

Agenda item 4

Report of the Secretary General

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to receive the Secretary General's report and advise as appropriate.

Note: The Secretary General's report also serves as a review of the implementation of the Secretariat's Work Plan for 2006.

1. This report covers the period since the 34th meeting of the Standing Committee (SC34), in April 2006, but some regional issues go further back in time to provide context. The level of activity demanded of the Secretariat continues to increase, commensurate with the number of new Contracting Parties, as well as increasing activity in existing Contracting Parties.
2. The Secretariat has had a tough but rewarding year, and looks forward to working with all concerned to advance the aims, objectives and programme of the Convention. This report is, of course, but a snapshot of the combined activities of the Secretariat and others – some items are reported in more detail under individual agenda items. Despite our small size compared to other secretariats dealing with fewer parties, the Secretariat continues to work well and effectively. Some progress has been made during the last year in terms of greater salary equitability with similar organizations, but this is an issue that Parties must address at COP10.

Goal 1: Wise use of wetlands

3. Stockholm Water Week provided the venue to discuss a key issue for the future – the valuation of wetlands and their services. The Secretariat has produced, jointly with the CBD, a volume dedicated to this issue, as the third in its technical report series. At SWW, I chaired a workshop on this issue, which concluded that
 - valuation of ecosystem services should be employed more frequently in a proactive way as well as being used in a problem-solving capacity, and methodologies are available for a wide range of ecosystem services;
 - valuation of ecosystem services can help resolve conflicts between, for example, carbon sequestration and water use; and
 - part of the valuation process must include communication of results (in a participatory way) to stakeholders with appropriate feedback.
4. The importance of this issue can be further judged by the Secretariat's participation in a drafting group of the UNECE preparing "Recommendations on payments for ecosystem services in integrated water resources management". These recommendations were adopted in Bonn, Germany, on 22 November 2006 by the 4th Meeting of the Parties to the

UNECE Water Convention. They are accessible at www.unece.org/env/documents/2006/wat/ece.mp.wat.2006.5.e.pdf. The approach follows the spirit of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and complements Ramsar's Wise Use concept.

5. This is an issue that we will keep in close contact with cooperating bodies on, and may well deserve a draft Resolution of some kind at COP10.
6. Several Contracting Parties in the Americas have issued important legislation to protect wetlands within their territory, receiving support from the Secretariat for the design and/or wider distribution of these documents. Among them, Chile published its "National Strategy for the Conservation and Wise Use of Wetlands in Chile", and the Government of the Bahamas recently finalized a "Draft National Issues Paper" which will constitute the basis for its National Wetlands Policy. This Draft, which is a direct outcome of project SGF/03/BS/1, sponsored by the Ramsar Small Grants Fund in 2003, is currently being reviewed in numerous public consultations and should be validated soon.
7. In Africa, Ghana, and Niger have drafted their National Wetland Policy (NWP) documents. It is worth noting that the Ghana NWP has an action plan and a budget with a major poverty reduction and promotion of human well-being component. Ramsar and the government of Ghana are going to organize the first-ever donors' roundtable meeting for financing an NWP in Africa. Congo-Brazzaville and Liberia have just prepared the outline of their NWPs as well.
8. Post-conflict assessments of wetlands have been completed in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Congo-Brazzaville. The Secretariat will extend this experience in other African countries such as Mozambique, Angola (when it joins the Convention), etc., when resources permit. Since the last SC meeting, the Secretariat has provided technical assistance through field missions to the following countries for the promotion of the wise use of wetlands: Cameroon, Gabon, Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan.
9. In the Asia region, China, India, the Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, and the Republic of Korea made significant progress in developing their National Wetland Policy and wetland legislation. Most of the Asian countries conducted wetland inventories, especially in monitoring migratory waterbirds to address the avian influenza crisis.
10. The Ministry of Environment of Japan, together with Shiga Prefecture Government, organized an international wetland restoration conference, with the attendance of more than 800 people from 14 countries. The Senior Advisor for the Asia-Pacific was invited as keynote speaker to the conference. More than 80% of Asian countries have carried out wetland restoration programs, and it remains a key area of activity and interest for this region.
11. The State Forestry Administration of China launched a wetland parks initiative. Three urban wetlands with rich culture and ecological value have been designated as national wetland parks, and more than 50 similar wetlands are under review to be listed as wetland parks in China. In response to such development, an international forum was organized by the Chinese government in October 2006, which focused on wetland parks and wetland Communications, Education, and Public Awareness (CEPA), with participation from more than 150 people from 10 countries. Wetlands in urban areas are a new and exciting

development, involving all aspects of the Convention – it is a possible subject for discussion at COP10.

12. Gyeongnam Province of Republic of Korea (the COP10 venue) organized an international symposium on regional issues for wetland conservation and preparation for COP10. The meeting examined major challenges for the Asia region on wetland conservation and wise use, which may become hot topics for the coming Asian Regional Meeting, Asian Wetland Symposium, and the COP10 debate.
13. China was also the venue for the 10th Living Lakes conference, held in Nanchang, which examined the issues of wetlands and agricultural development and the key issue of wetland health and human health – especially via the issue of avian influenza. This latter topic continues to wax and wane, depending on the closeness and frequency of HPAI outbreaks. It seems that the general issue of human health and wetlands will assume increasing importance for the Convention, including through work under the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), which has yet to be developed effectively.
14. Fiji, Marshall Islands, Palau and Samoa have completed their National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs). The NBSAPs include provisions for the conservation and sustainable use of coral reefs and mangroves, the critical wetland ecosystems of the Pacific Islands. One major consideration (and a potential challenge) is to ensure that these strategies are implemented and reviewed periodically. SPREP, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program, is currently providing support to Pacific Island countries for the implementation of their NBSAPs. The interaction of the NBSAP implementers and Ramsar is an issue to discuss and action under the Joint Programme of Work with the CBD and with the Biodiversity Liaison Group.
15. The outposted Associate Ramsar Officer, based at SPREP in Samoa, who functions as an Assistant Regional Advisor to the Senior Regional Advisor (SRA) in the Ramsar Secretariat, is continuing to provide advice and assistance to Pacific Island Contracting Parties (Fiji, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa), including the consideration of wetland policy development, the integration of Ramsar objectives into national strategies/policies where appropriate, site management needs, and establishment arrangements and support for National Ramsar Committees (NRCs).
16. All five Pacific Island Contracting Parties have existing national committees that have taken on the role of NRCs. Such committees have been established through other projects such as the UNDP-GEF Biodiversity Enabling Activities to assist Pacific Island Country parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity to meet their obligations under the CBD.
17. In conjunction with the 4th Biodiversity in Europe Conference in Croatia, the European SRA participated in a regional workshop on “issue-based modules for coherent implementation of biodiversity conventions”, a project coordinated by UNEP’s Division of Environmental Conventions with the assistance of the Belgium Development Cooperation. The project structures available information on common topics shared between several biodiversity-related Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). The modules elaborated so far can be accessed at www.svs-unepibmdb.net and are potentially of great value to streamlining national reporting among MEAs.

18. In Resolution VIII.17, Ramsar Contracting Parties recognized the importance of peatlands to the maintenance of global diversity and for storage of water and carbon, and they adopted *Guidelines for Global Action on Peatlands*. Subsequently, the Ramsar Secretariat established a coordination committee to bring together major global peatland stakeholders, including representatives of business companies, peatland ecosystem experts, conservationists, and scientists dealing with global climate change, biodiversity loss, water resources management and peatland wise use, including peat extraction, agriculture and forestry.
19. The Coordination Committee's role is to clarify a number of emerging issues and to propose common recommendations for future priorities. After producing the awareness brochure "peatlands – do you care?", distributed at COP9 and at other international meetings, the Committee held its 5th meeting on 29 July 2006 at Espoo, Finland. It outlined a plan to prepare a Ramsar Technical Report on peatlands, reiterated its wish to involve other conventions (CBD, UNFCCC, UNCCD) in its work and established an executive team to deal with upcoming issues, representing, besides the Ramsar Secretariat, the International Peat Society (IPS), the International Mire Conservation Group (IMCG), and the Global Peatland Initiative (GPI).
20. At the invitation of UNDP's initiative Action for Cooperation and Trust in Cyprus, the European SRA participated on 5 June 2006 in the World Environment Day Eco-Forum on this year's WED theme "Desertification", focusing on wetlands in drylands, their hydrological functions and services for human well-being, the findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, and choices against desertification, particularly in the Mediterranean region.
21. The European SRA was invited to a meeting of river navigation specialists, water and wetland experts, organized by the Romanian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Environment and Water, and Transport in Galati, 27-29 June 2006. The meeting commemorated the 150th anniversary of the conclusion of the 1856 Paris Peace Treaty after the Crimean War, and the establishment, at this occasion, of the European Danube Commission, the first to regulate and oversee free international navigation on the lower Danube. In 1998, an additional International Commission on the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) was established. The meeting in Galati was a much needed occasion to further the dialogue and cooperation between the navigation, water management and wetlands sectors to develop common measures for integrated flood management, navigation support, environmental restoration and biodiversity conservation.
22. A memorandum of cooperation was signed in June, 2006, between the secretariat and the Global Terrestrial Observing System (GTOS – signed by the A7DG of FAO, representing the GTOS partners) which aims to help the Convention in several ways, including through promoting of better information to allow the wise use of wetlands to be developed and promulgated widely.

Goal 2: Wetlands of International Importance

New Ramsar site designations

23. Since the 34th meeting of the Standing Committee (February 2006),

- 10 new sites from five countries in the Americas have been included in the List of Wetlands of International Importance: Argentina (Parque Provincial El Tromen), Ecuador (Complejo de Humedales Ñucanchi Turopamba), Guatemala (Eco-región Lachuá and Parque Nacional Yaxhá-Nakum-Naranjo), Mexico (Cascadas de Texolo y su entorno, Manglares y Humedales de Tuxpan, Estero de Punta Banda, Isla Rasa, and Laguna de Atotonilco) and Peru (Humedal Lucre–Huacarpay). Progress was made in the designation and/or update of another 37 sites in the region.
 - 19 new African Ramsar sites were included in the List, based on the receipt at the Secretariat of complete RISs and maps from Cameroon (2), Comoros (2), Gambia (1), Liberia (4), Sudan (1) and Uganda (9). 119 RISs are in the pipeline for either new designations or updates.
 - 3 new sites have been designated from Asia, and 3 more RISs have been received from Bangladesh, which could be added to the List before the end of the year. We also reviewed four sites from Nepal, but are still waiting for the official designation letter.
 - 2 site designations are in the pipeline for the Marshall Islands and Samoa. While they have already identified candidate sites for their second national Ramsar sites designation, these have been delayed slightly due to the unavailability of funds for conducting community consultations and associated site surveys. Papua New Guinea's third Ramsar site nomination is retained by their National Executive Council and efforts are being made to push these documents through their system.
 - 17 new European Ramsar sites were included in the List, based on the receipt at the Secretariat of complete RISs and maps from Belarus (1 site), Hungary (3), Portugal (5), Romania (3), Turkey (3), and the United Kingdom (2). Two existing Ramsar sites in Hungary and Latvia were extended. The Secretariat is currently processing 24 new designations or extensions from the Czech Republic (1), France (1), Italy (4), Serbia (2), Spain (14) and the United Kingdom (2). Forthcoming designations or extensions of existing Ramsar sites announced at COP9 (Resolution IX.15 paragraph 31) by Albania, Armenia (1), Belgium, Estonia (13), France (4), Georgia (3), Germany, Netherlands, Norway (20), Poland, Republic of Moldova (1), Slovak Republic, Sweden, and Turkey (8) need still to be substantiated.
24. While it is difficult for the Secretariat and me to be involved in designation ceremonies, I am pleased to report I was able to be present, at the invitation of the Manx government, at the designation of the first Ramsar site for the Isle of Man (British overseas territory), The Curragh. This was a well-organized local event giving good publicity to the aims of the Convention, and shows how a site can be important for both cultural and ecological reasons. The Manx government is also to be commended for introducing a scheme which will encourage neighbouring farmers to return wet meadows to their former species-rich state, by changing farming methods.

Threats to Ramsar sites and Montreux Record

25. In recent months several new complaints were received by the Secretariat regarding threats to Ramsar sites in the **Americas**:

- Argentina: on 4 August 2006, the Secretariat received documentation suggesting the presence of excessive overfishing in Ramsar site No. 885 Bahía de Samborombón. A letter was sent to the Administrative Authority requesting further information on the 14 August 2006, and again on the 16 November 2006. On 7 December the Environment and Sustainable Development Secretariat, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, informed the Ramsar Secretariat that they are requesting further information on the apparent threat from the provincial authorities in Buenos Aires, and will inform the Secretariat about the results of their query in due course.
- Belize: throughout 2006 the Secretariat received numerous complaints from the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM) regarding the potential impacts that an oil exploration project could have on Ramsar site No. 1562 Sarstoon Temash National Park. A letter requesting further information was sent to the Prime Minister on 29 May 2006, followed by another letter to the Administrative Authority on the 16 November 2006. To date the Secretariat has not received a response.
- Honduras: on 5 June 2006 the Secretariat received a complaint regarding a tourism development project potentially affecting Ramsar sites No. 722 Parque Nacional Jeanette Kawas and No. 812 Refugio de Vida Silvestre Punta Izopo. After corroborating the accuracy of the information with the database of the Inter-American Development Bank, the Secretariat sent a letter to the Administrative Authority requesting further information on 19 June 2006. To date the Secretariat has not received a response.
- Mexico: on 9 November 2006, the Secretariat received a complaint regarding the extraction of sand in the north of Cozumel Island. In order to determine if this activity has the potential to adversely affect Ramsar site No. 1449 Parque Nacional Arrecifes de Cozumel, the Secretariat has requested further information from the Administrative Authority on 16 November 2006. To date the Secretariat has not received a response.
- Mexico: on 1 and 19 November 2006, the Secretariat received similar complaints regarding the possible alteration of the hydrology of Ramsar site No.734 Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas as a result of extensive groundwater extraction, particularly from a nearby dairy company. A letter was sent to the Administrative Authority requesting further information on 6 December 2006. To date the Secretariat has not received a response.
- Uruguay: on 14 July 2006, the Secretariat received an information request regarding the potential threat posed to Ramsar site No. 1433 Estero de Farrapos e Islas del Río Uruguay, as a result of the operation of two paper pulp factories. The Secretariat sent a letter requesting further information to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uruguay on 21 July, and again on 16 November 2006. The Secretariat received a response from the Uruguayan government on 30 November 2006, indicating that of the two factories that were to be established near the Ramsar site, one has decided to relocate in another area. Regarding the second one, the Secretariat was referred to a series of technical documents constituting the “Final Cumulative Impact Study” performed by the International Finance Corporation, and was assured that additional supporting documentation would be sent in due course, stating that the conclusion is that this

plant does not pose any threat to the Ramsar sites as it is located downstream of the Ramsar site, and there is no risk that the counter-current will reach the site. Finally, given the preventive and corrective measures being implemented, the Uruguayan government does not consider that there is a justification for including this site in the Montreux Record at this stage. [See statements by Uruguay and Argentina in the report of the meeting.]

- Venezuela: on 21 June 2006, the Secretariat received information regarding the potential impact that the “Punta de Aves” tourist facility could have on Ramsar site No. 414 Refugio de Fauna Silvestre de Cuare. A letter was sent to the Administrative Authority requesting further information on 25 July, and again on 16 November 2006. To date the Secretariat has not received a response.

26. Pursuant to Resolution IX.15, paragraph 24, the Secretariat requested Contracting Parties in the Americas with sites listed in the Montreux Record to provide updates on their progress in taking action to address the issues for which the sites were listed:

Reminders were sent on 16 November 2006 on the following sites:

- Argentina: Ramsar site No. 759 Laguna de Llanquanelo
- Uruguay: Ramsar site No. 290 Bañados del Este y Franja Costera

And on 17 November 2006 on the sites:

- Costa Rica: Ramsar site No. 540 Palo Verde
- Guatemala: Ramsar site No. 488 Laguna del Tigre
- USA: Ramsar site No. 374 Everglades

27. To date the Secretariat has only received information about progress made in Llanquanelo, i.e. multiple workshops took place between 2003 and 2005 regarding grazing, invasive species, monitoring of ecological character and management and conservation of the Lagoon’s fauna. Additionally, a participatory management plan was prepared and presented to the community in June 2006, a monitoring programme was initiated for migratory species, invasive species management (aquatic and terrestrial) and artisanal fisheries, and projects for valuing cultural heritage in the site have started.
28. Paragraph 27 item viii) of the same Resolution also requested the government of Chile to evaluate the possibility of including the Carlos Anwandter Sanctuary Ramsar site in the Montreux Record, in accordance with Article 8.2 (e) of the Convention text. This site was successfully included in the Montreux Record on 6 October 2006 and received a *Ramsar High Level Mission* in the week of November 27th to December 1st, 2006, to discuss with all stakeholders the situation in the site and agree with the Chilean government on proposed next steps. An agreement was reached with CONAF on the first stage of implementation of the management plan which will allow for the restoration of the site.
29. Bolivia has informed the Secretariat that it is concerned about possible threats to Lagos Poopó y Uru Uru and the authorities are considering its inclusion in the Montreux Record in the near future.
30. Twelve **African** Ramsar sites are currently included in the Montreux Record. Egypt and Mauritania have requested the documents to de-list their sites from the Record; Mauritania

indicated that the factors that threatened the Ramsar site are no longer relevant, and Egypt gave no reason. Although Algeria stated its intention to remove its two sites from the Montreux Record, the documents have not yet been received by the Secretariat. Chad stated its intention to place the Partie tchadienne du lac Tchad Ramsar site on the Montreux Record due to oil exploitation threats, but the papers have not been received as yet. Letters have been sent from the Secretariat to the governments of Algeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia and Uganda asking for an update on their progress in taking action to address the issues for which these Ramsar sites were listed on the Record. Senegal informed us that the factors that threatened the sites are no longer relevant and requested that the sites be de-listed from the Record, and South Africa replied that information was being obtained with regards to the two sites on the Montreux Record and details would be provided to us. No other answers have been received.

31. Several NGOs and similar organizations have approached the Secretariat to inform us about problems regarding the following sites:
 - Algeria: Réserve Intégrale du Lac El Mellah and Réserve Intégrale du Lac Oubeïra – concession;
 - Kenya: Lake Elmenteita – pollution and diatomite extraction; Lake Nakuru – pollution;
 - Mauritius: Rivulet Terre Rouge Estuary Bird Sanctuary – harbour development;
 - Morocco: Embouchure de la Moulouya – tourism development;
 - South Africa: Verlorenvlei – housing development.
32. The Secretariat has approached these countries to collect additional information and offer its assistance to maintain the ecological character of these sites according to article 3.2 of the Convention. Morocco replied that the environmental concerns had been taken into consideration and did not need external assistance. South Africa informed us that the intention to conduct mineral exploration on the site had been withdrawn, and therefore this site remains intact.
33. For **Asia**, currently, there are 12 sites from five Contracting Parties (Azerbaijan 1, India 2, Islamic Republic of Iran 7, Jordan 1, and Kyrgyz Republic 1) that are included in the Montreux Record. Four out of the five Parties have been taking action to address the issues of the sites. Positive development news have been received of the 2 sites in India, 1 site from Iran, and 1 site from the Kyrgyz Republic, but none of them has officially requested removal from the Montreux Record.
34. Good news was received from India on another site, Kolleru Lake. The ecological character of the site was significantly changed due to encroachment and water pollution in 2005. The government of Andhra Pradesh has taken up restoration of Kolleru Lake in all earnestness and has also constituted a Committee of Ministers to review conservation activities from time to time. All the encroachments of fish tanks extending over an area of 16,125 acres have since been demolished on the orders of Supreme Court of India. With the removal of these obstructions, the flow of water in the lake has been restored.
35. Site threat complaints were received recently concerning Bundala National Park, which is the first Ramsar site designated in Sri Lanka. The site may face significant change due to the construction of the second international airport. The Secretariat is communicating with

relevant organizations to assess the threats.

36. For **Europe** the Secretariat received an update by Austria regarding the Donau-March-Auen Ramsar site. No information was received concerning the 26 other European Ramsar sites listed on the Montreux Record in Belgium (2), Bulgaria (2), Croatia (1), Czech Republic (4), Denmark (1), Germany (1), Greece (7), Italy (2), Poland (2), Spain (2), and the United Kingdom (2).
37. In their National Reports to COP9, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Hungary, Norway, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom provided information on Ramsar sites where human-induced negative changes have occurred, are occurring, or may occur in relation to Article 3.2. In Resolution IX.15 paragraph 23, the Conference of the Parties urged them to consider, at the earliest opportunity, the possible inclusion of these sites onto the Montreux Record. To date no such request was received by the Secretariat.
38. In December 2006, a Ramsar Advisory Mission was undertaken to the Albufera de Valencia Ramsar site at the request of the Spanish Ministry of Environment. The mission looked into the management practices of this Nature Park, and particularly the extension of zones to be urbanized inside the Park. A mission report will be available on the Convention's Web site in due course.

Updated Ramsar Information Sheets

39. Following the Parties' instructions in Resolution IX.15, paragraphs 28 to 30, the Secretariat sent reminder letters requesting updated Ramsar Information Sheets and maps for selected sites to Argentina, Canada and the United States on 7 August 2006; to Bahamas, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela on 20 November 2006; and to Suriname on 21 November 2006. In most cases the updated documents have not yet been received by the Secretariat.
40. Good quality Ramsar site information (updated RISs and maps) exists for all Ramsar sites in only 11 (out of 46) African countries. Since the 34th meeting of the Standing Committee, Gabon has provided updated RISs for its three sites, and Lesotho and Mozambique provided a finalized version of the RIS and map for their first Ramsar sites. Currently, a number of RIS updates from Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, South Africa and Zambia are being processed, although some have been pending for over two years. Eight countries still need to provide a good quality RIS and map for the Ramsar site(s) with which they acceded the Convention.
41. For Oceania, a letter and follow-up reminder have been sent to the Parties in the region. We received RIS update documents from five New Zealand sites, with for one of them a boundary extension. We are still waiting for Palau, however, to submit an RIS of their first Ramsar site, which they are in the process of developing at the moment. The RIS updates from Papua New Guinea for their 2 sites are being followed up with limited success, as are the RIS updates from Australia for their 53 sites.

42. The total number of Ramsar sites in Asia is 203, of which 68 need updated RISs. We received 27 RIS updates (Iran 21, China 4, Philippines 1 and Syria 1). China has finalized only one site; the rest are under review or waiting for more information.
43. Some pre-accession countries made good progress in preparing RISs for the sites to be accompanied by the accession instruments. The Secretariat received high quality RISs from Afghanistan, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, and the United Arab Emirates in 2006. These sites are ready to accompany their accession instruments.
44. Since February 2006, 75 updates were completed for Europe, concerning Ramsar sites in Austria (2), France (1), Hungary (4), Slovak Republic (2), Sweden (1), and the United Kingdom (65). Another 150 updates are currently being processed, concerning Ramsar sites in Austria (1), Belgium (1), Czech Republic (9), Estonia (3), France (3), Hungary (16), Latvia (2), Montenegro (1), Norway (10), Portugal (6), Romania (1), Slovakia (1), Spain (2), Sweden (1) and the United Kingdom (93). This leaves 372 Ramsar sites in nearly all European Contracting Parties for which updated information is still requested as a matter of high priority.
45. The Secretariat participated in June 2006 in an EU-funded workshop addressing the theme of business opportunities and constraints for sustainable use of wetlands, in the Neusiedlersee-Seewinkel Ramsar site in Austria. About 50 participants debated case studies, ranging from reed management, fish farming and nature tourism to investments for management of land retired from agricultural or other uses aimed at restoring or creating biodiversity value combined with sustainable use of the resources so developed, encouraging organic farming, introducing low-input crops, and establishing centres for retailing ecologically friendly products.
46. In May 2006, the German state archaeologists committee dedicated their annual meeting to the preservation and management of river basins, floodplains and lake landscapes. This was the occasion for the Ramsar Secretariat to present the Convention's integrated approach to taking into account the cultural values of wetlands and to provide links to the framework of the European Union Water Framework Directive and water legislation and planning processes at national level, and their implications for archaeological work.
47. At the generous invitation of the Chinese and Sichuan governments, I had the pleasure, with the SRA for Asia, to visit China in mid-year to see first hand the progress and challenges faced by the large peatland site known as Ruoergai Marshes, transboundary to the Sichuan and Gansu Provinces in the upper Yellow River on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau (3,400 to 3,900 m. altitude). They consist of approximately 1 million hectares of peat bogs, sedge marshes, lakes and wet grasslands, interspersed with low hills and drier grasslands. Tibetan people, who are almost exclusively pastoralists with vast herds of sheep, yaks, horses and goats, inhabit the Ruoergai Plateau.
48. Ruoergai NNR, Gaihai Lake NNR, Shouqu PNR and intervening areas (approximately 500,000 hectares) form the largest contiguous area of high altitude peat bog remaining in China, and one of the largest such areas in the world. The relative scarcity of high altitude peat bogs of this size ensures the global biodiversity significance of Ruoergai Marshes for diverse and endemic Tibetan/Himalayan flora, typical of montane peat bogs and alpine grassland. The marshes are also of high global significance as an important breeding area for threatened bird species, especially for summering and breeding populations of black-

necked cranes, *Grus nigricollis*. In summer, the population totals 600-900, with about 150-200 breeding pairs, making this the most important breeding and summering area for the species in the world.

49. During the visit, local governments (including provincial, prefecture and county government) and nature reserve authorities expressed their strong wishes to designate the site as Ramsar site. We welcomed the proposal, and encouraged China's Administrative Authority to submit the RIS as soon as possible. Meanwhile, we encouraged our Chinese colleagues to look at the broad sustainable development issues, address the need of healthy wetlands for local people programme for the province, as well as for downstream in China, given the important role in mitigating climate change on global scale these wetlands have. I was especially encouraged by the commitment shown by the Chinese authorities at all levels to implement the wise use principle.
50. In the Mediterranean context, besides the ongoing activities of MedWet, I had the pleasure in November to be invited to participate in a seminar in Bari, Italy, organized by the Federparchi agency, Italy. This was an attempt to establish a Mediterranean wide federation of protected areas, *inter alia*, to:
 - develop, in the spirit of IUCN resolutions, the Barcelona Convention on the protection of the Mediterranean Sea and other international environmental protection agreements, a basin-wide approach to national park and protected area activity;
 - agree on the need to set up stable forms of cooperation, in order to strengthen at international level the role and potential of the Protected Areas of the Mediterranean Basin as a fundamental tool both for protecting the nature and culture of the region and for promoting sustainable development.
51. While this is a regional approach, somewhat mirroring MedWet in coverage, its aims are especially at the protected area aspect of the Convention. A welcome development; whose results could provide positive leadership elsewhere in the world.
52. Finally, we have been working closely with wetlands International to improve the presentation, data entry and management of the Ramsar Sites Database. The loss of Doug Taylor from WI is a blow for the effective delivery of this service, but we are encouraged by the positive developments from other officers of WI, including help in establishing how the RIS can be input electronically directly from the Secretariat. We aim to continue discussions with WI during the remaining period of the triennium, with a view to presenting a new approach at COP10.

Goal 3: International cooperation

53. Globally, a key new memorandum of cooperation was signed with the Global Programme of Action for Land Based Sources of Marine Pollution (GPA), at its 4th meeting of the programme in Beijing, China, in October 2006. This MOC will help coordinate actions under the Convention and the programme, and it is hoped it will lead to greater sharing of knowledge and resources, and hence better implementation in the near shore environments.

Both the GPA and the Convention have emphasised integrated approaches to water flows and management.

54. In the Americas, implementation of the High Andean Strategy as urged in Resolutions VIII.39 and IX.7 has been a key priority for 2006. The Secretariat participated actively in and continued to contribute to the development of the Western Hemisphere Strategy for Migratory Species (WHMSI), as a member of its Steering Committee.
55. In Africa, an MOC was signed with the Congo River Basin Authority (CICOS) and of a small grant was confirmed for the designation and management of a network of Ramsar sites in the Congo basin.
56. Finalization of the WacoWet regional initiative action plan for the West and Central Africa coastal wetlands has been progressed, but the initiative remains yet to be finalized. Preliminary discussions with the Nile Basin Initiative for collaboration in the management of the wetlands in the basin may lead to the signature of an MOU.
57. Collaboration has continued with the European Space Agency in the framework of the TIGER project for the management and monitoring of water and wetlands resources using earth observation technologies. Our involvement in this project is to lead to the development of a global observatory tool for wetlands and water resources on the continent.
58. Our collaboration with ESA also continued on the Globwetland project, and a jointly organized symposium on the uses of wetland earth observation (remote sensing) for a range or inventory, assessment, monitoring and management purposes was held in October in Frascati, Italy, with major involvement of several members of the STRP as well. A proceedings volume of all presented papers will be published shortly, and it is also planned to publish a selection of the papers in a special issue of a scientific journal. However, much work remains to be accomplished to enable the power of remote sensing to be available to on-ground managers, and during the symposium ESA re-affirmed its commitment to continuing to support Ramsar implementation.
59. We have also strengthened our collaboration with the Africa Ministerial Conference on Water (AMCOW) to look at the water conservation component of their activities. If this makes sense, we may formalise this collaboration through an MOU with UNEP (Water Policy) to support AMCOW.
60. In Asia, the Himalayan Initiative has been making progress this year. Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Tajikistan have officially endorsed the initiative agreement; Bangladesh, China, India, and Nepal have this under serious consideration. Bhutan, China, India and Nepal are actively participating in the implementation of an EU-funded capacity building and policy development project under the Himalayan Initiative framework. A workshop was organized by WWF India and the Indian Ministry of Forests and Environment, concrete follow-up action had been agreed in the workshop, and Kyrgyzstan is proposed as host of the forum for 2007.
61. The East Asia Australasia Flyway Partnership was officially launched in November by the governments of Australia and Japan, together with Wetlands International. The Flyway Partnership will carry on the objectives of the Asia Pacific Migratory Water Bird

Conservation Strategy, but will expand the work to closely link to wetland management for sustainable development. Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore, and the USA have endorsed the partnership, as have the Russian Federation and the USA from other regions that share these flyways. Ramsar, CMS, IUCN, Wetlands International, WWF, International Crane Foundation, and several local NGOs became the partners. A comprehensive implementation strategy was developed, and a secretariat to coordinate the Partnership will be established in 2007.

62. The Ramsar Centre Japan is working with Japan's Administrative Authority and partners for the implementation of Ramsar COP9 Resolution IX.19, for the preparation of the next Asian Wetland Symposium.
63. After COP9, the Ramsar Regional Training and Research Centre for Central and West Asia speeded up its strategy development. The Department of Environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran appointed Dr. Asghar Fazel as the coordinator for the centre. An external consultant was contracted to finalize the strategy document, and it is intended to circulate the document to the regions for official endorsement. A workshop was planned in the first week of December 2006, but due to delay in finalizing the strategy document, this workshop is now postponed to the first week of February 2007.
64. The Mekong River Basin countries have been working together to develop a basin-wide wetland conservation approach on the basis of the four lower Mekong wetland program. One basin-wide meeting has been organized in the first week of January 2007. The Asia Water Bird Census, coordinated by Wetlands International Malaysia, is progressively consolidating its network and improving the quality of data.
65. Bilateral cooperation in the region is also making progress, such as the dialogue between Iran and Afghanistan on the management of Sistan province wetlands, and dialogue between South and North Korea on biodiversity conservation of DMZ. Dialogue between Kazakhstan and China on Balkhash river cooperation is also underway.
66. The Associate Ramsar Officer in Samoa has been involved in SPREP collaboration with the University of the South Pacific (USP), the International Centre for Protected Landscapes (ICPL), and the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI) to organize and deliver the bi-annual Pacific Island Community-Based Conservation Course in 2005, which includes a Ramsar component. This course will be run again in April 2007.
67. A MoC was signed with SPREP in May 2006 to strengthen our links with that programme, including its support for the Ramsar Officer – a position which is both working well and delivering excellent results. Thanks are due to the WWF Global Marine Programme in providing initial seed funding, with the government of Australia, to launch this experiment in decentralisation, which is showing clear promise.
68. The Ramsar Officer in Samoa has worked closely with the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), University of the South Pacific (USP) and the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories (California State University) to plan for marine and coastal habitat mapping needs in the region. He is on the organizing committee of the planned Marine Geological and Biological Habitat Mapping (GeoHab) conference in May 2007 – this is a collaboration of

regional and international partners to showcase marine habitat mapping tools and to share the latest information and expertise about the seafloor and associated communities (including coral reefs and mangroves) with specific focus on the Pacific Islands region. These technologies have application for other regions with these ecosystems.

69. He has also been collaborating closely with a leading regional NGO, the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI), to plan priorities and needs for strengthening community-based coastal resource management over the next five years in the region. This has resulted in a partnership between SPREP and FSPI for a series of exchange attachments/visits between coastal wetland practitioners from Pacific Islands to learn from each other's experiences. Three further exchange attachments are in the pipeline to occur during the first quarter of 2007.
70. The Associate Ramsar Officer has also been collaborating with the University of Tasmania, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, and UNEP Regional Seas Programme to conduct a survey to assess the technical capacity of Pacific Island countries to assess and manage mangrove responses to climate change and sea level rise. The survey results were recently published by the UNEP Regional Seas Programme – the title is “Pacific Island Mangroves in a Changing Climate and Rising Seas”, available online at www.unep.org and www.wpcouncil.org.
71. Under this same umbrella of collaboration, a symposium of mangrove responses to relative sea level rise and other climate change effects was organized and conducted as part of the Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS) annual meeting in July 2006. At the same conference, at the invitation of our Australian Administrative Authority, the Deputy Secretary General chaired a symposium on Ramsar Convention implementation approaches and challenges, and also discussed approaches with SWS officers for further developing SWS/Ramsar collaboration.
72. For Europe, Ukraine approached the *ad hoc* group of international organizations with interest in the Danube Delta (including Ramsar, UNESCO, ICPDR, European Commission, Council of Europe, UNECE Aarhus and Espoo Convention secretariats, WWF, IUCN, and Wetlands International) with the request to support the organization of an international conference on the wider issues in the Danube Delta region. Preparing the conference in Odesa, 27-28 February 2006, the international organizations were able to work with the Ukrainian, Romanian and Moldovan authorities and develop cooperation among these three countries. The conference aimed to generate an overall shared vision for the conservation and sustainable development of the Danube Delta region, under which individual project decisions could be taken. The participants stressed that regional development has to be planned and undertaken at a functional scale and in a sustainable way, to take into account existing ecological limitations and sensitivities, and be based on a common vision and cooperation among the three countries sharing the area.
73. Cooperation with the World Heritage Convention was reinforced during a symposium on managing natural World Heritage sites and cultural landscapes in Southeastern Europe, held in the premises of the German Federal Environment Foundation (DBU) in Osnabrück in October 2006. The symposium concluded that wetland management cannot be dissociated from the wise use of the wider landscape in the catchment basin of which a wetland forms part. Often such catchments are shared between different countries situated up and downstream or on left and right river banks. Therefore, coherent ecosystem

management depends on international coordination and transboundary cooperation. The results of this symposium will form the basis of three training seminars for site managers in March 2007 at Skocjan Caves World Heritage and Ramsar site in Slovenia, April 2007 in Italy, and May 2007 in Croatia.

74. Two regional initiatives with the potential to operate under the Convention, the Nordic-Baltic Wetlands Initiative and the Carpathian Wetland Initiative, had successful meetings as summarized in the specific paper to this meeting on Ramsar regional activities (DOC. SC35-11). On the occasion of the first meeting of the Carpathians Convention in Kyiv, December 2006, a memorandum of cooperation was signed between the Ramsar and Carpathian secretariats, to promote better conservation and management of the wetland resources of the Carpathians. This occasion happened because the results of the Evian Encounter on developing a wetlands initiative for the Carpathians - a clear example of the value of these funds in helping the Convention develop.
75. As an additional example of cooperation globally, the Secretariat is represented on the International Steering Committee (ISC) for the Consultative Process Towards an International Mechanism Of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMOSEB). This ISC met earlier in 2006, but the Secretary General also participated by invitation in a special workshop held in Leipzig, Germany, in November 2006 on developing the mechanism. This workshop was however held under Chatham House rules, i.e., participants were there as themselves, not institutionally based! This mechanism is benefiting from an extensive consultation period, and should eventually help manage the global needs for biodiversity information – and thus benefit our STRP, among others.

Goal 4: Implementation capacity

76. For the Americas, in the 2006 cycle of the Wetlands for the Future Fund (WFF), five proposals are expected to receive approval. A total of 18 WFF projects have been closed since February 1st, 2006.
77. In the case of the Small Grants Fund (SGF), 15 proposals from the Americas were assessed, and although several were of very good quality only one received funding. A total of four SGF projects were closed during this period.
78. The Federal Government of Switzerland (the Federal Office for the Environment - FOEN) has agreed to contribute to the Convention's activities in Africa for another year through the Swiss Grant for Africa. The 2006 Swiss Grant for Africa will allow the Secretariat to support five projects on the continent and address the implementation of COP9 Resolution IX.14 on Wetlands and Poverty Reduction - this will make an important contribution to the team's strategic objectives for Africa. The 2006 SGA will support the following countries Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Senegal and Zimbabwe.
79. For Asia/Pacific, 16 SGF proposals were received, including 14 from Asia and 2 from Oceania, but only half (8) of them were officially endorsed by the Administrative Authorities. Two proposals (Kyrgyz Republic and Viet Nam) from Asia and one (Kiribati) from Oceania have been approved for funding in 2006. The Japanese government may provide funds to support more SGF projects in 2006 cycle.

80. A management workshop was held with SGF support in the Bardacha wetland area, a complex of near-natural parts of the Sava river floodplain and fishponds, in Bosnia & Herzegovina in November 2006. This provided the first opportunity for one of the Assistant Regional Advisors at the Secretariat, who help in administering Ramsar projects, to provide direct input to an ongoing SGF project. The results of the workshop and the site visit showed that this can effectively contribute to the project results by clarifying processes and contributing experiences from other projects and Ramsar sites. In this case, also the manager of Lonjsko Polje Ramsar site, somewhat upstream in the Sava floodplain in Croatia, contributed in a significant way to the preparation for Ramsar designation of the Bardacha wetland site.
81. Ramsar Crane Bank Award. Following the creation after COP9 of the Crane Bank Ramsar Award to promote the wise use concept of wetlands in the Africa region, the prize was awarded to two young professionals from Madagascar and Zimbabwe and will support their costs for a tour of duty for two weeks in Uganda next year. The tour should allow the recipients to inspire themselves from the successful experience of Uganda in establishing the proper institutional and technical set up for wetlands management. Each candidate's scope of activities will be associated with the environmental theme selected for the year as indicated on the nomination form. In 2006, the theme for which candidates was eligible was 'wetlands inventory and assessment'. The Secretariat is working towards the creation of a similar prize for French-speaking countries.
82. Draft Handbook on Wetlands Assessment, Planning, Management and Monitoring in collaboration with the African Development Bank. In recognition of the importance of wetlands as very significant components of the general environment in Africa, the AfDB is committed to promoting sustainable wetland management activities within its Regional Member Countries (RMCs), to serve as a vehicle for the achievement of its overarching objectives of poverty reduction and sustainable development. To this effect, the Secretariat has collaborated with AfDB for the preparation of a handbook to help the bank staff and RMC counterparts better understand the general concepts of integrated wetlands management issues, ensure that wetland conservation and wise use are better understood, and how to address wetland issues in Bank-sponsored projects.
83. Development of training modules for Ramsar focal points and national wetlands committees in French-speaking countries. The objective of this project is to strengthen the links between the Secretariat, the daily contacts in the Administrative Authorities, and the National Wetlands Committees in order to improve their coordinating role in the implementation of the Convention. This activity is at its early stage and should really start in the beginning of 2007 with most of the funding from the French government. UNCCD and CBD have shown an interest in being associated with this initiative.
84. Parliamentarian workshops (Gabon, Cameroon and Lesotho). The Secretariat has organized a series of workshops for Africa parliamentarians on their role in the implementation of MEAs at national level. The experiences of the Ramsar Secretariat in the African region show that the understanding of Parliamentarians for MEAs is underdeveloped. Capacity building is therefore needed with that specific group of stakeholders. To achieve a better synergy, priority for our next capacity building sessions to MPs in the region will be given to States which ratified all (or almost all) major MEAs.

85. UNITAR. A number of initiatives have occurred and are developing with UNITAR in Geneva. In August, the Ramsar SRA for Asia/Pacific co-organized a training workshop jointly with CBD and UNITAR in Kushiro International Wetland Centre for the government officials from 27 countries in Asia/Pacific region. This is a training series that takes place each year and focuses on ecosystem approach on wetland, water and biodiversity conservation.
86. In July I took part in a training session organized at the University of Budapest, Hungary, on implementation of the MEAs. The presentation was well received by the attendees, and is an event likely to be repeated. We are to sign a formal MoC with UNITAR in January to enhance this relationship.

Party issues

87. The State Council of China has approved the Ramsar Administrative Authority expanding its office for the implementation of the Ramsar Convention, and a network for monitoring migratory waterbird and wetlands has been established in the suite of responses to HPAI. Similar work has been undertaken by other East Asian Parties.
88. The Marshall Islands, Fiji, and Samoa, as well as non-party Tonga, are to carry out institutional strengthening in their environment ministries. Some of these parties have also previously accessed Ramsar SGF funds to review training needs related to the implementation of the Ramsar Convention. Funding has also been identified by the Ramsar officer in Samoa to carry out capacity building for the implementation of the Ramsar Convention and other biodiversity-related MEAs in the Marshall Islands, the focus being on harmonizing implementation through strengthening coordination across national executing agencies, which at the moment is still somewhat fragmented.
89. All five Pacific Island Ramsar Contracting Parties are participating in a UNDP–GEF regional project on National Capacity Self Assessment (NCSA), which aims to identify country-level priorities and needs for capacity to address global environmental issues of biodiversity (including wetlands), climate change and land degradation. The project also looks at exploring synergies among thematic areas and aims to verify linkages with wider concerns of environmental management and sustainable development.
90. The Ramsar Secretariat participates, together with a number of international organizations, including the secretariats of the Biodiversity and Alpine Conventions, the Austrian Ministry of Environment, Forests, Agriculture and Water Management, IUCN, WWF, and others, in the advisory board of the international master programme of the University of Klagenfurt on the management of protected areas. This M.Sc. programme is organized in nine block courses over two years. A Ramsar lecture in September 2006 focused on the management plan structure, according to guidance provided in Ramsar Handbook 8 and illustrated by the Karavasta Lagoon Ramsar site case in Albania. In June 2007, twenty students from seven different countries will obtain their diploma and be well-equipped to manage Ramsar sites and other protected areas.
91. On 28 April 2006, Austria opened its UnderWaterWorld Ramsar Centre in Schrems Nature Park after several years of careful planning. The centre is intended to attract at least 30,000 paying visitors a year, as it is forming part of the tourist attractions in and around the Waldviertel ponds, peat bogs and floodplains Ramsar site. The centre gives unusual

insights into the mysterious world of water through an underwater zoo, cinema, and science lab for schoolchildren. In the outdoor area, frogs, dragonflies and otters can be observed in their natural habitats. Water terraces, ponds and natural brooks illustrate the scenic uniqueness of the Waldviertel region. Not many Ramsar sites have such a splendid entry gate to discover their riches, but this one can lead the way.

National Focal Points of CEPA and the STRP

92. It has long been an issue that national focal points for CEPA and for the STRP have either not been notified or have been rather inactive. In the case of the STRP this issue still remains a problem, despite the best efforts of the STRP members. The same is true, though to a lesser extent, for CEPA. The functioning of the Convention in full depends on these national focal points being notified to the Secretariat – and then, of course, in the Secretariat following through!!

GEF projects

93. GEF is slowly becoming more responsive to Ramsar's role in potentially delivering its requirements. I am due to visit the CEO in early January and will report back verbally on those discussions.
94. Meanwhile the Secretariat is involved on the Steering Committees of two major GEF projects which will directly support Ramsar implementation. One is "Wings over Wetlands (WOW)" – a project to increase capacity for wetland management for waterbirds on African-Eurasian Flyways. This long-awaited project, launched in November 2006, will directly support a range of aspects of Ramsar implementation and implementation of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), including through 11 wetland management demonstration sites (most of which are Ramsar sites), regional information exchange and capacity building, and the development of enhanced tools and resources for identification of flyway-scale key site networks. It is being implemented largely by our IOPs Birdlife International and Wetlands International, with UNEP-WCMC.
95. The second project, being coordinated by UNEP-WCMC, is the "2010 Biodiversity Indicators Partnership (BIP)", developed to undertake assessment of the achievements under the WSSD/CBD 2010 biodiversity target. This will also make a significant contribution to the STRP's work on developing assessment of Ramsar's "indicators of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Convention", and the Secretariat and STRP have been closely involved in the project design and development. It is anticipated that this project, which also directly involves four IOPs, will kick off in March 2007.

Synergies with other conventions

96. Although Ramsar is supposed to be an observer at the Joint Liaison Group, the Secretariat is not informed when meetings of this group occur. On the other hand, there do not seem to have been any actions which would have warranted the presence of the Secretariat in any case.
97. The Biodiversity Liaison Group, on the other hand, is beginning to be rather effective. A meeting was held in Ramsar HQ, with the heads of all conventions, except World Heritage which again did not send a senior officer. Nonetheless this meeting went well, with a number

of areas agreed for cooperation and update, including promotion of joint activities, and keeping the vexatious issue of national reports under review.

98. That meeting was followed the next day by a meeting of the 2010 Task Force, hosted by IUCN. This meeting reviewed what the several agencies and MEAs were attempting to accomplish in implementing the WSSD and CBD 2002 commitment to reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010. The meeting did not offer any novel approaches to this issue, but Ramsar COP10 should certainly review what has been accomplished and what remains to be done in Ramsar taking its part in implementing the 2010 target.
99. The Secretariat is also involved in, and will benefit from, a UNEP-funded project being implemented in 2007 by UNEP-WCMC on behalf of CITES, Ramsar, CMS, and the World Heritage Convention. The project is further developing approaches to harmonization of national reporting processes, including development of a framework for joint Ramsar and CBD reporting on inland waters, and developing tools to increase the joint information and knowledge management capacity of the convention secretariats.

Goal 5: Membership

100. In the Americas, Dominica, and Haiti are working towards their accession, together with Guyana.
101. For Africa, Cameroon and Sao Tome and Principe have joined the Convention since the last SC meeting. The Secretariat is expecting the accession of Ethiopia and Zimbabwe in 2007.
102. In Asia, the Secretariat is working with Afghanistan, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, the UAE, and Yemen towards their accession. The Kazakhstan government made the decision to ratify the Ramsar Convention in December 2005, but did not include at least one site as Ramsar site. The Secretariat has been working with BirdLife and the UNDP wetland project team, and the UNEP Siberian Crane Project team, to finalize the required RIS. The RIS documents of two sites are now ready for the Ministry to sign off on.
103. The Secretary General and the SRA for Asia have been working with Yemen Environment Protection Authority (EPA), and the Yemeni Parliament ratified Ramsar Convention in May. The Secretariat is able to make use of the Danone Asia Fund to support the site selection and stakeholders' consultation workshop. It is anticipated that the accession procedure will be completed before World Wetlands Day 2007.
104. The Secretariat also paid two visits to the United Arab Emirates to encourage their accession in 2006. A Ramsar candidate site has been selected, and the national consultations (among different emirates) are now underway.
105. Accession instruments and RISs for Afghanistan, Iraq and Lao PDR are ready for the governments to sign and send to UNESCO. The SRA for Asia will visit Lao PDR in the beginning of January 2007.
106. We are also looking for the opportunity to bring other countries into the Convention. Initial attempts have been made in communication with Bhutan, Brunei, North Korea, and Oman.

107. In the Pacific, considerable assistance has been provided to Fiji, Cook Islands, and Tonga to complete their accession processes. Fiji became the 152nd Contracting Party. The Cook Islands' National Environment Service currently retains the completed Ramsar accession documents, and further liaison will be carried out to verify the situation. Tonga requested an in-country assistance "mission" to help them get their accession activities back on track, which has been affected by staffing constraints. This assistance mission was completed in July 2006 – their Ramsar SGF project report was finalised, and a daily working counterpart was identified to progress remaining accession activities. Political difficulties in Tonga recently, however, have again created a constraint to completing their preparations.
108. Preparatory activities for accession have been re-invigorated for the Republic of Kiribati with full government support pledged to assist the process. The Associate Ramsar Officer in Samoa has assisted the Kiribati government to put together a proposal for their national accession process, which was submitted to the Ramsar SGF 2006 cycle and approved. They have also been assisted in drafting a cabinet paper and RIS for their proposed site. The Ramsar Officer is currently liaising with them on pre-arrangements for project start-up in early 2007.
109. Assistance has also been offered to non-parties Niue, Nauru and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) to commence initial planning and considerations for national activities. An economic crisis that Nauru has been facing has delayed the planning and commencement of their activities for the time being. A renewed pledge of assistance has been made to Niue during late 2006 since the main contact has left for other employment. Securing a new daily contact is part of the process to revamp their consideration of joining the Convention.
110. Following the declaration of independence from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro by the Republic of Montenegro in early June, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs announced to the UN Secretary General, on 16 June 2006, that the Republic of Serbia continues to exercise its rights and to honour its commitments deriving from international treaties concluded by Serbia and Montenegro. He requested that the Republic of Serbia be considered a party to all international agreements in force. UNESCO advised the Ramsar Secretariat that this should be considered as Serbia's formal declaration of succession to the Ramsar Convention. Despite repeated requests from the Secretariat, the new Republic of Montenegro has not yet made a similar declaration of accession or succession.
111. No further news about the possible accession of Andorra was received during 2006, despite interest shown to join the Convention for several years. San Marino and the Holy See are two other remaining European countries not yet a Party to the Convention.