

Report of the Secretary General

Actions requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to note the report of the Secretary General.

1. This report covers the work of the Secretariat from the 52nd meeting of the Standing Committee (SC52, June 2016) until the end of February 2017. The different papers prepared for the 53rd meeting (SC53) address various areas of the Secretariat's work. The present report provides an overview and selected highlights of this work, with a special focus on activities carried out since 22 August 2016, when the Secretary General appointed at SC52 took office.
2. As agreed with the Executive Team, the Secretary General conducted a broad external and internal consultation with representatives from Contracting Parties, including chairs of subsidiary bodies and working groups, heads of convention secretariats and International Organization Partners (IOPs), and other external stakeholders, as well as all the staff members of the Secretariat. The consultation focused on identifying strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in the implementation of the Convention and work of the Secretariat, including gaps in capacities. Efforts are ongoing to strengthen the work of the Secretariat so that it can effectively deliver on its mandate specified in Article 8 of the Convention, implement the instructions given to it by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee, and support Parties to implement the Strategic Plan of the Convention. The main areas for this are mentioned below with some highlights of actions taken.

Strengthening service to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability

3. A major area identified for improvement was the delivery of the Secretariat's core role of servicing Contracting Parties, including the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies and accountability in all the work of the Secretariat to implement decisions and requests from the Contracting Parties. This is being addressed by refocusing the job description of the Deputy Secretary General to this core function (see below at paragraph 27) and prioritization of this area in the whole team's work (see document SC53-09 *Integrated 2017 Annual Work Plan and 2016-2018 Triennial Work Plan for the Secretariat*).
4. Highlights in this area during the reporting period include the organization of the 20th meeting of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP20), which was held in Gland, Switzerland, from 13 to 17 February 2017. Fifteen STRP members and 29 observers attended, including STRP National Focal Points from Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The main focus of the meeting was on progressing the tasks designated as high priority by the Standing Committee at SC52. (See document SC53-10 *Report of the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP)* for

further details on each of the high priority tasks.) Part of STRP20 was also devoted to the process of beginning to identify future priorities for the next STRP work plan, which will undergo consultation in due course and be submitted to COP13. To help inform this process, representatives from the Secretariats of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Technical Committee of Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) provided presentations on possible opportunities for future collaboration.

5. In addition to supporting the organization of STRP20, including documents and logistics, the Secretariat facilitated the preparatory work for some of the high priority tasks, as follows:
 - a drafting workshop for the *State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People* in Changshu, China, on the margins of the 10th INTECOL Conference (20 to 23 September 2016);
 - a drafting workshop for Task 3.1 at the Headquarters of Wetlands International in Ede, the Netherlands (29 November to 2 December 2016); and
 - a drafting workshop for Task 1.1 in Vientiane, Lao P.D.R. (13 to 15 December 2016).Preparatory work on task 1.2 was also conducted at an international peatlands workshop in Vilm, Germany, hosted by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (11 to 14 September 2016). Overall, STRP20 was a highly productive meeting and the entire Secretariat team collaborated to ensure its success. Participants expressed satisfaction with the organization and running of the meeting.
6. Another highlight is the ongoing work to prepare SC53. A full review of existing decisions and Resolutions was conducted to ensure that requests from Contracting Parties were followed up and relevant items included in the agenda of the meeting. Guidance for the preparation of documents was also developed to ensure consistency. The Secretariat facilitated the operation of working groups in charge of preparing recommendations and updates to SC53 and drafted documents for the meeting. Logistics are being taken care of, and next steps include ensuring clarity of roles and responsibilities and reinforcing capacities of the team to organize this and future meetings effectively.
7. The Secretariat also revised the draft Memorandum of Understanding with the United Arab Emirates, which will host the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP13) in October 2018. Most clauses of the agreement, the statement of requirements and the budget have been agreed with the United Arab Emirates and signature is expected before SC53 (see document SC53-07 *Progress with preparations for the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties*).
8. The Secretariat also completed the National Reporting format and made it available to all Parties through an on-line system together with an off-line option.

Increasing relevance of wetlands and the Convention to global sustainable development policy objectives

9. Efforts are also on-going to strengthen the Secretariat's work to support international cooperation and enhance the relevance of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. Capacities for this will be reinforced with the recruitment of a Head of Science and Policy (see below at paragraph 27), to ensure engagement in relevant policy processes and contribute to the policy relevance of Ramsar's scientific and technical work. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change agreed in 2015

are driving national and international planning and funding efforts, and it is therefore important to ensure that the contributions from wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks. The Secretariat has therefore actively engaged, since September 2016, in ongoing work on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including in the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs). The aim is to position Ramsar and ensure that the Contracting Parties' commitment to reporting on the extent of wetlands is part of the SDG monitoring process, especially on water-related ecosystems (indicator 6.6.1., with the possibility of being co-custodian of this indicator) as well as on indicators 14.2 and 15.1.2. (see document SC53-15 *Progress on implementing Resolution XI.6 on Partnership and synergies with Multilateral Environmental Agreements and other institutions*). There is also ongoing work in developing a short guide on how to integrate the Convention's work under the Strategic Plan into Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

10. Wetlands play a critical role in the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, and linking Ramsar to the climate-change agenda could contribute to Contracting Parties' efforts and potential access to resources. The Secretariat has therefore actively engaged with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, including at the 22nd meeting of its Conference of the Parties (COP22) in Marrakech, 7 to 18 November 2016, including High Level Segment, Action Day for Water and Climate, and joint opinion editorial with the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, highlighting the important role of the Convention and wetlands in mitigating and adapting to climate change. The Secretariat has also stepped up the positioning of the Convention in the Global Peatlands Initiative to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by protecting peatlands, as well as in the Blue Carbon Partnership focusing on coastal ecosystems (see document SC53-04 *Proposal for a new memorandum of understanding and update on other agreements*).
11. The Ramsar Secretariat also worked to re-establish and strengthen collaboration with the CBD, through the identification of possible areas of joint work with the CBD Secretariat and active participation in CBD COP13 in Cancún, 4 to 17 December 2016, raising the visibility of the Ramsar Convention in the High Level Segment, round tables on agriculture and fisheries and in two side-events organized by the Ramsar Secretariat.
12. The Secretariat has continued to participate actively in the Biodiversity Liaison Group and InforMEA. It also signed an important Memorandum of Cooperation with the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and participated in the fifth session of the Platform's Plenary (IPBES-5) in Bonn, from 7 to 10 March 2017.
13. Other highlights include:
 - i) identification of areas of collaboration with UNCCD, including contributions to the global assessment of each Convention i.e. the Global Land Outlook of the UNCCD and the Ramsar's *State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People* report;
 - ii) collaboration with the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction as the main partner on World Wetlands Day on Disaster Risk Reduction;
 - iii) memoranda of understanding signed with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) in December 2016, and ongoing discussion with the UN Development Programme (UNDP);
 - iv) engagement in the water agenda, including the International Water Summit (18 to 21 January, 2016) in Abu Dhabi, World Water Week (28 August to 2 September, 2016) in

Stockholm, the Budapest Water Summit (28 to 30 November, 2016) and ongoing contribution to UN Water, and the World Water Development Report.

v) Further details are provided in document SC53-15.

Strengthening support and enabling implementation

14. Since SC52, the Secretariat has provided support in the designation process for 18 Ramsar Sites (including support in data compilation in the RIS, publication and translations). It also supported three Contracting Parties with Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs): Colombia (Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta Ramsar Site), Bolivia (Los Lipez Ramsar Site) and the United Republic of Tanzania (Kilombero Ramsar Site). Five Contracting Parties requested RAMs in 2016 to be conducted in 2017 as follows: Côte d'Ivoire (Grand Bassam Ramsar Site), Indonesia (Berbak National Park Ramsar Site), Senegal (Réserve Spéciale de Faune de Ndiaël Ramsar Site), Uganda (Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Wetland System Ramsar Site, and Lake George Ramsar Site), and United Arab Emirates (Ras Al Khor Ramsar Site). Funds are being mobilized for two RAMs to Nicaragua (Bluefield Ramsar Site and Corn Island) and Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone River Estuary Ramsar Site). For more information see document SC53-18 *Update on the status of Sites on the List of Wetlands of International Importance*. Thirty Contracting Parties were supported in the development of wetland inventories.
15. The Secretariat prioritized the completion of data in the Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS). By mid-March 2017 the data completion will be finalized for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Oceania. Because of the high number of Sites in Europe, the data completion for that region is still ongoing and will be finalized by the end of 2017.
16. The Secretariat has engaged in numerous capacity-building efforts including training sessions, workshops, presentations and webinars providing support to Contracting Parties in subjects such as Ramsar Site management, restoration, monitoring, peatlands, and RIS/RSIS data completion. The trainees included Site managers, National Focal Points and Ramsar Regional Initiatives' stakeholders. Efforts are underway to put in place a more coordinated approach to capacity building across the regions, including the identification of needs and priority areas in which capacities are needed, development and use of common materials and tools, development of partnerships for capacity building, and monitoring of outcomes.
17. The Secretariat is strengthening its enabling role to deploy its limited capacities and resources in the most effective and efficient way. Efforts include supporting Regional Initiatives (see document SC53-12 *Update on Ramsar Regional Initiatives*) and developing strategic partnerships that could significantly step up the support provided to Contracting Parties for the implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Plan. In this regard, the Secretary General engaged with the heads of the six IOPs and there was full agreement on the need to jointly identify strategic areas of collaboration to support the Convention and fully use the potential of this important partnership. A face-to-face meeting will be held with the heads of IOPs on 2 May 2017 and a preparatory process has been put in place, including a teleconference on 20 February. The outcomes will be reflected in a renewed Memorandum of Understanding.
18. Regarding resource mobilization, in this reporting period the Secretariat raised USD 70,000 for RAMs, USD 65,000 for Regional Initiatives and USD 87,000 for the Ramsar Convention's Programme on communication, capacity building, education, participation and awareness (CEPA). As part of fundraising for COP13, USD 18,000 were raised for the 7th Oceania Regional Meeting in Fiji, and the Secretariat is now seeking funds for pre-COP Regional Meetings. The Secretariat has also worked with Danone-Evian and has obtained approval for renewal of its

partnership for 2017-2020 with 250,000 Euros per year and the opportunity to collaborate with its multi-million-euro Livelihoods Fund.

19. The Secretariat has also supported fundraising for Contracting Parties. In Asia, it worked with the IUCN Asia Regional Office on a project worth EUR 2,530,000 entitled “Building Resilience of Wetlands in the Lower Mekong Region through a Ramsar Regional Initiative”. It is also working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Centre for Biodiversity, the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia, Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia, and the UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre on an ASEAN regional project worth USD 286,500, entitled “Promoting the Conservation and Sustainable Management and Use of Key Coastal and Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN Region”. This proposal will be submitted to the ASEAN Secretariat in the coming months. In the Americas, fundraising has been focused on Contracting Parties' priorities, mainly on Regional Initiatives. Three project proposals were prepared by the Secretariat and relevant Contracting Parties of the Regional Initiatives of CariWet, La Plata River Basin and Mangroves and Coral Reefs, and submitted to the International Climate Initiative (IKI) in June 2016. The Secretariat has received an indication from IKI that the project for CariWet has fulfilled the funding criteria and it has participated in a training session for the legal, administrative and financial requirements for IKI funding in February 2017. The other two projects – for La Plata River Basin and Mangroves and Coral Reefs – will be submitted again to IKI for the 2017 cycle. The Secretariat and Contracting Parties are also looking for alternative funding donors. The recruitment of the Head of Resource Mobilization and Outreach (see below at paragraph 27) is expected to enhance the Secretariat's efforts in this area and to implement the Convention's Resource Mobilization and Partnership Framework.

Enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention

20. The Secretariat continues information sharing among the stakeholders of the Convention and increasing public awareness about wetland services and benefits through the Ramsar website, social media, newsletter, a broad range of e-lists and numerous outreach campaigns, such as World Wetlands Day. The website was significantly improved in 2015 and 2016 and further web development tasks are ongoing, including to build up an online library of official and non-official Ramsar documents. A report on progress made in the development of the website was published in the Ramsar newsletter in October 2016 (newsletter disseminated to mailing lists of: Administrative Authorities, National Focal Points, CEPA Programme, Scientific and Technical Review Panel, Ramsar Forum). The website traffic and the following on the social media platforms indicate a continued growth each year. In 2016 the website traffic increased by 33% compared to 2015.
21. Ramsar Convention social media have also seen a steadily growing engagement and following. On average, all Ramsar social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) have seen a 50% increase in engagement. The growing power and utility of social media offer an opportunity to inform, educate and engage with a larger audience and complement already established traditional channels.
22. The World Wetlands Day global campaign in 2017, and other outreach campaigns, have proved to be very effective in raising the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and awareness of its mandate. There was growing engagement of the Contracting Parties in the WWD campaign as well as increased global reach. A record number of 1,605 events in 117 countries were registered on the global online map. For this campaign, the Secretariat partnered with UNEP,

United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Wetlands International, IUCN and the Partnership for Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction (PEDRR). The WWD 2017 social media campaign potentially reached more than 25 million people. Further information being compiled will be provided at SC53.

23. Other important outreach efforts were undertaken for the IUCN World Conservation Congress, the UNFCCC COP22 and CBD COP13. Thanks to the Secretariat's presence in these international conferences, including engagement in more than 40 events, key communications messages on the Ramsar Convention and the role of wetlands in climate change adaptation and mitigation (including water security, carbon sequestration, disaster risk reduction) reached more than half a million people worldwide via social media.
24. A joint opinion editorial by the Ramsar Secretary General and Ms Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of UNFCCC was featured in Project Syndicate (Project Syndicate is an international media organization that publishes and syndicates commentary and analysis on a variety of important global topics) and published in more than 30 media outlets. This article, together with Ramsar's joint press release with UNEP on the launch of the Global Peatlands Initiative at UNFCCC COP22, generated a potential viewership of 10 million people.
25. These efforts have been part of the Secretariat's implementation of the CEPA Action Plan. The Secretariat assessed the status of implementation of the Plan, and reviewed expected outcomes in line with its capacity and taking a whole-of-Secretariat approach (see document SC53-03 *Progress in the implementation of the CEPA Action Plan 2016 – 2018*). Further, the Secretariat integrated the Plan's outcomes into its triennial and annual work plans to align and streamline its work (see document SC53-09 *Integrated 2017 Annual Work Plan and 2016-2018 Triennial Work Plan for the Secretariat*).

Strengthening the Secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness

26. The guiding objective has been "to organize to deliver" on the Strategic Plan of the Convention and the mandate of Contracting Parties, and to use in the most efficient way the limited resources of the Convention and the capacities of its Secretariat. The main gaps that have been identified in the capacity of the Secretariat are in the following areas:
 - i) the core function of supporting the governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention and overall accountability to Contracting Parties; and
 - ii) linkage with relevant policy processes through policy-relevant science.Adjustments have been made to the job descriptions for vacant posts, to fill existing gaps, improve efficiencies, serve the needs of the Contracting Parties, and foster enhanced implementation of the Convention.
27. The following positions are being recruited: Deputy Secretary General, with a job description refocused on governing and subsidiary bodies and ensuring overall accountability to the Contracting Parties; Head of Resource Mobilization and Outreach (with advice from the Resource Mobilization Working Group in the development of the job description); and Head of Science and Policy. A new Finance Officer has also been recruited and will start on 15 May 2017. Adjustments will be necessary across the team, including the Administration Support staff once the above positions are filled.
28. A review has also been conducted of the financial management of the Secretariat. The Secretary General provided reports to the Executive Team and the Sub-group on Finance. Measures are being taken to address problems identified and to ensure that the Convention has

a rigorous, transparent and accountable finance management system, in line with the IUCN policies and standards. Further information is contained in the documents for SC53 on the budget and on outstanding contributions (SC53-20 *Ramsar financial matters 2016* and SC53-21 *Update on outstanding annual contributions*).

29. A staff workshop was conducted on 2 November 2016 in which the findings of the Secretary General's external and internal consultation were shared. The Secretariat staff worked on ways to address key areas that needed to be strengthened.

30. A professionally facilitated Planning Workshop was conducted from 16 to 18 January 2017, focusing on: the review of the triennial and annual work plans (see document SC53-09 *Integrated 2017 Annual Work Plan and 2016-2018 Triennial Work Plan for the Secretariat*); uniting the team in its clarity of role, identity and accountabilities; principles to guide how the Secretariat works; and changes needed to better serve Contracting Parties and deliver on the Secretariat's mandate (value proposition and business model). A human resources plan was also developed as part of the exercise. Agreement was reached at this workshop on: development of individual performance indicators related to the work plan; and mid-term and end-of-year assessment of progress in implementation of the work plan. Further work is foreseen in the longer term towards a new planning cycle to further focus the work of the Secretariat, and to improve cohesion of the team, accountability, and building the needed capacities and skills.