

**5th European Regional Meeting  
on the implementation and effectiveness of the Ramsar Convention**

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Keynote

**Assessing the effectiveness of the implementation of the Convention**

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**Isn't it obvious?**

We can already say that the Ramsar Convention is a success. It encapsulates a public consensus about principles and aspirations, and provides a process for international dialogue and cooperation on wetland matters - quite an achievement!

According to the Convention itself, however, the Parties want more than this - namely, conservation and wise use results for wetlands. After more than three decades, it seems reasonable to expect to know how well this is progressing.

Let us break the question into parts.

**Making an assessment**

Under Ramsar and elsewhere, methods have been agreed for making a variety of types of assessment of wetlands and wetland biodiversity, including inventory, site importance evaluation, population estimation, species threat analysis, rapid assessment, risk assessment, vulnerability assessment and impact assessment.

A major international status and trends review for inland water ecosystems was published this year; and the presentation following this one will report on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. We have a lot of information!

**Policy relevance**

While much of this assessment activity is based on sound science, not all of it is directed towards policy-relevant purposes. Even when it is, it has not necessarily been designed to meet the specific purposes defined by the Ramsar Convention.

Of course it is important to know objectively whether wetland species are increasing or decreasing, and so on. On its own, however, this will probably give little insight into whether governments are being intelligent in the way they approach questions of tradeoffs, cost-effectiveness, balancing competing goals, and other genuine public interest dilemmas. The Convention aims at effectiveness in these areas too.

## **“Means” versus “ends”**

The Convention does have some policy-related assessment processes. There are for example national reports, and reports about Secretariat work plans. These however tend to measure activity, rather than the ecological outcomes of that activity; i.e. the “means to the end” rather than the end itself.

## **Individual events versus systematic evaluation**

Ramsar Parties have also agreed advice on monitoring, and procedures for reporting on ecological change at Ramsar sites, advancing certain cases with the aid of the Montreux Record, and periodically updating Ramsar Information Sheets. These often concern information about specific events, rather than being systematic science-based assessments. They may therefore be informative about the success or failure of individual instances of implementation, but not be so good at evaluating the effectiveness of the Convention as a whole, in a country or globally.

## **Is there a hypothesis?**

Too often, efforts to assess effectiveness lack an expression of what exactly is being proved. Demonstrating a result, and pronouncing it desirable, is not a very revealing conclusion about effectiveness, unless we can also say something about what was likely to have happened without the Convention. It is important to formulate some kind of hypothesis; such as: “the requirements in the Convention attaching to Ramsar sites will make it less likely for damaging land-use change to be permitted in such sites than in undesignated areas”.

## **What targets and objectives are we using?**

The Ramsar Strategic Plan contains numerous targets, and Parties have also been asked to set national ones. Almost all of these however are “process” targets rather than “outcomes”. The latter are in the meantime provided by the Convention itself, e.g. stemming the progressive encroachment on and loss of wetlands; and wise use and maintenance of ecological character of those that remain.

The Convention also contributes to targets defined elsewhere, such as the Millennium Development Goals, and the Johannesburg Summit target to reduce rates of biodiversity loss by 2010.

Indicators of effectiveness should in theory relate to targets for effectiveness, i.e. what level of effectiveness should be expected. No such targets have in fact been defined.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (the CBD) is developing a range of “outcome-oriented” targets for its programmes of work, including those covering wetlands. The CBD is less advanced, so far, in relation to global indicators with which to measure the achievement of these targets. With Ramsar, the reverse is the case. Close cooperation between the two Conventions in this area is therefore allowing their respective strengths to complement one another.

## **What is our baseline?**

Choosing a baseline or reference condition for measurement can be a thorny issue. One of the fundamental aspects of this in the Ramsar context is the definition of “ecological character” of wetlands (more important, in fact, than the better-known “international importance” benchmark).

It is also possible to design indicators which are independent of any baseline.

## **Attributing cause**

It is not enough to show that the aims of the Convention have been realised, i.e. that conservation and wise use of wetlands has occurred, without knowing whether in fact this is a result of implementation of the Convention, as opposed to some other cause.

Most of the time, we have to make assumptions about this link between cause and effect. In these contexts it is difficult to arrange experimentally robust “control” situations, for example to compare before and after accession/designation, inside and outside sites, sites having Ramsar-style management regimes and sites which do not, etc.

## **Current STRP work on indicators**

COP8 asked the STRP to prepare a set of key indicators of effectiveness to be used in conjunction with national reports. A working group reviewed the indicator literature, including about 1,000 potentially relevant measures already in use elsewhere, and developed suggestions for 19 possible Ramsar indicators, on which it reported to the Standing Committee in January. The oral presentation will give more details.

Some of the proposed indicators are designed to operate at national level, and some at supranational level.

Pragmatism is key: we should propose things that all countries can measure; in other words not necessarily state of the art techniques, or measures that need a lot of data.

Currently a consultant is working up the operational details for a priority sub-set of the nineteen, and looking at how they might be tested. There will be more to report on this in the new year.

## **Final points**

We should remember that the aim of indicators is to provide a kind of representative sampling, and not a comprehensive evaluation “summing up” the effectiveness of everything done under the Convention. Moreover, the answers will generally express a band of probability: as long as this tells us enough to determine a course of action, we should not be agonising over standards of precision or completeness that were never requested.

With more than three decades of sustained attention to Ramsar’s particular field, there are long consistent time-series datasets, for example for waterbirds, that are a key asset. As techniques develop, it is going to be important to resist the temptation to keep redesigning the question and redesigning the measuring technique just because we can.

Repeatedly “re-starting the clock” at “year zero” in this way will risk losing some of the value of the whole assessment process.

If we find any lack of effectiveness, it is crucial that we are ready with ways of putting it right, and that we give priority to that. This needs to be designed in to the strategy at the outset.

The STRP work is helping us to advance towards a more integrated approach to the whole area of objectives, targets, baselines, indicators, monitoring, reporting and conclusions about progress across all aspects of the Convention’s implementation.

This may all cost some effort; but the cost of not doing it well could be far greater.

If we remain pragmatic, and harness the insights, knowledge and experience of people like those at this meeting, together with the networks of others within our countries, then the Ramsar Convention will be able to assess its effectiveness, enhance its effectiveness, and continue giving good global leadership on this in future.