Action Plan on Culture and Wetlands was introduced and discussed.

Subsequent activities have included input to research projects, commentaries on strategic policy linkages, development of a website, presentations to external fora and collaboration with UNESCO.

Most of the work on this subject has been resourced through a combination of volunteer time and external project funding for short-term activities, notably from the MA-VA Foundation for Nature, while Med-INA provided technical and administrative support. In 2013, under then Secretary General Anada Tiega and with the agreement of the Standing Committee, it was decided to replace the CWG with a much broader Ramsar Culture Network (RCN), and membership of this Network has been expanded to a current list of over 100 individuals and organisations. To implement a rich portfolio

of activities, the RCN Coordinators prepared an ambitious project proposal, which was adopted by the Ramsar Secretariat and approved in early 2015.

Thus, culture has been brought to the core of the Ramsar Convention as a priority issue, while a Culture and Livelihoods Manager has been added to its Secretariat, under Chris Perceval, Head of Strategy and Partnerships.

The positive perspectives of work on culture in the Ramsar Convention will be presented during COP12, in Punta del Este, Uruguay, in June 2015.



in cooperation with UNESCO's World Heritage Centre

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