

## Report of the Secretary General

### Actions requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to note the reports of the Secretary General for the periods 18 April 2019 – 30 March 2020 and 30 March 2020 – 30 April 2021.

1. This report covers the work of the Secretariat from the publishing of the *Report of the Secretary General* to the 58th meeting of the Standing Committee (SC58) on 30 March 2020, through to 30 April 2021. It provides both an overview and selected highlights of the work completed during this period. Given that the Standing Committee could not consider the earlier report at SC58, it is asked to also note that report, published as document SC58 Doc.6<sup>1</sup>.
2. This past year has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the lives of people across the world. The pandemic also had implications on the operations of the Convention, including travel restrictions resulting in the cancellation of face-to-face meetings of its governing and subsidiary bodies, and in limitations to implementation of its provisions by Contracting Parties and the Secretariat. Still, considerable action continued to be taken by both Contracting Parties and the Secretariat to implement the decisions taken at the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP13) and at SC57 and SC58, adapting to the context of the new working environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. From the Secretariat's perspective, actions were taken to enable staff to quickly and effectively work from home. Previous efforts to strengthen IT infrastructure and train staff on the utilization of online tools allowed the Secretariat to work in a coordinated and effective manner despite working remotely. The Secretariat embraced new technologies to support the work of Contracting Parties including for their processes of decision making. Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, the Secretariat continues its commitment to strengthen its work to effectively deliver on its mandate specified in Article 8 of the Convention, to implement the instructions given to it by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee, and to support Parties to implement the Strategic Plan of the Convention. Importantly, the Secretariat is taking assigned actions on Resolutions adopted by COP13 and decisions of SC57 and SC58 as the basis of its workplan. The main areas of work during the reporting period are described in this report, including implications of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Documents prepared for the present meeting (SC59) provide further detail on various areas of the Secretariat's work.
3. In the first quarter of 2021, the Secretariat reviewed progress made in 2020 on completing the actions identified in the 2019-2021 work plan approved by Decision SC57-21 and the workplan for 2020 approved by Decision SC58-26, and to identify the activities specific to 2021 that will

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ramsar.org/document/sc58-doc6-report-of-the-secretary-general>

result in achievement of the identified indicators. This review, which took place during four virtual sessions on Zoom conducted over several weeks in February, confirmed that considerable progress has been made during the first two years of the triennium in completing the desired results identified across the functional areas included in the workplan approved by the Standing Committee. As mentioned last year, the 2019-2021 workplan continues to serve as the basis for the development of individual workplans for all staff and in evaluating staff performance. The 2021 work plan is presented to SC59 for approval in document SC59 Doc.18<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Strengthening service to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability**

4. The delivery of the Secretariat's core role of servicing Contracting Parties remains a priority despite the current operational challenges, and includes the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies and accountability in all the work of the Secretariat to implement decisions and requests of the Contracting Parties. This area of work has thus continued to be prioritized while utilizing new tools and processes adapted to the new operating environment due to the pandemic. The workplan explicitly refers to the requests made by Contracting Parties to the Secretariat to enhance accountability of the Secretariat.
5. A critical function of the Secretariat is the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention, including the COP, the Standing Committee and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP).
6. An important highlight during 2020 was the organization of a virtual SC58 meeting that took place on 23 and 25 June 2020. The Secretariat consulted with the Executive Team to submit proposals to the Standing Committee to address urgent and time-sensitive matters in the agenda of SC58. When a decision was taken by the Standing Committee on 19 May to hold a virtual meeting, the Secretariat undertook research to identify a meeting platform that would support live interpretation, enable participants to join the meeting on a variety of devices including mobile phones, and provide on-demand technical support to participants to get acquainted with the platform and overcome potential connectivity issues. The meeting was attended by 68 participants representing 35 Contracting Parties. During these virtual meetings, 31 decisions were taken.
7. Following the virtual SC58 meeting the Secretariat conducted a survey to collect feedback from Contracting Parties. The main findings were that Contracting Parties felt that the meeting was well organized, that the online meeting technology worked well and that time-critical decisions could be taken. The Secretariat was acknowledged for its innovative approach in using new technology and ways of working to facilitate consultation and decision making. In particular, Parties appreciated the advance sessions to test connectivity and the use of the platform and the technical support that was available during the meetings.
8. Following SC58, the Secretariat supported an intersessional process from September 2020 to March 2021 whereby the Standing Committee took critical decisions in regards to its mandate, including addressing budgetary matters. The Secretariat provided support to this intersessional process through implementing a process in line with the Rules of Procedure under which Contracting Parties could comment on proposed decisions via email (full comments were also provided for transparency), with decisions amended to reflect the views of Parties, until consensus on a decision was reached. Contracting Parties made ten decisions during this intersessional process. The Secretariat notified all Contracting Parties of these decisions and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ramsar.org/document/sc59-doc18-integrated-secretariat-2021-annual-plan-as-part-of-the-approved-triennial-plan>

created specific pages in the website with the intersessional decisions and notifications. The Secretariat also supported Standing Committee members on request in fulfilling their function of representing the views of the Parties in their regions and keeping the Parties informed of ongoing work and consultations of the Standing Committee and its Working Groups.

9. The Secretariat has continued to support working groups established by COP13. It has organized teleconferences, prepared meeting agendas and minutes, and secured and managed consultancies that supported the working groups. The Secretariat also assisted in the preparation of working group reports and documents presented to SC59. Support has been provided to the following groups:
  - i. Effectiveness Working Group – The Secretariat has continued to manage the administrative matters related to the consultant contract and provided administrative support to the consultant as requested by the Working Group.
  - ii. Working Group on the review of the Strategic Plan – The Secretariat, with the temporary help of a consultant, supported the Working Group in fulfilling the requests listed in Annex 1 of Resolution XIII.5, notably to review the fourth Strategic Plan (SP4), identify potential refinements to SP4 and any elements that can contribute to the preparation of a new Strategic Plan after 2024. The results are presented in the report of the Working Group to SC59<sup>3</sup>.
  - iii. Observer Status Working Group – The Secretariat has facilitated several calls of the working group and provided summary reports. Additionally, the Secretariat supported the Working Group on the follow-up to the independent legal analysis consultancy requested in Decision SC57-14 and in developing the terms of reference (TORs) for the financial analysis of the legal status of the Secretariat requested in SC58 Intersessional Decision 09 on 16 March.
  - iv. Working Group on the Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs) – With guidance from Contracting Parties, the Secretariat supported the Group to develop its TORs and recruit a consultant to help the Group by providing an assessment report and preparing draft Operational Guidelines as requested by Resolution XIII.9.
10. Ahead of SC58, the Secretariat supported the online meeting of the Subgroup of Finance and conducted meetings via virtual means that resulted in the review, adjustment and approval of the 2021 budget by the Standing Committee during SC58 in June 2020. The Secretariat also supported further financial intersessional decisions by the Standing Committee in the first quarter of 2021.
11. The Secretariat supported the work of the Management Working Group on STRP matters, facilitating a virtual meeting on 2 November 2020 to provide a progress update on the delivery of the STRP's highest priority tasks, as requested by the Standing Committee during its intersessional process. The Secretariat and STRP Chair also sought guidance during the meeting on the way forward for the *Global Wetland Outlook – Special Edition* and its alignment with the theme of the 50th Anniversary of the Convention, as well as the ad-hoc advisory task on Criterion 6, in accordance with the request of the Standing Committee in Decision SC58-06.
12. Support to the STRP over this reporting period included:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ramsar.org/document/sc59-doc10-report-of-the-working-group-on-the-review-of-the-strategic-plan>

- i. Facilitating a call of the Management Working Group to provide guidance to the STRP on the development and finalization of the highest-priority tasks.
  - ii. Supporting the work of the task leads and working groups to finalize drafts for the highest-priority tasks, including: working with external consultants supporting the work of the Panel, organizing regular calls with the STRP Chair, Vice-Chair and task leads, coordinating the peer review process for drafts and ensuring communication flows with Panel members and STRP National Focal Points.
  - iii. Supporting the STRP Chair with the process for setting future scientific and technical priorities, as well as preparation of documents for SC59.
  - iv. Facilitating participation of the STRP Chair in the following meetings: the 16th Meeting of the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel and Bureau of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the 16th Meeting of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) Technical Committee, and an online panel discussion for World Wetlands Day 2021.
  - v. Given that the STRP24 could not meet face-to-face, the Secretariat organized a virtual meeting of the STRP on 29 April where members were able to inform the group of progress made on the priority tasks and discuss next steps in completing their assigned work.
13. The Secretariat supported the CEPA Oversight Panel by facilitating two teleconferences and distributing a survey to Contracting Parties. With support from the Secretariat, the Oversight Panel has prepared a report for SC59 that articulates the Panel's recommendation for moving towards a new approach and the preparation of a draft resolution<sup>4</sup>.
  14. The Secretariat has been actively preparing the meetings of the bodies of the Convention scheduled for 2021 and especially SC59 to be held from 21 to 25 June 2021 and processes related to COP14, initially scheduled for October-November 2020. The Secretariat has worked with the Executive Team to support the Standing Committee in taking decisions on this matter, including the dates and modalities of SC59, the timeline for documents and submission by Parties of Draft Resolutions, recognizing that the process and timeline is dependent on the date of COP14.
  15. The Secretariat is actively engaging with the host of COP14 to identify a new date for COP14 and finalize the Memorandum of Understanding that specifies the meeting requirements.
  16. As instructed in Resolution XIII.4 on *Responsibilities, roles and composition of the Standing Committee and regional categorization of countries under the Convention*, Contracting Parties requested the Secretariat to review previous Resolutions and decisions, identifying those or parts of those, if any, that may no longer be valid or applicable, that contradict each other, or are otherwise inconsistent with current Convention practices. Instructed by Decision SC58-19, the Secretariat has carried out the following work: a) preparation of a draft list of all existing Resolutions that are effectively defunct and should be removed from a list of valid Resolutions (document SC59 Doc.13.2), and b) draft guidance for the Parties, the chairs of committees, panels and other Convention bodies and the Secretariat, to specify how Resolutions should be drafted, adopted and recorded in the future, to ensure that the soft law of the Convention remains clear, accessible and easy to use for matters with multiple prior COP Resolutions

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/sc59-doc171-report-of-the-chair-of-the-cepa-oversight-panel>

and/or Recommendations (document SC59 Doc.13.1). As instructed by Decision SC58-20, the Secretariat has incorporated feedback received from Parties into a revised draft consolidated resolution on inventories, for use as a model in preparing future draft consolidated resolutions as instructed by the Standing Committee (document SC59.Doc.13.3). The Secretariat has also prepared for the consideration of SC59 a draft resolution on a process for the review and consolidation of Resolutions and Recommendations of the Conference of the Parties, as instructed in Resolution XIII.4 (document SC59.Doc.13.1).

17. In support of the implementation of Resolution XIII.1 on *World Wetlands Day*, the Secretariat has been assisting a group of interested Contracting Parties under the leadership of Costa Rica in the process of preparing a draft resolution for submission to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2021. The process has been delayed due to COVID-19 given that the General Assembly second committee requested to postpone any new resolutions to a later date at which they can be fully addressed. The Secretariat has arranged regular calls of the group and provided summary reports of the calls.
18. The Secretariat continues to support Resolution XIII.6 on *Language strategy for the Convention* and, via the Ramsar Exchange email list, has encouraged Contracting Parties to provide translations of the most important Ramsar information documents into their own official languages and to make them publicly available on their national Ramsar websites. Additionally, the Secretariat has invited Parties to provide translated Ramsar documents of wider relevance, so that the Secretariat can publish them on the Convention's website. The number of documents in languages other than English, French and Spanish on the Convention website has increased from 197 to 206.
19. The Secretariat continues to standardize its practices and systems in its support to the meetings and processes of the governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention. All related data and information is managed through a constituent relationship management (CRM) system that continues to be enhanced to efficiently manage mailings, correspondence and meeting registration processes. It is now used for all correspondence with Contracting Parties and for supporting meetings including the SC58 virtual meetings, the intersessional process of the Standing Committee, meetings of the subgroups and working groups, and the series of capacity-building webinars that were hosted during the year. It is being used in the preparation and management of SC59. Thanks to the central tracking provided by the CRM the Secretariat has better visibility on participation and can more efficiently organize meetings and communicate with participants. The CRM now allows the Secretariat to quickly report on gender participation in all meetings and events hosted by the Secretariat. The Secretariat is also using a project management tool called Basecamp, which helps to follow individualized timelines and work plans for the preparation of documents and enables real-time tracking of progress, document sharing among multiple contributors and early identification of potential delays and bottlenecks. It was first used for SC58 for document preparation and it proved to be useful. It is being used for SC59.
20. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in challenges for Contracting Parties and the Secretariat in conducting the work of the Convention's governing and subsidiary meetings. In particular, it was not possible in the reporting period to have face-to-face meetings. As mentioned above, the Secretariat supported decision-making on prioritized issues and operation of Working Groups, using appropriate technologies. But working virtually, and with a home-based team, has resulted in increased work demands on the Secretariat as iterative decision-making processes take more time, thus putting pressure on the limited capacities of the Secretariat. The Secretariat is also developing proposals and supporting Parties to manage

uncertainties in moving forward towards COP14. At the same time, it has been an opportunity to develop its ability to use technology and develop new approaches to serve Contracting Parties.

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

21. The Secretariat continues to strengthen its work in supporting international cooperation and enhancing the relevance of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. Given that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the ongoing negotiation of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework are driving national and international planning and funding efforts, increased attention continues to be paid to ensure that wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks.
22. As instructed in Resolution XIII.7 and Decision SC53-17, the Secretariat continues to actively engage in discussions regarding achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including as co-custodian of SDG 6 Indicator 6.6.1 (on change in extent of water-related ecosystems), as instructed in Decision SC53-17. The Secretariat participated in the 11th meeting of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which took place virtually from 3 to 5 November 2020. Main outcomes of this meeting were: i) review of the tier classification of indicators and update on missing data submissions; ii) review of the refinement proposals of the global SDG framework; iii) discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and SDG indicators implementation; iii) the IAEG-SDGs work plans for November 2020-March 2021 and for March 2021-February 2022. With the data provided by Contracting Parties in their National Reports to COP14 on SDG 6 Indicator 6.6.1, the Secretariat prepared a joint storyline with UNEP for the UN Secretary General Report for the High Level Political Forum in July 2021.
23. On 18 March, the Secretary General delivered a recorded video statement at the high level meeting on the implementation of the water related goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda convened by the President of the General Assembly in support of the implementation of the Decade on Water and Sustainable Development (2018-2028) and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).
24. In line with Resolution XIII.7 on *Enhancing the Convention's visibility and synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements and other international institutions* and Decision SC57-47 on wetland inventories, the Secretariat continues working with Contracting Parties to complete and refine information on wetland extent that was submitted in National Reports. The Secretariat developed and launched a toolkit<sup>5</sup> for use by Contracting Parties which includes best practices and addresses the identified gaps in knowledge through the provision of guidance, support and resources, including Earth observation tools, to complete wetland inventories and report on wetland extent. The Secretariat also undertook training sessions for Contracting Parties on wetlands inventories and reporting on wetland extent. An update of the activities undertaken to support Contracting Parties on wetland inventories and reporting on wetland extent for SDG 6 indicator 6.6.1 is provided in Standing Committee document SC59 Doc.9.
25. The Secretariat has been active in supporting the achievement of SDG 14 (“Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”). On 22 April 2021 the Secretary General participated in the virtual High-Level Dialogue Source-to-Sea

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.ramsar.org/news/a-new-toolkit-for-national-wetlands-inventories>.

organized by the Government of the Netherlands, the Action Platform for Source-to-Sea Management and the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, H.E. Peter Thomson.

26. At the invitation of the Ministers of State and Foreign Affairs and of Maritime Affairs of Portugal as co-organizers with Kenya of the UN Ocean Conference, the Secretary General delivered a video statement during Dialogue 3 on "Managing, protecting, conserving and restoring marine and coastal ecosystems".
27. As part of the high-level week of the UN General Assembly and the UN Summit on Biodiversity, the Secretary General participated in the "Build Back Bluer" round table of ocean champions convened by Fiji, Kenya, Norway, Palau, Portugal, Sweden and the United Arab Emirates. The event aimed to build momentum toward ambitious near-term outcomes for ocean health, notably a new global target of conserving 30% of the oceans by 2030.
28. The Secretary General is one of two focal points for the Community of Ocean Action on Mangroves and participated in the webinar "Implementing SDG 14 with the Communities of Ocean Action" organized by UN DESA within the "Keeping the Momentum for Ocean Action" webinar series.
29. On 6 November 2020, the Secretary General of the Convention on Wetlands and the Secretary *pro tempore* of the Inter-American Convention for the Protection and Conservation of Sea Turtles signed the renewal of their Memorandum of Understanding, to continue the collaborative work to protect sea turtle species and their wetland habitats. This contributes to the implementation of Resolution XIII.24.
30. The Secretariat has been actively engaged in supporting the achievement of SDG15 ("Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss") and the biodiversity agenda. The Secretariat continues to strengthen its engagement with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In 2020, the Secretariat participated actively in the CBD's preparatory process for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Main highlights include:
  - i. The Secretary General delivered a joint statement of the Biodiversity Liaison Group (BLG) on 30 July 2020 at the webinar conference "Building Back Better: protecting biodiversity, combating land degradation and mitigating climate change to reduce the risks of future pandemics, and the importance of a coherent approach" jointly organized by Egypt as President of the COP and the Secretariat of the CBD.
  - ii. On 30 September 2020, the Secretary General delivered a video statement to the UN Biodiversity Summit highlighting the importance of wetlands for nature-based solutions to address the current threats to biodiversity.
  - iii. The Secretary General participated in the 26th Senior Officials Meeting of the United Nations Environment Management Group (EMG) held virtually on 28 October 2020, which decided to extend the Consultative Process on Biodiversity in support of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The Secretary General expressed support for the Global Biodiversity Agenda and stated that the EMG has significant value in building a common narrative for "Building Back Better" with an environmental focus.

- iv. The Secretariat, the Chair and six Standing Committee representatives participated in the Bern II virtual multilateral environmental agreement (MEA) consultation workshop on the post-2020 framework from 18 January to 2 February 2021.
31. The Secretariat continues to participate actively in the BLG. The Secretary General participated in the virtual meetings of the BLG on 30 April and 3 December 2020 with a major focus on engagement in the process for the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, the preparation of the Bern II workshop and sharing experiences on how BLG members are managing operations within the COVID-19 context.
32. Given the critical role played by wetlands in climate change mitigation and adaptation, the Secretariat has engaged on this issue, including through the participation of the Secretary General in the Race to Zero Water Day on 20 November 2020 “Vision of a zero-carbon, resilient future through Water” organized by the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) and partner organizations. Water Day was opened by the United Nations High-Level Champions on Climate Change from Chile and from the United Kingdom who emphasized the crucial role of water for climate action. The Secretary General highlighted the largely untapped potential of water-related ecosystems to contribute significantly to the emissions reductions needed to achieve the limit of two degrees Celsius of warming. She highlighted that wetlands are increasingly important to protect us from the impacts of climate change since they reduce the risks of droughts and floods while also cleaning and recharging water.
33. The Secretariat contributed to SDG 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment. The Secretariat developed guidance to assist Contracting Parties to mainstream gender in their work in wetland conservation and wise use in support of implementation of Resolution XIII.18 on *Gender and wetlands*. A gender guidance document<sup>6</sup> with supporting case studies was produced and is available in three languages on the Convention website. Additionally, the Secretariat provided a training webinar on the subject for Contracting Parties and interested stakeholders. A recording of the webinar in the three languages is presently available on the Convention website for viewing<sup>7</sup>.
34. The Secretary General is one of the International Gender Champions (IGC), a network of ambassadors and heads of agencies established initially in Geneva, Switzerland, and now active in other cities. The Secretary General has implemented her commitment to this initiative throughout the reporting period, and participated in the network’s activities including its annual meeting to review progress during 2020 and priorities for 2021. The Secretariat has made adjustments in its systems so that it can better promote and report on gender balance in the delegations to meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention.
35. The Secretariat continues to strengthen its relationship with the Geneva-based Permanent Missions to the United Nations and UN agencies. The Secretariat had planned a briefing for the Permanent Missions on the linkages between wetlands and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and on important issues in the SC58 agenda. The briefing scheduled for autumn 2020 was cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation. The Secretariat will plan a future briefing once the situation warrants.
36. Other processes in which the Secretariat engaged include:

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/guidance-on-mainstreaming-gender-under-the-ramsar-convention-on-wetlands-0>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ramsar.org/resources/training-webinar-mainstreaming-gender-under-the-convention-on-wetlands>



- i. The Secretariat sent a notification in February 2021 to Contracting Parties, STRP National Focal Points and the International Organization Partners (IOPs) on recent developments in IPBES processes, and inviting them to participate in these processes including the review of the summary for policymakers of the values assessment.
  - ii. The Secretariat participated virtually in the 11th meeting of the InforMEA Steering Committee which took place on 26 November 2020. The Secretariat acted as the co-chair of the technical group liaising with different MEAs regarding the implementation of the application programming interface which enables selected content to be visible on the InforMEA website.
  - iii. The Secretariat contributed to the online session of the 5th session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.1) on 22 February 2021. The Secretary General delivered a recorded video message to the Leadership Dialogue “Contribution of the environmental dimension of sustainable development to building a resilient and inclusive post-pandemic world”. She emphasized the role of the Convention in addressing habitat loss through the protection and restoration of wetlands and their relevance for a successful green post-COVID recovery.
37. In 2020, the Secretariat participated actively in the development of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and in the task force of the aquatic and transitional ecosystems monitoring and evaluation framework. These engagements informed the consideration of SDG 6 Indicator 6.6.1 “Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time” for which the Convention is co-custodian and various targets of the Convention’s 4th Strategic Plan as priority indicators of the UN Decade’s monitoring framework. In February 2021, the Secretariat was appointed as a Global Partner of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.
38. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting postponement of meetings of relevant policy processes, there was considerable activity in keeping work moving forward, creating important opportunities for engagement by the Secretariat to position wetlands and the work of the Convention in the global agendas on biodiversity, sustainable development and climate change. In fulfilment of its mandate, the Secretariat continued its engagement with relevant and prioritized MEAs and UN processes. However, as reported previously, it remains a major challenge that the Secretariat does not have access to the UNGA, or the UN Economic and Social Council, the UN platform for debate on sustainable development. The proposal to obtain observer status was submitted by Uruguay, then Chair of the Standing Committee, in 2017, but its consideration has been deferred. The Secretariat has continued to face limitations to its engagement in the UN, including UNGA and UN-Water processes. This is an issue being addressed by the Standing Committee’s Working Group on the Observer Status.

### **Strengthening support and enabling implementation**

39. During the reporting period, the Secretariat provided support to the designation of 28 new Wetlands of International Importance, the extension of two “Ramsar Sites” and the update of information for 37 Sites. This included support in the transfer of data into the Ramsar Sites Information System (RSIS), and publication and translation of Site summaries (for more details see document SC59 Doc.23).
40. The Secretariat carried out one Ramsar Advisory Mission (RAM) to Spain (Doñana), together with the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and IUCN. Additional RAMs were prepared for Malawi

(Lake Chilwa), Nicaragua (Sistema de Humedales de Bahía de Bluefields) and Tunisia (Sebkhet Sejoumi), but could not be undertaken because of travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

41. The Secretariat supported the work of Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs), including the Initiative on Black and Azov Seas Coastal Wetlands (BlackSeaWet), the Ramsar Regional Initiative for Central Asia (RRI-CA), the Carpathian Wetland Initiative (CWI), the Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI), the Nordic-Baltic Wetlands Initiative (NorBalWet), the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), the Niger River Basin Network (NigerWet), the Initiative for the Amazon River Basin, the Initiative for the Conservation and Wise Use of the Plata River Basin, the Initiative for the Conservation and Wise Use of Mangroves and Coral Reefs, and the Caribbean Wetlands Initiative (Cariwet).
42. Eighteen RRIs benefited from guidance to submit annual reports to SC59. NorBalWet, BlackSeaWet and RRI-CA management was advised by the Secretariat on possible new funding sources and how to scale up activities. The Secretariat advised and supported MedWet to organize the members' meeting MedWet/Com14, and revision of their terms of reference. The Secretariat participated in RRI-led events including the COP6 of the Carpathian Convention and the first-ever Flyway Youth Forum organized by EAAFP, during which the Secretary General delivered a keynote speech.
43. The Secretariat also supported the fundraising activities of La Plata River Basin and Mangroves and Coral Reefs Regional Initiatives.
44. The provision of technical support to Contracting Parties continued to evolve with travel limitations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretariat continued to support capacity-building needs of Contracting Parties and strengthened the use of virtual technologies to increase its reach. It further developed webinars to reach an increasing number of Contracting Parties with the aim to further support implementation of the Convention. During this reporting period, the Secretariat organized a series of eight webinars on the following topics:
  - 27 May 2020: RSIS Compilers Training 2020 (English, French and Spanish)
  - 24 September 2020 and 1 October 2020: Grant Writing: How to write effective project proposals (English, French and Spanish)
  - 19, 20, 21 and 22 October 2020: National Wetlands Inventories Training Webinar (English with French and Spanish interpretation)
  - 12, 13, 17 and 18 November 2020: Preparation of National Reports to COP14 (English, French and Spanish)
  - 10 December 2020: Wetlands as Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (English with French and Spanish interpretation)
  - 16 March 2021: 50th Anniversary Campaign Briefing (English with French and Spanish interpretation)
  - 23 March 2021: Training Webinar – Preparation of Draft Resolutions for COP14 (English, French and Spanish)
  - 25 March 2021: Training Webinar: Mainstreaming Gender under the Convention on Wetlands (English, Spanish and French interpretation)

In total, there were 984 participants from 137 countries; 60% of participants were female and 40% male. Building on the success and learnings of these webinars, the Secretariat is planning additional webinars and developing new capacity-building initiatives in 2021.

45. The Secretariat continues to work to identify strategic partnerships to enhance the support to Contracting Parties at scale. Notably, the Secretariat collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to produce reports for 12 countries providing information and guidance on including wetlands in their Nationally Determined Contributions. In December 2020 the Secretariat and UNDP co-hosted an online training event “Wetlands as Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)”. The training provided guidance on how Contracting Parties can integrate wetlands into their national commitments to achieve the targets set in their NDCs.
46. As part of the Global Peatlands Initiative, the Secretariat provided support to the preparation of its main project funded by the German Climate Initiative (IKI) with a focus on global peatland mapping and country programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, Peru and the Republic of the Congo.
47. The Secretariat continues to strengthen collaboration with the IOPs. Periodic teleconferences between the partners are held to review implementation of the Joint Activities for Collaboration in the renewed Memorandum of Cooperation. The IOPs contributed to the development of the 50th Anniversary campaign and actively supported World Wetlands Day 2021. Notably, IUCN was a joint co-sponsor of World Wetlands Day 2021.
48. The Partnership Agreement with Danone concluded in December 2019 and a no-cost extension was accorded until June 2021 to finalize all pending activities. During the extension period the Secretariat and Danone will undertake a review of the Partnership, with the clear objective to assess and frame the elements of a future collaboration that is aligned to the priorities of the Convention, cognizant of the changes in the funding priorities of Danone. Since 1998, Danone has funded the development of communication materials for World Wetlands Day and the Ramsar Awards, in particular the cash prize of USD 10,000 awarded to each Award winner. As Danone will no longer be funding World Wetland Day, the Secretariat has prepared a funding proposal for World Wetlands Day and is approaching potential donors. The Secretariat requests support from Contracting Parties in identifying potential donors for World Wetlands Day 2022.
49. The Secretariat continues to implement the Resource Mobilization Work Plan approved for the triennium. Fundraising for non-core priorities continued with outreach to public and private donors during the reporting period to mobilize funds for RAMs, World Wetlands Day, wetland inventories, Ramsar Regional Initiatives and the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards. The list of fundraising priorities is published and can be accessed under the Resource Mobilization page of the website<sup>8</sup>. A fundraising proposal to facilitate delegate travel to attend COP14 has been drafted and it will be shared with prospective donors once there is clarity on dates. Updating of the funding organization database continued and focus was given to adding more government organizations and institutions that are funding wetland conservation. The funding database<sup>9</sup> was set up to facilitate resource mobilization efforts of Contracting Parties: it is a searchable database and currently lists 98 funding organizations. On this same page, Contracting Parties can also view current calls for proposals when they are published by the Secretariat.
50. A training webinar in English, French and Spanish on how to write effective funding proposals was organized to support national fundraising. A recording of the webinar including supporting resource documents is published on the capacity-building page of the website<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, a

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ramsar.org/about/fundraising-priorities-for-the-triennium-2019-2021>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ramsar.org/activity/funding-organization-database>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.ramsar.org/resources/training-webinar-on-grant-writing>

new resources page was added under the resource mobilization section of the website<sup>11</sup>; this page lists training resources and guidelines developed by the Secretariat and/or its partners to support national fundraising efforts. The Secretariat, Danone and WWF have developed a training module on facilitating public and private sector engagement. It will be available online in July 2021 with the objective of raising awareness about the different funding opportunities and avenues available to conserve wetlands.

51. Additionally, to support Contracting Parties with resource mobilization, the Secretariat organized a capacity building webinar “How to access the green Climate Fund (GCF) for the Conservation of Wetlands” in collaboration with the GCF. This webinar<sup>12</sup> provided information and guidance on how to access funding for wetland-related projects from the GCF.

### **Enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention**

52. The visibility of wetlands and the Convention is being increased through a variety of communications outreach efforts. The Secretariat has strengthened information sharing among the stakeholders of the Convention and has increased public awareness about wetland services and benefits through the Convention’s website at [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org), social media, newsletter, and outreach campaigns such as World Wetlands Day, other international days and importantly this year, through the 50th Anniversary campaign. The Secretariat has taken an approach of speaking with “one voice” across the Secretariat to our target audiences about wetland issues and linking wetlands to relevant policy frameworks such as the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.
53. During the reporting period, 193,000 users visited the Convention website. All Convention social media platforms have seen a steady increase in engagement over the past year. Twitter and Instagram are the fastest growing channels, with audience increases of 25% over the past year. Currently the Convention’s Twitter account has 22,900 followers, Instagram over 8,300 and Facebook 156,400.
54. The Secretariat continues to update and enhance the website, so that it better serves the needs of Contracting Parties and other users. The Secretariat took several steps to ensure the easy access of Contracting Parties and other users to the documents and communications they need. A “quick search” entry page to the documents library was created, giving one-click access to key documents such as the records and decisions of meetings of Convention bodies, the Convention texts, and the List of Wetlands of International Importance. In addition, the Secretariat worked with the site developer to optimize the search functionality of the main library. In order to ensure that Parties can access all the Secretariat communications on the implementation of the Convention, a list of the latest “Notifications” was created on the home page alongside the latest “News” and “Events”, with a link to all the qualifying communications sent to Contracting Parties using the CRM system. Additionally, the Secretariat has taken action to ensure that the record of the intersessional process of the Standing Committee and the resulting Decisions taken through 2020 and early 2021 remain accessible and clear for the long term through the creation of a list of intersessional Decisions taken.
55. The 2021 World Wetlands Day campaign highlighted the contribution of wetlands to the quantity and quality of freshwater on our planet. A key highlight, in addition to the information materials provided by the Secretariat to support national outreach activities of Contracting Parties, was the organization of a global online panel discussion on “Wetlands Securing Fresh

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.ramsar.org/about/resources>

<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/gcf\\_webinar\\_e.pdf](https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/gcf_webinar_e.pdf)

Water for All” hosted by the Secretariat on 1 February and streamed through Zoom and the Convention’s YouTube channel. Over 300 participants attended the interactive live event, while the YouTube video recording of the event has 9,200 views. The online panel moderated by the Secretary General included a distinguished panel of speakers from UNCCD, UN-Water, IPBES, CBD, IUCN, Danone, the STRP Chair, the Special Envoy for International Water Affairs of the Netherlands and a representative of the Government of Mexico. Each panelist shared insights about why we need to upscale and accelerate initiatives that conserve wetlands and all freshwater ecosystems.

56. Digital platforms and in particular social media are proving to be powerful mediums to amplify our messages and reach larger and diverse audiences. This can be confirmed by the 1.3 billion people reached through social media on World Wetlands Day, due to the collective campaigns undertaken by the Secretariat, governments, international and other partner organizations. Danone and the Norwegian Environment Agency provided funding to support the 2021 World Wetlands Day outreach campaign.
57. The 50th Anniversary of the Convention of Wetlands is being celebrated in 2021. To develop the 50th Anniversary campaign, the Secretariat worked with a public relations and communications agency in designing a campaign with an ambition to achieve an increased understanding among key influencers of what Wetlands “are”, and the services they perform for humankind - with the ultimate goal of improving their protection. The campaign was created with an intention that Contracting Parties and partners spread the message about wetlands and thus easily share content adapted to their national and local audiences. A number of communications assets and resources were produced and continue to be produced during 2021, including the 50th Anniversary logo, brand guidelines, social media toolkit, social media tiles, fact sheets and gifs. Contracting Parties, IOPs, NGOs and individuals can customize the creative communications assets based on their own context and interest. All campaign resources are produced in three languages and are housed on a dedicated 50th Anniversary website at <https://ramsar50.org/>. The website was launched on 16 March following the conclusion of WWD activities. The official hashtag of the campaign is #RestoreWetlands. Since the beginning of the campaign there were 1,260 social media posts with the hashtag #RestoreWetlands which gained 11.08 million impressions. One of the campaign objectives was to reach and resonate with youth with early indicators that website visitors are primarily aged between 18 and 34 years old.
58. The Wetland City Accreditation initiative continues to contribute to enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention, including through the Convention’s webpage that features the cities accredited at COP13. As instructed by Resolution XII.10, the Secretariat notified Contracting Parties of the nomination process for the current triennium and received 25 applications by the nomination deadline of 15 March 2020. The Secretariat transmitted all received nominations to the Independent Advisory Committee for its review which has been completed. The IAC has prepared a report for SC59 (document SC59 Doc.22) which identifies those cities it is recommending become accredited wetland cities
59. The Secretariat continues to participate in “Flotilla” meetings, a mechanism to coordinate communications and achieve communications synergies among a number of biodiversity and environmental agreements and organizations. A key activity of the Flotilla is the ability for organizations to share their communications plans and resources allowing other organizations to support their efforts. The Flotilla has played an important role in broadly disseminating the Convention’s 50th Anniversary campaign resources and messages and promoting this milestone year.

60. Key challenges for the Secretariat in enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention are the limited resources and capacity to undertake communication and outreach activities. The Secretariat is addressing this challenge by focusing its efforts on providing communications tools and assets for Parties and other organizations to use, leveraging communications for events such as World Wetlands Day, the Wetland City Accreditation scheme and the 50th Anniversary, and pursuing strategic engagement with IOPs and other organizations such as the Flotilla that have the ability to raise the visibility of wetlands and the Convention. At the same time, the Secretariat continues to build on the increased outreach enabled through social media and online events.

### **Strengthening the Secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness**

61. The Secretariat continues to work towards strengthening its guiding objective to “organize to deliver” on the Strategic Plan of the Convention and the mandate of the Contracting Parties, and to use the limited resources of the Convention and the capacities of the Secretariat in the most efficient way. As mentioned above, the Secretariat has had to adapt its way of delivering its work in the current context.
62. Since the first signs of the pandemic, actions were taken to enable staff to quickly and effectively work from home. Previous efforts to strengthen IT infrastructure and train staff on the utilization of online tools allowed the Secretariat to work in a coordinated and effective manner despite working remotely. The Secretariat embraced new technologies to support the work of Contracting Parties including for their processes of decision-making. Some highlights are provided below.
63. The management of finances and administration continues to be strengthened and adapted to new ways of working.
- i. The financial stability of the Secretariat is solid. In 2020 there was an increase in cash from CHF 3,827K in 2019 to CHF 5,634K in 2020. There was a decrease in Contracting Party net receivables from CHF 2,364K in 2019 to CHF 680K in 2020. Furthermore, amounts owned to IUCN decreased from CHF 367K in 2019 to CHF 61K in 2020 and other payables decreased from CHF 749K to CHF 655K due to closer monitoring of payments to IUCN and vendors.
  - ii. Despite the challenging conditions of working remotely, the Secretariat successfully delivered all requested documentation and information for the first remote financial audit. The report of external auditors noted that since April 2020 there were no new financial issues raised by auditors.
  - iii. Technologies and business practices continue to be developed to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness in the work of the Secretariat, such as the use of the CRM and Basecamp, with implications on reducing the time spent by staff on administrative tasks (e.g. correspondence, registration, meeting organization), use of digital rather than paper documents, on-line signatures and electronic submission of documents and contracts, among others.
64. Work continued in ensuring that the capacity of staff meets the requirements of the key functions of the Secretariat as identified in the triennial and annual work plans approved by the Standing Committee. Talent management policies and procedures of IUCN were implemented, including on appraisals and promotions. Adjustment of job descriptions, grades, compensation

and benefits of current and vacant positions were conducted with IUCN to enhance alignment of competencies and functional requirements, as well as equity within the Secretariat, with IUCN and the market. A main highlight in this area is the conversion of the Internship Programme into a Junior Professional Programme whereby job descriptions and hiring conditions were revised and enhanced in line with IUCN.

65. During the reporting period three competitive recruitment processes were completed with the positions of Director, Science and Policy, Senior Advisor for Africa, and Senior Advisor for Asia and Oceania now filled.
66. During the process of recruitment for vacant posts, efforts are being made to ensure that competencies align with the Secretariat's functional requirements and that regional and gender diversity is achieved to the extent possible. Currently, 52% of Secretariat staff are women.
67. Capacity building of staff continued in 2020, in particular through the roll-out of the following activities: individual sessions with a professional coach to identify personality, communication and work styles followed by a two-day workshop focusing on individual strengths and team collaboration. A leadership development training course for the Senior Management Team is scheduled for autumn 2021.
68. Attention has been paid to the challenges and opportunities resulting from working from home. Weekly staff meetings have been held while working in these conditions to maintain internal communication and foster a sense of team and connectedness.
69. The planning meeting identified the need to address staff wellness. A survey was conducted to measure the impact of the pandemic on staff, and follow-up activities to support employees in the COVID-19 work environment will be undertaken during the year. The wellbeing of staff was identified as a priority for 2021 and included in the Secretariat's HR work plan for 2021.
70. The reporting period has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the resulting challenges, the team has worked hard with achievements in all areas of the Secretariat's work plan as described in this report. The pandemic has also created opportunities to develop new ways of working including virtual means to increase the Secretariat's reach and to build capacities of Contracting Parties. However, challenges remain especially related to restrictions in office use, travel and face-to-face meetings. Importantly, the COVID-19 survey showed an increase in work across the Secretariat in the current virtual setting as compared with the normal situation, as well as implications on staff wellness. Special consideration is being given to these findings and this will be an important area of work moving forward in 2021.
71. The Secretariat will continue to strengthen a whole-of-Secretariat approach, with the development of additional standard operating procedures (SOPs) that will contribute to making further progress in terms of operational excellence. Some important challenges identified earlier on remain including the legal status of the Secretariat as it relates to access to strategic global fora, signing of donor contracts and talent acquisition and retention, which is being addressed by the Working Group on the Observer Status established by Decision SC57-14. Other areas for further work include: continuing to develop more coherent and coordinated approaches across the team to achieve efficiencies and better serve Contracting Parties across all regions; balancing enhanced accountability for implementation of the decisions taken by the COP and Standing Committee with the service provided to Contracting Parties in each region; balancing thematic and regional approaches; and continuing to build the needed capabilities, capacities and skills in core functional areas of the Secretariat's work.