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“Healthy wetlands, healthy people”

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The evolution of the Transboundary Ramsar Sites initiative

1. This paper responds to the request by the Parties at the 9th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP9) in Kampala in 2005 for a report to COP10 on the further progress of the concept of the list of Transboundary Ramsar Sites. That list was conceived as an initiative associated with the Convention’s Communications, Education, and Public Awareness (CEPA) activities, but discussions at Ramsar COP9 moved misleadingly into a number of directions that were not part of the initiative as it was evolving in seminars and agreements sponsored by an increasing number of Parties at that time.
2. The purpose of this paper is to review the objectives of the Transboundary Ramsar Sites initiative and summarize its evolution both before and since Ramsar COP9, and to encourage other Parties to the Convention to join voluntarily into the development of this exciting new public relations mechanism of the Convention.

Definitions

3. Increasingly, Ramsar Contracting Parties are designating their new and existing Ramsar sites as “Transboundary Ramsar Sites”. Transboundary Ramsar Site (TRSs) are a subset of the broad category of transboundary wetlands, but the initiative is not related to the scientific, technical, and management issues concerning transboundary wetlands in general.
4. The educational and public relations practice of listing formally notified TRSs is based on the component parts of already designated Ramsar sites. Questions concerning the kinds of international collaborative management arrangements are left to the participating national and local authorities.
5. The objectives of the Transboundary Ramsar Sites initiative are two-fold. 1) For the Parties involved, the participating authorities are making a formal statement of their commitment to supporting Article 5 of the Convention, which says that “the Contracting Parties shall consult with each other about implementing obligations arising from the Convention especially in the case of a wetland extending over the territories of more than one Contracting Party or where a water system is shared by Contracting Parties.”
6. In addition, 2) for the Convention as a whole, the listing of Transboundary Ramsar Sites provides the opportunity to highlight wetland management arrangements that involve constructive collaborative relationships amongst Parties and, where appropriate, to make

available on the Ramsar Web site some of the exemplary materials, like joint management plans, that may arise from those arrangements.

7. In the very simple definition, the term “Transboundary Ramsar Site” refers to a situation where an ecologically coherent wetland system extends across national borders and the Ramsar site authorities on both or all sides of the border have formally agreed to collaborate in its management, and they have notified the Secretariat of that intent.
8. The label of “Transboundary Ramsar Site” denotes merely a cooperative management arrangement and **NOT** a distinct legal status for the Ramsar sites involved. The concept of a list of TRSs imposes no additional obligations of any kind upon the Parties that have already agreed their collaborative arrangements or upon Parties that may not wish to do so.
9. The designation of new or existing Ramsar sites for the list of Transboundary Ramsar Sites has been entirely voluntary, and Parties that do not wish to do so will not be obliged to. The initiative is best understood as a CEPA and site management mechanism by which Parties that wish to draw public attention to their wetland collaboration may do so and by which the Convention can highlight such promising Article 5 activities.
10. Listing as a Transboundary Ramsar Site requires only three elements:
 - i) two or more Ramsar sites that are part of a coherent wetland system that is divided by international borders;
 - ii) some kind of formal agreement for collaborative management between the participating Ramsar Parties of their own Ramsar sites as part of the larger system; and
 - iii) a simple notification to the Secretariat by the Ramsar Administrative Authorities of the participating Parties that they wish their joint initiative to be added to the list of Transboundary Ramsar Sites, with or without a new name to identify the larger system.
11. Participating Parties may also wish to forward to the Secretariat additional materials, such as texts of their collaborative agreements, legal declarations, joint management plans, reports of their joint meetings, etc., for possible use on the Ramsar Web site as news items or as best-practice examples for the possible use of other Parties. They are not required to do so, however, because the Secretariat does not have the capacity to comment on or judge the materials themselves, and there is no external threshold for admittance to the list of TRSs. The sovereign states that are Ramsar Parties retain full sovereignty of the Ramsar site(s) under their jurisdiction and decide for themselves if they wish to be represented on the TRS list.
12. There have been no financial implications for the Convention as this concept has evolved. Secretariat staff receive formal notifications from participating Administrative Authorities in the Parties and post them on the Ramsar Web site (http://ramsar.org/key_trs.htm). The staff are not required to investigate, judge, or monitor individual entries on the TRS list.

Evolution of the concept

13. The concept of the list of Transboundary Ramsar Sites originated some years ago amongst a number of European Parties, perhaps inspired by the success of the long-lasting collaborative management of the Lake Fertő and Neusiedlersee, Seewinkel & Hanság Ramsar sites shared by Hungary and Austria.
14. The first TRS was designated in 2001 by notifications from Hungary and Slovakia joining the Baradla Cave System and Domica Ramsar sites in a collaborative management relationship. Following international discussions in a number of venues, including Ramsar regional meetings, Hungary and Slovakia named a second TRS in 2003, called the “Upper Tisza Valley”, comprising their two newly-designated Ramsar sites along the Tisza River. In March 2004, Belgium and Luxembourg jointly designated the “Vallée de la Haute-Sûre” TRS, for the first time employing the method of filing a single, joint Ramsar Information Sheet to designate their own two Ramsar sites that form the component parts.
15. At Ramsar COP8 in Valencia, 2002, the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award was bestowed upon “The NGO Trinational Initiative for the Morava-Dyje Floodplain” for their crossborder work on coordinating management efforts at a number of Ramsar sites in that region, and in June 2004 the governments of Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia designated those four participating Ramsar sites as a Transboundary Ramsar Site under the unwieldy name of “Trilateral Ramsar Site Floodplains of the Morava-Dyje-Danube Confluence”.
16. In April 2004, a seminar on transboundary wetlands was held in Lida, Belarus, with support from OMPO and the Ramsar Small Grants Fund, and amongst the wider scientific and management issues there was considerable discussion specifically of Transboundary Ramsar Sites, with technical presentations on the “Cepkeliai-Kotra Wetland Complex” TRS shared by Lithuania and Belarus (which has not yet been formally notified for the TRS list) and the Nigula wetland shared by Estonia and Latvia (which was designated as the TRS “North Livonian Transboundary Ramsar Site” in 2006/7). The report of that seminar can be read at http://ramsar.org/mtg/mtg_belarus_transboundary.htm.
17. An international conference entitled “Management of Transboundary Ramsar Sites – Chances and Challenges” was held in November 2004 at Illmitz, Austria, on the shores of the Neusiedl/Fertő jointly-managed lake, where there was informed discussion of a large number of candidate TRSs (http://ramsar.org/mtg/mtg_austria_transboundary.htm), and this was followed up by extensive presentations at the Ramsar European regional meeting in Armenia in December 2004 and again at the European regional meeting in Sweden in May 2008.

Further developments since COP9

18. In August 2006, at a major international conference in Eger, Hungary, a symposium was convened on transboundary wetlands, and a number of presentations were heard on transboundary Ramsar wetlands in the Carpathian Basin, the Prespa Park, the Danube Delta, and the Prypiat River Region (http://ramsar.org/mtg/mtg_hungary_transboundary2006.htm).
19. More recently, Estonia and Latvia have designated the “North Livonian Transboundary Ramsar Site” in 2006/7, Hungary and Slovakia have designated (2007) as a TRS their two

existing Ramsar sites in the Ipoly Valley, and Belarus and Ukraine designated the Prostyry, Prypiat, and Stokhid Ramsar sites as part of the “Stokhid-Prypiat-Prostyry” Transboundary Ramsar Site in early 2008.

20. In April/May 2007, Ramsar Standing Committee member Ms Libuse Vlakakova organized a tour of present and potential Transboundary Ramsar Sites in Central Europe, sponsored by the Czech Republic, in which the participants studied the collaborative management arrangements at a number of sites, and the report by Ms Monica Zavagli participating on behalf of the Ramsar Secretariat (http://ramsar.org/wn/w.n.transboundary_study_2007.htm) gives strong evidence of a growing spirit of common purpose amongst the practitioners who are now part of the Transboundary Ramsar Site initiative.

Future TRS designations

21. Thus far, all TRS designations have come from Europe, where the movement began, and several more are meant to be added quite soon.
22. Elsewhere, interest has been expressed amongst a number of Parties in spreading the TRS initiative for collaborative Ramsar site management into the other Ramsar regions. Namibia and South Africa have both indicated their intention to designate their Ramsar sites both called “Orange River Mouth” as a Transboundary Ramsar Site, and Gambia and Senegal have already designated their common wetland system as a TRS to take effect as soon as Gambia’s RIS for its new Ramsar site is ready for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance.
23. The riparian Ramsar Parties of the Lake Chad Basin Commission are already participating in a de facto TRS joint management programme and can formalize that Transboundary Ramsar Site listing as soon as the last remaining Ramsar site designation is in place. Similarly, the Niger Basin Authority includes a number of international jointly managed Ramsar sites that can be added to the TRS list when the Parties have completed their preparations. A number of Neotropical Parties, especially Costa Rica, have expressed their strong interest in being part of this initiative, and Cambodia in the Asia/Pacific region has expressed an interest. Indeed, the Mekong River area holds great promise for the future of internationally collaborative Ramsar site management.

Encouraging participation

24. The Transboundary Ramsar Site initiative will inevitably strengthen as more Parties join in, and they should be encouraged to do so. Despite the many difficulties of working together across national borders (as addressed, for example, during a specific workshop of the 6th European Ramsar regional meeting in Sweden in May 2008, cf. http://www.ramsar.org/mtg/mtg_reg_europe2008_report.pdf), the environmental benefits of internationally collaborative management arrangements for transboundary wetland ecosystems and river basins, where feasible, do not need further explanation. The historical record is replete with cases where Parties’ best efforts to achieve environmental responsibility have been compromised or destroyed by the unsustainable practices of an upstream or contiguous country.

25. Thus the Ramsar Secretariat is wholeheartedly supporting this Transboundary Ramsar Sites initiative, begun and fostered in Europe but now spreading into the other Ramsar regions, as a way of encouraging and publicizing, and thus providing incentives, for the implementation of the Convention's Article 5 on international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

Annex

Transboundary Ramsar sites**Collaborative international management of adjacent Ramsar sites**

Pursuant to Article 5 of the Convention and Resolution VII.19 (1999) on international cooperation:

Increasingly, Ramsar Contracting Parties are designating their new and existing Ramsar sites as **Transboundary Ramsar Sites**, meaning that an ecologically coherent wetland extends across national borders and the Ramsar site authorities on both or all sides of the border have formally agreed to collaborate in its management, and have notified the Secretariat of this intent. (*Ramsar Manual*) This is a cooperative management arrangement and not a distinct legal status for the Ramsar sites involved.

De plus en plus, les Parties contractantes font de leurs nouveaux sites et de leurs sites existants des **sites Ramsar transfrontières** : ainsi, des zones humides écologiquement cohérentes s'étendent de part et d'autre de frontières et les autorités responsables de ces sites, des deux côtés de la frontière, décident, dans le cadre d'accords officiels, de collaborer à la gestion et notifient le Secrétariat de leur intention. (*Manuel de Ramsar*)

Cada vez más, las Partes Contratantes de Ramsar designan sus sitios Ramsar nuevos y existentes como **sitios Ramsar transfronterizos**, lo que implica que un humedal ecológicamente cohesivo se extiende a través de fronteras nacionales y las autoridades del sitio Ramsar de ambos o todos los lados de la frontera han acordado oficialmente colaborar en su manejo, y han notificado a la Secretaría tal decisión. (*Manuel de Ramsar*)

| Contracting Parties | Individual Ramsar sites and designation | Common TRS name (if any) | Instrument |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Hungary | Baradla Cave System and related wetlands (2001) | . | 14 Aug. 2001 |
| Slovakia | Domica (2001) | | 18 Jan. 2001 |
| Hungary | Felső-Tisza (Upper Tisza) (2004) | Upper Tisza Valley | 6 Nov. 2003 |
| Slovakia | Tisa River (2004) | | |
| Belgium | Vallée de la Haute-Sûre (2003) | Vallée de la Haute-Sûre | 8 March 2004 |
| Luxembourg | Vallée de la Haute-Sûre (2003) | | |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Austria . Czech Republic Slovakia | Donau-March-Thaya-Auen (1982) Untere Lobau (1982) Mokrady dolního Podyjí (floodplain of lower Dyje River) (1993) Moravské luhy (Morava flood plains) (1993) | Trilateral Ramsar Site Floodplains of the Morava- Dyje-Danube Confluence | 30 June 2004 |
| Estonia Latvia | Nigula Nature Reserve (1997) Sookuninga Nature Reserve (2006) Northern bogs (Ziemelu Purvi)(2002) | North Livonian Transboundary Ramsar Site | 27 Dec. 2007 31 July 2006 |
| Hungary Slovakia | Ipoly Valley (2001) Poiplie (1998) | . | 2 Feb. 2007 |
| Belarus Ukraine | Prostyr (2005) Prypiat River Floodplains (1998) Stokhid River Floodplains (1995) | Stokhid-Prypiat-Prostyr | 4 Jan. 2008 1 Feb. 2008 |

The instruments of designation (column 4) are available at
http://www.ramsar.org/key_trs.htm