CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)
35th Meeting of the Standing Committee
Gland, Switzerland, 14-16 February 2007

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Agenda item 14

Ramsar sites and protected area systems

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to note the developments on freshwater protected areas, and comment on any further work the Committee would like the Secretariat to undertake, in the context of the already agreed activities with the World Commission on Protected Areas.

1. In Resolution IX.22 the Parties agreed, *inter alia*, the following operative paragraphs:

   8. AGREES to include as extra data fields in the approved Ramsar Information Sheet for the designation of Wetlands of International Importance from COP9 onwards the following:

   Protected area categories, if any, for the site, as established by each Contracting Party, and/or IUCN categories (1994), if appropriate, and any other relevant designations;

   9. REQUESTS all Contracting Parties, where appropriate, to include information for these new data fields when they next update their Ramsar Information Sheets for existing Ramsar sites;

   10. CALLS UPON Parties to consider, wherever possible, developing processes which integrate efforts aimed at broader protected areas system development with Ramsar site network expansion, the nomination of World Heritage sites, and the identification of Biosphere Reserves.

2. Concerning paragraph 8, the Secretariat has added the extra data fields, including for IUCN protected area categories, to the revised Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS) issued to Contracting Parties following COP9.

3. During the year, a number of consultations relating to protected areas have taken place. The Chair of the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) met with the Secretariat and it was agreed to try and have formal input to the proposed summit on protected area categories in 2007, and to hold, later in 2007, a joint workshop on transboundary protected areas.

4. Regarding the question of categories, and also the status of freshwater protected areas, an unofficial group of interested persons met in Skukuza, Kruger National Park, South Africa, on 13 October 2006, and their conclusions are in the annex. No one from the Secretariat was invited to this event.

5. Following this event the Secretary General placed the following report on the Web site of the Convention.

> This issue will be discussed at an IUCN categories summit in March – although in passing we should note that inland waters including saline and calcareous waters as well as simply "fresh".
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> Comments on this approach are welcome (to definition@ramsar.org), as the secretariat is also moving ahead with a small publication for the IUCN categories summit, but aimed at contracting Parties to help clarify some of the issues surrounding the nexus between Ramsar sites and protected area status.
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> The Convention encourages Parties to designate and manage important wetlands in a way that does not diminish their ecological values. While many of these **Wetlands of International Importance** also have other protection status (e.g., are officially protected areas under national legislation, natural World Heritage sites or UNESCO biosphere reserves), there is no *obligation* for Ramsar sites to be protected areas as recognised by IUCN. On the other hand, the definition of protected areas post World Parks Congress in Durban 2003 would mean all of the wetlands of International Importance qualify anyway!
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> **Previous protection status of Ramsar sites**: This distinction is implied, although not often stated as baldly, in our literature. For example, the *Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance* makes no reference to protection status. The *Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands (RIS)* implies that protection status is not mandatory, with phrases such as: "If a reserve has been established" and "If appropriate, list the IUCN (1994) protected areas category/ies".
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> The *Ramsar Convention Manual* (2004) is explicit: "***Designating a wetland for the Ramsar List does not in itself require the site previously to have been declared a protected area***. In fact, listing under the Ramsar Convention, especially in the case of sites subject to intensive use by human communities … should provide the necessary protection to ensure its long-term sustainability" (my emphasis). And again: "… sites designated for the Ramsar List do not have already to be established as legally protected areas before designation. Listing under the Ramsar Convention elevates the sites to a higher status (recognized as places of "international importance"), focuses more attention upon them, and should contribute to their long-term conservation and wise use – whether or not Ramsar status conveys additional legal protection in-country depends upon the national and local policy and legislation concerning Ramsar Sites... Human uses of wetlands are compatible with listing under Ramsar, provided that they are in line with the Ramsar concept of "wise use" (sustainable use) and do not lead to a negative change in ecological character."
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> **Ramsar sites as protected areas**: It is less clear whether Parties regard inclusion on the List as in effect meaning that the site becomes a protected area, whether or not it has been given an IUCN category. Some NGOs regard this as the case. Ramsar designation implies an obligation for some site protection (i.e. maintain its ecological character), which suggests protection status. Sites are listed in the World Database on Protected Areas, which also implies that they may be protected areas, but so are

other designations of land use that are clearly not protected areas (for example some military lands, World Heritage sites that are not protected areas etc) and this may reflect confusion in the WDPA.

The publication envisaged from the secretariat should help resolve some of these issues and set a positive way forward both for the categories summit and the ongoing discussions in the Convention.

6. Although this call for comment elicited almost zero response, the Secretariat has had discussions with the WCPA on these issues. There is an agreement that the proposed publication from the Secretariat will be a valuable input to the categories summit. There seems little enthusiasm from the protected area community to make changes to the accepted definition of protected areas to include inland or fresh waters. However, the inclusion of the concept of maintenance of ecological processes or services is an intrinsically attractive one, and aligns well with the redefinition of wise use and ecological character agreed at Ramsar COP9.

7. This issue will be discussed with the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity in the context of the next Joint Work Programme.

Annex

The Skukuza symposium statement

Conservation of freshwater ecosystems is crucial for providing reliable and clean water supplies needed to sustain people, ecosystems and nature. Globally, freshwater biodiversity and habitats are being lost at an unprecedented rate. On 9-13 October 2006, 33 experts from government and non-government organizations, with particular expertise from Australia, South Africa and the USA, gathered in Skukuza, South Africa, to identify solutions for freshwater conservation, especially through improved establishment and management of protected areas for freshwater conservation.

What is the problem?

There is:

- Massive decline of freshwater biodiversity, which is worse than that recorded for terrestrial and marine biomes;
- Growing demand for water and increasing pollution over large parts of the world threaten remaining freshwater biodiversity;
- The likelihood that these threats will be exacerbated by climate change, and by inadequate or inappropriate government responses to climate change, such as the construction of more dams for hydroelectricity and water supply.

Large areas of freshwater habitats are incorporated in protected areas (e.g. Ramsar sites), but these are not properly representative of the diversity of habitats (examples were presented from Australia, South Africa and the USA) and:

- Rarely are sustained by environmental flows (as evidenced by the non-delivery of the agreed 'ecological reserve' water downstream to the Kruger National Park – the Symposium's venue);
- Existing protected areas were often not designated and managed for freshwater conservation, for example by excluding headwaters or using rivers as boundaries (as evidenced by the Kruger National Park - the Symposium venue);
- Usually are not networked effectively.
- Are often viewed and managed as a necessary resource for conserving terrestrial biodiversity rather than for their intrinsic biodiversity value.

Freshwater biodiversity is still rapidly declining; therefore current protected areas are not adequate for freshwater conservation thus far.

Conserving freshwater ecosystems is one of the greatest governance challenges faced by modern societies. There are multiple and often conflicting demands placed upon freshwater. Nearly everyone lives within a river basin and everyone needs to be part of the solutions for their conservation.

The Symposium discussed the low priority afforded by most governments to better freshwater ecosystem management, and concluded that:

- Conservation of freshwater ecosystems is critical for sustainable livelihoods and the achievement of human development targets; the wise management of ecosystem services provided by freshwater is the key link in achieving multiple development targets.
- Governments and societies are often unaware of the need to conserve freshwater ecosystems, threats to them and opportunities to manage them better.
- There are unique opportunities now to advance freshwater conservation, especially for freshwater protected areas, through commitments made under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The Symposium concluded that the world community needs to enhance conservation management, especially by using areas for the protection of:

- The entire freshwater biome at the largest scale through wise use and conservation;
- Environmental processes, such as the flow of sediments and nutrients in rivers needed to sustain the ecology of floodplains, deltas and estuaries;
- Attributes that provide particular ecosystem services from natural wetlands, services such as clean water, medicinal plants and fish;
- Freshwater-dependant species, such as mammals, birds, fish;
- Ecological communities, such as floodplain forests, lakes, and peat swamps.

To best manage and conserve freshwater habitats, it is critical that a linked set of actions are implemented concurrently at different scales, ranging from sites, to small catchments, to entire river basins, to concerted national and international actions. Protected areas are one of the most important strategies for conserving inland water biodiversity at local to basin scales. Integrated river basin (catchment / watershed) management, and the provision of adequate water flows are two other critical actions that are needed.

The symposium agreed that the roles of protected areas regarding the conservation of freshwater ecosystems are to:

- Conserve biodiversity *in situ* (species, wetlands types)
- Maintain ecological processes (e.g. free-flowing, icon sites lever allocation of flows)
- Manage the ecosystem and biodiversity to deliver defined ecosystem goods and services, e.g. to sustain fisheries and/or reliable sources of clean water supply
- Act as scientific reference points
- Reduce user group conflicts

The Symposium urges IUCN – the World Conservation Union, through its World Commission on Protected Areas, to redefine its definition of protected areas to better embrace freshwater conservation. We propose that protected areas be redefined as:

"An area of land, inland waters and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, ecological processes and the ecosystem services provided, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means."

The Symposium concluded with the participants committing themselves to actions designed to help governments and society better conserve freshwater ecosystems for people and nature. These actions include:

- Preparing and distributing guidelines and case studies publicly on: a) management guidelines for optimal conservation of freshwater biodiversity in protected areas; b) establishing protected area systems to conserve freshwater biodiversity at the national scale;
- Developing criteria, guidelines and case studies, and develop a place where rivers that are protected as free-flowing rivers can be registered by governments and celebrated;
- Supporting national governments to implement national protected area systems to conserve freshwater biodiversity;
- Existing method and case study materials are being published on the website: www.protectedareas.info.

The Symposium concluded that:

- Freshwater habitats need to be conserved as the source of water for people and nature;
- Effective protected areas are one of the best tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems to benefit people and nature;
- Globally, peace, good health and food security depend on sustainable management of freshwater ecosystems as the main source of water for people and nature;
- A well managed aquatic environment is the best defence against disasters such as floods and droughts and the best response to mitigate against the impacts of climate change.

The world's governments face a huge challenge to manage freshwater ecosystems sustainably – mitigating the threats is urgent. The future of freshwater biodiversity and the critical ecosystem services that it provides, such as drinking water, food, nutrient cycling, flood and drought control, depend on immediate action. Fortunately the government commitments that have been agreed under the Convention on Biological Diversity and Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provide a unique opportunity to establish an effective protected areas system that will make a major contribution, by 2010, to significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on earth.