

Agenda item 12.7

## Progress and future developments of the Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS)

**Action requested:** The Standing Committee is invited to note the continuing work and developments of the RSIS.

1. The Standing Committee will recall that the Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS), including within it the searchable Ramsar Sites Database of coded information on all Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites), is maintained and developed by Wetlands International under a long-standing arrangement with the Convention. This is carried out by means of a contractual arrangement with the Ramsar Secretariat with funding allocated in the Convention core budget for this work.
2. This note provides the Standing Committee with a brief update on recent and current developments in the management and implementation of the RSIS. Matters relating to future Ramsar site data and information needs and further developments of the RSIS will be discussed during the 24<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Scientific & Technical Review Panel when it meets in late January 2008, and any relevant outcomes of those discussions will be reported verbally to the Standing Committee.
3. The Ramsar Sites Information Service delivers on six general purposes and functions of the Convention's handling of Ramsar site data and information provided by Contracting Parties and of the accessibility of this data and information through the Web. These are as follows:
  - i) **Supporting reporting obligations.** The Ramsar Secretariat has reporting obligations to Contracting Parties at each COP under Article 8 of the Convention and under COP decisions, notably on designation status and Ramsar Information Sheet updates, on Article 3.2 and 2.5/4.2 matters, and in providing global and regional implementation report analyses to COP. The RSIS and its database provides the source of updated information to support this Article 8 reporting.
  - ii) **Supporting priority setting and decision taking in the context of the Convention.** In the *Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance* and numerous COP decisions, Parties have committed themselves to developing a strategic approach to designating a coherent and comprehensive national and international network of Ramsar sites. The RSIS and its database permits assessment and gap analyses of current coverage of wetland types and other wetland-related biodiversity features, summary and indicator analyses, and assessments in relation to other conservation actions and features.

- iii) **Increasing access to information on Wetlands of International Importance.** The Ramsar Sites Database and the RSIS Web presentation provide the structure for the filing and location information, an information source and library function, and links to other Ramsar site-relevant information, including publications, maps and images.
  - iv) **Promoting scientific and technical cooperation.** The database and its linked information provides a valuable data source for those reviewing and researching wetland issues, particularly those related to protected areas and important sites.
  - v) **Helping to ensure that Ramsar sites are well recognized in other international fora.** The RSIS provides the tools to provide key information on, and full recognition of, Ramsar sites into other protected areas processes and fora, notably those with which the Convention has memoranda of cooperation and joint work plans or other collaborative work, such as the World Heritage Convention, UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme (and its Biosphere Reserves), IUCN-WCPA, GTOS, and UNEP-WCMC.
  - vi) **Supporting communications, education and public awareness.** The publicly-accessible Web-based RSIS forms an important component of the Convention's CEPA delivery by ensuring that full and up-to-date information on each designated Ramsar site is widely available, in order to secure wide public recognition of this key pillar of the implementation of the Convention by its Parties.
4. Following review during 2006 of the Secretariat's and Wetlands International's procedures for handling Ramsar site information sheets (RIS) and database data entry, adjustments to those procedures were implemented beginning in 2007. In particular, data for each newly designated Ramsar site, and for RIS updates for existing sites, are now entered into the Ramsar Sites Database by the Secretariat's Regional Assistants, under the coordination of the Regional Affairs Officer.
  5. This in turn has freed up more capacity under the contracted funds allocated from the core budget for Wetlands International to focus more of its work on developing tools and providing information to support more directly the Parties' identification of gaps in Ramsar site coverage and priorities for future designations. This is in line with the application of the *Strategic Framework* for future Ramsar site designation and related COP decisions. It also frees up capacity to make this work available as components of the RSIS.
  6. An increasing number of these tools and assessments to support future designations will be added to or linked to the RSIS during 2008, accessible through a redeveloped front page to the Web site. Other RSIS enhancements planned for 2008 include linking access to through the RSIS to the short summary "Annotated List" site descriptions maintained by the Secretariat.
  7. A long-standing issue on Ramsar site information provision has been the availability of, and access to, an accurate set of digital Ramsar site boundaries in order to provide these through the RSIS. It is therefore pleasing to report that progress is now underway, through joint work between the Secretariat, Wetlands International, and the European Environment Agency, to access and make available such a digital boundary layer for all European Ramsar sites (a significant percentage of the total number of sites), and these are

now viewable through the RSIS “web-mapper” facility for an increasing number of European countries. During 2008 efforts will be redoubled to access this dataset for sites in other Ramsar regions.

8. In addition to the “web-mapper” facility on the RSIS, Ramsar site data and information can now be viewed and accessed as an overlay to the Google Earth system. At present, sites are accessible only through their central grid reference point location, but a trial that is now underway, linked to aspects of STRP’s work on Ramsar site issues, is indicating that a promising way forwards for the RSIS may be to provide much more comprehensive site information provision using the Google Earth platform.
9. As noted in paragraph 2 above, a number of aspects of the STRP’s current priority tasks will speak to issues and directions for the further development and management of Ramsar site information by the Convention. In particular, the STRP’s Immediate Priority task 52 concerning a range of aspects of Convention data and information needs includes specific reviews of Ramsar site data and information needs, as well as issues of RSIS future management and Ramsar Information Sheet structure and content. Related to this are issues arising from STRP’s task 54 on detecting, reporting and responding to change in ecological character, as well as on keeping under review the Ramsar site designation criteria and their application. The STRP at its 14<sup>th</sup> meeting in late January 2008 will be reviewing and further developing its advice to Standing Committee and COP10 on these matters.