



**10th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to
the
Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)**

“Healthy wetlands, healthy people”

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**Progress and issues concerning regional initiatives operating
within the framework of the Convention**

1. This document responds to Resolution IX.7 (2005) on *Regional initiatives in the framework of the Ramsar Convention*, in which the Parties (in paragraph 14) instructed the “Standing Committee and Secretariat, particularly in relation to those initiatives funded by the core budget, to review their success and submit a summary report for consideration at COP10”, and to the ensuing Standing Committee Decision SC37-7, requesting “the Secretariat to prepare a new version of the explanatory background portions of DOC.SC37-8 as an Information Paper for COP10.”

Development of regional initiatives over the years 2003-2008

2. At the 8th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP8), the Parties recognized the importance of regional initiatives in promoting the objectives of the Convention in general and in implementing the Ramsar Strategic Plan in particular as they can build upon biogeographic commonalities, shared wetland systems and wetland-dependent species, and solidly established common social and cultural links (Resolution VIII.30).
3. COP8 also recognized the critical importance of financial and political support from Contracting Parties to such initiatives and provided specific guidance for the development of regional initiatives in the framework of the Convention (in Annex I to Resolution VIII.30).
4. A new budget line “support to regional initiatives” was included in the Ramsar core budget, and at COP8 it was decided that financial support from that budget line should be provided during the triennium 2003-2005 to the well-established Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), allocating 258,582 CHF to that programme for the triennium.
5. For the next triennium (2006-2008), Contracting Parties were invited to submit proposals for regional initiatives, prepared according to the guidance annexed to Resolution VIII.30. Based on such proposals, COP9 endorsed (through Resolution IX.7) nine regional initiatives as operating within the framework of the Ramsar Convention and appropriate for funding support from the Ramsar core budget in 2006-2008, i.e. seven regional networks, including MedWet, and two regional centres for training and capacity building.

6. The core budget line “support to regional initiatives” was maintained for the triennium 2006-2008 with a total sum of 687,572 CHF, and COP9 allocated specific funding for 2006 to four of the eight newly endorsed initiatives (West Africa, High Andean, and Ramsar centres in Panama and Iran). COP9 decided also to phase out Ramsar’s funding of MedWet, and to contribute, in declining steps during a second triennium 2006-2008, a total sum of 52,348 CHF to MedWet from this budget line.
7. While the allocations to MedWet for the entire triennium and to four new initiatives for 2006 were made by COP9 through Resolution IX.7, the Standing Committee was entrusted to allocate the remaining amounts of the budget line for 2007 and 2008 during its annual meetings. It did so by allocating annual funding support for 2007 and 2008 to the four initiatives listed above, plus to a fifth initiative for the Pacific Islands, which figured amongst those endorsed in 2005 by COP9 (Resolution IX.7).
8. Funding support to regional initiatives for both triennia together (2003-2008) amounted to a total of 945,854 CHF (2003-2005: 258,582 CHF, 2006-2008: 687,272 CHF), as detailed in the table below. MedWet received Ramsar core funding support during both triennia (2003-2005: 258,582 CHF and 2006-2008: 52,384 CHF), while the other five initiatives were only supported during the second triennium 2006-2008.
9. The table shows that funding was spread over all six Ramsar regional groups defined in Resolution VII.1, despite their huge differences in size, number of countries, economic wealth, potential, and needs for regional (and subregional) initiatives.

2003-2008 (CHF)	Neotropics	North America	Europe	Africa	Asia	Oceania
MedWet			310,930			
Panama Centre	240,000					
Iran Centre					134,745	
WacoWet				127,700		
Pacific Islands						68,779
High Andes	64,000					
indicative totals*	184,000	120,000	103,644	231,343	238,388	68,779

* Amounts allocated to regional initiatives that cover countries belonging to more than one regional group are split in equal parts to the number of regional groups concerned, not reflecting real amounts of money spent in each of them.

Regional initiatives endorsed in 2005 without funding support and initiatives recognized as being in preparation

10. Three more regional activities were endorsed by COP9 as operating within the framework of the Convention and appropriate for funding in 2006-2008. They did not request Ramsar core funding, however: the ChadWet initiative for wetlands in the Lake Chad basin, NigerWet, a similar initiative for wetlands in the Niger river basin, and the partnership for wetland sites of international importance for East Asian-Australasian migratory waterbirds. They progressed significantly over the triennium.

11. In Annex I to Resolution IX.7, the Parties also recognized that four additional proposals of regional initiatives had the potential for operating under the Convention, subject to their acceptance by the Contracting Parties concerned and further development and consideration by COP10. These were proposals for an Eastern African Ramsar centre and for wetland networks in the Himalayan, Carpathian, and Nordic-Baltic regions.
12. Furthermore, based on announcements made during COP9 by Contracting Parties, Resolution IX.7 lists five additional regional initiatives under development (in paragraph 6). They concern the elaboration of an international wetland training programme at the Kenya Wildlife Service Training Institute, programmes for the La Plata/Paraguay-Parana Wetlands System and for the Lake Victoria Environmental Management Programme and initiatives for Black Sea Wetlands and the Nile River Basin.

Lessons learnt in implementing regional initiatives during the triennium 2006-2008

13. A critical analysis of the MedWet experience 1991-2002 was already prepared for the occasion of COP8 to assist upcoming regional initiatives in other parts of the world and published as an attractive booklet in all three Ramsar languages (Papayannis: *Regional action for wetlands*). In addition, starting to implement new initiatives during the current triennium provided more useful lessons to be learnt.
14. Noteworthy achievements of regional initiatives include programmes involving several Contracting Parties, paying attention to shared challenges and seeking solutions to common problems. Regional initiatives operating at basin scale offered the most promising expectations because they are shaped within an enabling environment provided by a permanent river/lake basin organization or convention. Regional capacity was substantially increased through the work of regional centres. Some of the regional initiatives such as MedWet and the High Andes facilitate dialogue between Contracting Parties and enable links with the Ramsar International Organization Partners (IOPs).
15. The Standing Committee addressed difficulties related to the implementation of regional initiatives during its meetings in 2007-2008. From these discussions, it can be concluded that operational difficulties occurred essentially at three levels: a) because of the absence of sufficiently clear governance and reporting mechanisms, and their application, between the executive body of the initiative and its members and donors, b) because of a discrepancy between the planning process and the operational readiness to implement planned activities in a timely manner, and c) because of the absence or weakness of structures and procedures to provide the initiative with sufficient backing and long-term support. The Standing Committee discussions helped to better scope the aims and requirements of regional initiatives, and to clarify which developments need to be avoided in future.
16. This led to the conclusions that regional initiatives under the Convention need to provide operational means to support improved implementation of the Convention on the ground. They need to provide implementation support in the long term. They need to be based on commonly agreed terms, and they need to benefit from sufficient political and financial support within the region. Regional initiatives should not duplicate the functions of the Ramsar Secretariat, but need to be complementary to its role and bring added benefits. While a minimum of coordination between regional initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat is required, the former should not generate excessive demands on the Secretariat staff.

Ideally, regional initiatives will have to develop into “umbrella” structures that coordinate and supervise the implementation of programmes and projects for better wetland conservation and wise use in the region concerned, as demonstrated over the years of operation by MedWet.

Further clarification needed: the role of regional initiatives vs. the role of the Secretariat

17. Regional initiatives (i.e., both networks and centres) are not intended to take up the role of the Convention Secretariat, nor to fulfill Secretariat functions in their region. Their role is complementary to the Secretariat. The major goal of regional initiatives is to increase the capacity and to provide additional support for better implementation of the Ramsar Convention in the region. Staff working for regional initiatives are not staff of the Ramsar Secretariat – their roles are different and they need to be complementary to the roles of Secretariat staff. While Ramsar Secretariat staff act on behalf of the Convention, regional staff cannot act on behalf of the Secretariat and should not be seen to be doing so.
18. Regional initiatives are acting for the benefit of the Convention, but not in the name of it. It needs to be made clear in communication and outreach, including the appropriate use and reference to the “Ramsar” identity, name and logo, that regional initiatives are not regional offices of the Convention. They are set up to provide added value for better implementation of the Convention in the region, and need to avoid duplicating efforts with the Convention Secretariat. To this end, coordinating mechanisms need to be established between regional initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat, and both need to be aware of the complementary functions of the other.
19. Based on the extensive experience with the operation of the MedWet Initiative, it appears that regional initiatives, when operationally ready to do so, may take on additional tasks of coordinating and supervising more specific and restricted regional projects, in terms of thematic, geographical or time-bound focus, while also playing a long-term strategic role as a true regional forum, bringing together all relevant countries and actors in the region. These tasks were referred to as “umbrella” functions during the Standing Committee discussions. They merit to be identified in more detail with a clear view to distinguish them from the functions of the Convention Secretariat, to make sure that they are complementary to the latter and support the goal of improving the implementation capacity of the Convention in the region, while not putting undue additional pressure to the work of the Secretariat.

Further clarification needed: regional centres vs. regional networks

20. Resolution IX.7 separates regional networks for cooperation and capacity-building from regional centres for training and capacity-building. This underlines the slightly different nature of both. Regional centres have to fulfill the priority functions of providing training, facilitating exchange of expertise and knowledge, and coordinating and harmonizing technical, scientific and monitoring work in the region. By doing so, regional centres contribute significantly to building increased capacities in the region for a better implementation of the Ramsar obligations.
21. Regional networks are different in nature. Foremost, they provide a framework, or forum, for regional consultation, planning, cooperation, as well as for joint activities among Ramsar Contracting Parties and other additional actors in the region. To be effective, it is

crucial for a regional network that all countries and all major stakeholders, representing all relevant different sectors, are cooperating in the framework of a regional initiative.

22. In contrast, regional centres for capacity building and training can operate in a more flexible way, by responding to regional needs and opportunities. The essence of regional networks is, however, to provide a stable and well-supported forum for international discussion, consultation and action in a cooperative way covering common Ramsar issues and concerns.
23. Finally, both regional centres and networks need to be set up for the long-term, and they must receive adequate long-term support from within the region concerned.

Clarification needed: regional initiatives vs. regional projects

24. Regional initiatives are different from projects. This distinction should be recognized and clearly made. Initiatives aim to establish stable and lasting structures to increase the implementation capacity of the Convention in a given region. They need to be based on substantial political, technical and financial support in the long term from the countries and additional wetland actors in the region. Regional initiatives are an operational means to support all aspects to increase the implementation capacity for Ramsar approaches in the region. Projects, on the other hand, are focused upon specific objectives and aspects and are limited in time. As demonstrated by the operation of the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet) since 1991, regional initiatives provide a regional forum to develop, support and implement specific projects and to facilitate training and capacity-building programmes.
25. Many of the recent proposals submitted to the Secretariat are indeed not aiming to construct lasting operational means and cooperation structures, but focus instead on short-term cooperative actions among different countries towards specific and often time-bound objectives. Such proposals undoubtedly have significant merits as cooperative international projects, and should be financially supported by donor organizations specifically set up for project support. But they are clearly not responding to the needs to be covered by regional initiatives.

Proposals for regional initiatives submitted for consideration to SC37

26. In January 2008, the Secretariat proceeded in a similar way to that in 2005 (before COP9) and invited Contracting Parties to submit proposals for regional initiatives – ongoing or new – wishing to be formally endorsed by COP10 as operating in the framework of the Convention during the period between COP10 and COP11.
27. Based on this call, the Secretariat received a total of 21 proposals, including eight ongoing initiatives, seven proposals concerning initiatives recognized by COP9 as being in development and needing further development, and six new proposals developed more recently. They are listed in the table below. (CHF = Swiss francs)

Initiatives COP10-11 CHF ^b	Ramsar funding request 2009-2011	Ramsar funding request 2009 (11.1) ^a	expenditure forecast 2009 (9.3) ^a
funded earlier and ongoing:			
MedWet	no funding requested		582,100
Panama Centre (Western Hemisphere)	70,800	23,600	332,000
Iran Centre (West & Central Asia)	210,000	70,000	242,000
High Andes	66,000	22,000	1,037,000
Pacific Islands	180,000	99,000	not provided
East Asian-Australasian Flyway	no funding requested		not provided
Lake Chad Basin	no funding requested		not provided
Niger Basin	no funding requested		not provided
recognized in 2005 as needing further development:			
Uganda Centre (East Africa)	87,500	87,500	100,800
Black Sea	237,900	60,100	66,700
Carpathian	75,000	25,000	104,300
La Plata Basin	150,000	50,000	55,000
Himalayan	238,300	79,000	not provided
Nordic-Baltic	no funding requested		not provided
Nile Basin	no funding requested		not provided
newly submitted in 2008:			
Korea Centre (East Asia)	no funding requested		225,000
Caribbean Islands	75,000	25,000	25,000
Lesser Flamingo Plan	350,000	200,000	not provided
Neotropical Mangroves	75,000	75,000	not provided
Congo Basin	180,000	60,000	1,069,500
Congo Basin CICOS	no funding requested		not provided
Totals	1,995,500	876,200	

a) referring to the number of the question in the proposal format sent to all Parties

b) all amounts in CHF, simplified exchange rates: 1 CHF/USD, 1.58 CHF/EUR, rounded to 100 CHF.

28. Two competing proposals were received for the Congo river basin. No information was provided concerning future plans of the initiative for West African coastal wetlands (WacoWet), supported during the triennium 2006-2008 with 127,000 CHF from the Ramsar core budget, despite reminders from the Secretariat. Ramsar funding support requested by these 21 proposals submitted in early 2008 is likely to exceed substantially the funds that will be made available in the core budget by COP10.
29. Many of the proposed regional initiatives have not yet finalized their operational planning for 2009 and beyond. This is reflected in the quality (or absence) of information provided in the proposals submitted to the Secretariat in time for the 37th meeting of Standing Committee and illustrated by the key indicator of expenditure forecast figures for 2009 (or its absence) in the table above. The texts of the 21 proposals received for ongoing and new regional initiatives are available in PDF format, unedited and in their original language

(English, French or Spanish), at
http://www.ramsar.org/sc/37/key_sc37_doc08_proposals.htm.

Proposals to COP10 and for the period leading to COP11

30. Following up on the lessons learnt and the conclusions outlined above, it is proposed to redress a number of operational difficulties, notably through addressing the need for:
 - a) improved reporting and governance mechanisms of regional initiatives and better clarification of the working and coordination relationships between the initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat,
 - b) improved administrative procedures to provide Standing Committee with better information prior to its decision on how to allocate available core funds to individual initiatives at annual intervals, based on urgent funding needs and operational readiness of the beneficiary initiatives to spend the funds, and
 - c) regular evaluation procedures to clarify if the initiatives evolve towards the provision of long-term operational means for improved Ramsar implementation on the ground.
31. Based on the Standing Committee deliberations, a step-wise procedure is proposed to focus first on the main functions of regional initiatives and the support they need to provide to the Convention, before considering the question of how to allocate possible Ramsar core budget funds to different initiatives.
32. In order to draw up a list of regional initiatives to be endorsed as operating within the framework of the Convention, COP10 is invited to adopt “Operational Criteria” as a main new tool and reference against which proposals can be assessed as either corresponding to the requirements for endorsement or needing further preparatory work. A proposal for “Operational Criteria” is attached to COP10 DR 6. They are intended to expand and replace the “guidance for the development” of proposals for regional initiatives adopted by COP8 (Annex I to Resolution VIII.30), which have been used to assess proposals in the past.
33. Then, it is proposed that COP10, aware of the 21 proposals submitted to Standing Committee in early 2008 based on the guidance provided by COP8, and aware of the amount of financial support requested by these proposals from the Ramsar core budget, will allocate a global sum to the core budget line for Ramsar regional initiatives, specifying as in the past the respective amounts to be allocated for regional centres and for regional networks for the period 2009-2012.
34. Assuming that Standing Committee would propose to COP10 an allocation of similar amounts as in the past, this could mean a global allocation of 250,000 CHF or so at an annual basis, split up into 100,000 CHF annually for regional centres and 150,000 CHF annually for regional networks.
35. It is proposed that COP10 will not make individual funding allocations to proposed initiatives, but that this will be done subsequently by Standing Committee on an annual basis.

36. The first annual allocation for the period 2009-2012 would thus be made during the 40th meeting of the Standing Committee in early 2009. COP10 would request the initiatives seeking Ramsar endorsement and possible funding to submit an updated proposal, fully in line with the Operational Criteria to be adopted by COP10, and providing information that substantiates that they are ready to operate and to implement their commonly agreed work plan 2009 in a timely manner.
37. The availability of updated reports in accordance with the Operational Criteria in early 2009 will put the Standing Committee in a much better position to make effective funding allocations, and should then become an annual procedure.