

Report of the Secretary General

Action requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to note the present report of the Secretary General.

Introduction

1. This report covers the work of the Secretariat from 1 June 2023 through to 29 February 2024. It provides both an overview and selected highlights of the work completed by the Secretariat during this period.
2. The Secretary General has expressed her commitment to strengthen the Secretariat's work to effectively deliver on its mandate specified in Article 8 of the Convention, and to implement the instructions given to it by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee. The Secretary General has organized reporting on the work of the Secretariat under the areas below to support to Contracting Parties in the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the Convention:
 - Ensuring operational excellence in support of Contracting Parties;
 - Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes;
 - Collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism; and
 - Mobilizing resources to support implementation of the Convention.

Ensuring operational excellence in support of Contracting Parties

3. The delivery of the Secretariat's core role in supporting Contracting Parties remains a priority and includes the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies and implementation of the decisions and instructions of Contracting Parties. This area of work has been prioritized in the triennial work plan approved by the Standing Committee at its 62nd meeting (SC62), and in the 2024 annual work plan which is presented to SC63 for its consideration as document SC63 Doc.14.
4. A critical function of the Secretariat is the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention, including the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), the Standing Committee, and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). During this period, the Secretariat has made logistical arrangements, prepared meeting documents, and organized the convening of SC62, STRP26, and SC63.

5. The attendance at SC62 was notable, with a total of 147 participants representing 45 Contracting Parties and 21 observer organizations, and up to 130 additional online participants daily. The use of an overflow room, equipped to enable hybrid meeting engagement, played a pivotal role in facilitating seamless interventions from observer organizations, contributing to an inclusive and interactive environment. The results of the meeting survey were positive, reflecting strong engagement from the participating Parties.
6. The Secretariat organized STRP26 from 5 to 9 February 2024. A total of 45 participants attended the meeting, including 16 Panel members, six STRP National Focal Points, nine STRP observer organizations and three representatives of International Organization Partners (IOPs). The Secretariat enabled virtual participation in plenary and during breakout sessions of the meeting, with 52 participants participating remotely.
7. The Secretariat has undertaken preparations for SC63, which is scheduled from 3 to 7 June 2024, including the preparation of meeting documents and logistical arrangements. Meeting enhancements based on feedback from Parties and the experience of the Secretariat include standardization and enhancement of nameplates with the Convention's logo and arrangements for meeting participants to receive a "Carte Explore", allowing free travel around Gland and Nyon. Detailed information on these arrangements is available in the "Information for participants" document¹, accessible on the SC63 meeting page².
8. The Secretariat continues to support Working Groups and Subgroups of the Standing Committee, including the Management Working Group, the Strategic Plan Working Group, the Subgroup on Finance, the CEPA (communication, capacity building, education, participation and awareness) Oversight Panel, Working Group on Institutional Strengthening and the Youth Working Group (YWG). The Secretariat supported Parties in establishing the Subgroup on COP15 and the Independent Advisory Committee of the Wetland City Accreditation during SC62.
9. On the margins of SC62 in September 2023, the Secretary General met the Chair of the Youth Working Group (YWG) and other YWG members to discuss the implementation of Resolution XIV.12 on *Strengthening Ramsar connections through youth*, including the progress of the YWG that was mandated by the Resolution. Youth engagement has become an important element in the Secretary General's missions and engagements. At COP28 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2023, the Secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands co-organized a side event with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), at which the Secretary General joined the SPREP Director General, the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment of Samoa, the Ambassador of Fiji to Indonesia, the Australian Ambassador for Climate Change, and youth representatives on the panel to discuss the role of youth empowerment in wetland conservation, particularly in the Pacific region. In addition, the Secretary General delivered keynote speeches at the IHE Delft Institute for Water and Education in the Netherlands and the Jawaharlal Nehru University School of Environmental Sciences (SES) in India, emphasizing that youth engagement in wetlands is more important than ever in the 2030 Agenda. She also interacted with the youth on the margins of the sixth United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-6) in Nairobi, Kenya, and also in Harare, Zimbabwe during her visit there.
10. The Standing Committee agreed in Decision SC58-18 to intersessionally acknowledge the status of outstanding contribution balances of Contracting Parties as a group confirmation. Such a

¹ See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/63nd-meeting-standing-committee-sc63-information-participants>.

² See <https://www.ramsar.org/meeting/63rd-meeting-standing-committee>.

confirmation of outstanding balances is necessary for the external auditor to complete the audit of the financial statements of the Convention on Wetlands. The Standing Committee intersessionally acknowledged outstanding contributions through a silent procedure ending on 25 January 2024.

11. During this period, the Secretariat conducted two Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs): one was a joint mission with the World Heritage Centre (UNESCO) to the Fertő/Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape, a transboundary Ramsar/World Heritage site between Austria and Hungary, and the second was to the Sierra Leone River Estuary, Sierra Leone. Additionally, the Secretariat provided assistance to five Contracting Parties on the procedures for conducting a RAM.
12. These RAMs helped the countries to identify solutions to a range of threats affecting the ecological character of Wetlands of International Importance (“Ramsar Sites”), including urbanization and other human activities such as wind farms, tourism development and water supply. During this period, the Secretariat also completed reports for RAMs previously carried out in Bolivia and Benin. In the coming months, the Secretariat is planning RAMs for Guinea, Nicaragua, Mexico and Lake Prespa in Albania, Greece and North Macedonia.
13. Throughout 2023, significant progress has been made on all the tasks outlined in the STRP work plan. One notable achievement includes the completion of a briefing paper on the “Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework: Upscaling wetland conservation, restoration, and wise use through National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)”³ as a deliverable linked to Task 5.2. Furthermore, the STRP has successfully completed all terms of reference (TORs), which have been made available on the STRP workspace, and scoping documents for the tasks assigned for this period.
14. The Secretariat held a planning workshop from 27 to 28 November 2023, which included a thorough review of its progress against the planned activities for 2023. This review served as a foundation for shaping the planned activities for 2024, aligning with the objectives outlined in the triennial plan for 2023-2025. The workshop facilitated the streamlining of activities, elimination of duplications, and refinement of indicators. The 2024 work plan for the Secretariat is submitted to SC63 as document SC63 Doc.14, and it incorporates new tasks mandated by the decisions of SC62.
15. Technologies and business practices continue to be developed to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the work of the Secretariat. The CRM (constituent relationship management) database was actively maintained and further developed as the main tool for efficient management of contacts, mailings, meeting registration, nomination processes and reporting. The Convention’s website went live in summer 2023, after being redeveloped with a focus on performance, ease of use for Contracting Parties and ease of management for the Secretariat (see more at paragraph 20 below). A streamlined approach to support Parties intersessionally combined several tools, including the CRM, conference call platforms Zoom and Teams, and document sharing spaces SharePoint and Adobe online. A proposed approach and tools for enhancing intersessional collaboration among Contracting Parties is presented to SC63 as document SC63 Doc.13.2.
16. The Secretariat’s financial stability remained solid in 2023 due to effective financial management and oversight aligned with validated financial practices endorsed by the newly appointed external auditors. In the course of last year, the implementation of budgeted

³ See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/kunming-montreal-global-biodiversity-framework-upscaling-wetland-conservation-restoration>.

activities increased, resulting in higher percentage of implementation of core budget for 2023 compared to 2022. At the end of 2023 the core fund balance had decreased due to an increase in provisions (both for staff and outstanding contributions).

17. As of 29 February 2024, the Secretariat consisted of 22 staff. Of these, 11 are male and 11 are female, giving a perfect gender balance. The Secretariat has also achieved gender equity in different types of position; gender balance has been reached in management positions (M1 and above) with a male-to-female ratio of 57% to 43% (4 to 3 staff members) and in support and professional positions (Junior Professional to P2), with males comprising 47% (7 staff members) and females 53% (8 staff members) of these positions. At this date, four positions are vacant:
 - Two Junior Professionals – Technical Support: the incumbent for the Americas region will start in her role on 4 March 2024, while the recruitment for the Asia and Oceania position is about to be completed.
 - Senior Advisor for Americas: recruitment is ongoing by end of April.
 - Wetland Finance Support Officer, which is a new position funded by the Republic of Korea: recruitment is ongoing and is scheduled to be completed by mid-April.
18. The Secretariat continues to provide knowledge and network support to Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs). For example, to mobilize resources in support of their functioning, the Secretariat linked the French Development Agency (OFD) to NigerWet and the Southern African Ramsar Regional Initiative (SARRI). As a result, the OFD has committed technical and financial resources to fully establish the organizational structure, terms of reference and a strategic plan of activities for SARRI. The Secretariat plans to work continuously with RRI coordinators to identify areas for further cooperation and support.

Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes

19. Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes is foundational to addressing the triple planetary crises linked to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The issue of protecting, conserving and restoring wetlands must be elevated to instill urgency in the actions needed.
20. The updated website for the Convention was launched in July 2023. The site has been developed using the latest technology to enhance ease of use, speed and security. While the content and structure remain similar to the previous website, a specialized agency helped create a new look and feel, making the site more modern, user-friendly and optimized for use on different devices such as tablets and phones. The chosen technology will enable the Secretariat to manage content more effectively and ensure that the site can be efficiently enhanced, updated and maintained over many years. Additionally, a more flexible approach to content creation enables the Secretariat to build new pages adapted to different types of content while keeping a homogenous look and feel throughout the website. In this regard, the Secretariat has received positive feedback from Contracting Parties.
21. The Convention maintains an active and engaged presence on various social media platforms, witnessing a consistent rise in engagement throughout the reporting period. At the end of the reporting period, the Convention's X account had approximately 33,950 followers, Instagram had 10,822 followers, and the Facebook page enjoyed a substantial following of 156,000 followers. The official LinkedIn account had 10,388 followers, and the YouTube channel 4,250 subscribers. Notably, the Secretary General demonstrates remarkable activity on X and

LinkedIn, where she has 11,807 followers with whom she shares regular updates on the meetings she attends and her perspectives on wetlands in the global agenda.

22. World Wetlands Day on 2 February remains the most significant communication and awareness-raising event for the Convention. The 2024 theme, “Wetlands and Human Wellbeing”, underscored how all aspects of human wellbeing are tied to the health of the world’s wetlands. The Secretariat – with funding from Danone – produced a variety of communication and branding materials for the global awareness campaign and made them available to download on the dedicated website.
23. Over 1,400 national events were organized for World Wetlands Day, in over 70 countries, and a diverse audience that included children, local communities, young people and policy actors participated. The Secretary General joined celebrations in Indore, India.
24. The Secretariat has been leveraging the opportunities presented by international days to bring attention to the importance of wetlands for the planet and people. On international days such as World Water Day (22 March), International Day for Biological Diversity (22 May), World Ocean Day (8 June), International Youth Day (12 August) and International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction (13 October), the Secretariat distributed video and print statements from the Secretary General, developed event specific social media content and participated in events.
25. The Secretary General has demonstrated remarkable activity and engagement in various international fora, exemplified by discussions with influential organizations such as the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), the Environmental Management Group (EMG), and notable meetings with various Permanent Missions.
26. Furthermore, the Secretary General is proactive in seeking engagement with the international media for opportunities to communicate about wetlands. During the reporting period, she was interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and China Global Television Network (CGTN).
27. Shoebill Environmental Consultancy’s initiative to restore the Venter Valley urban wetland in Zambia won the 2023 Pitch for the Grant award, receiving EUR 10,000 from Danone in September 2023. The Secretariat received over 260 project proposals with ideas aimed at wetland conservation and improving livelihoods. Launched in 2022 as part of the renewed partnership with Danone, Pitch for the Grant supports ideas from individuals, community organizations, and social enterprises to conserve, restore, and sustainably use wetlands. This grant initiative with Danone demonstrates the availability of diverse grassroots efforts for wetlands and emphasizes the crucial need for more of this type of seed funding for wetlands.
28. The Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) for the Wetland City Accreditation (WCA) scheme extended the deadline for new Wetland City Accreditation applications by three months, from 30 November 2023 to 29 February 2024. Additionally, in collaboration with ICLEI Cities Biodiversity Center, the Convention launched a poster and accompanying fact sheet on World Cities Day which provides a snapshot of important benefits of urban wetlands and illustrates what cities can do to enhance these benefits. This joint effort aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of the relationship between urban areas and wetlands, thus encouraging sustainable urban development.

29. The Secretariat actively participates in online meetings of the “Communications Flotilla”, organized by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Montreal, which was established as a way of coordinating communications and achieving synergies among a number of biodiversity-related Conventions and organizations.
30. A key element of the Communications Strategy is to create rich, current and relevant content which will enable the Secretariat’s partners and stakeholders to spread this content and messages. The Secretariat will create compelling content, using storytelling where possible such as showing the “wetland champions”, to share stories that will foster understanding and inspire action for wetlands. The Secretariat will continue to search for and source local and regional content to illustrate these messages. Furthering this commitment, the Secretariat has launched an initiative known as “Women and wetlands” which seeks to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment by documenting the stories of women, including Indigenous women and girls to raise awareness and inform the design of meaningful interventions.

Collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism

31. Contracting Parties have expressed their desire for the Secretariat, on behalf of the Convention, to be active in the wider global policy agenda. To this aim, the Secretariat continues to prioritize its work in supporting international cooperation and raising the profile of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework are driving national and international planning and funding efforts. The increased attention ensures that wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks.
32. The Secretary General participated in the 29th Senior Officials Meeting of the UN Environment Management Group (EMG) where she advocated for the importance of wetlands and their sustainable use in addressing a range of environmental challenges.
33. In October 2023, the Secretary General attended the third Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-3) on Plastic Pollution. On the margins of this meeting, she met several Ministers from our Contracting Parties and Heads of Agencies including Ms. Inger Andersen, the Executive Director of UNEP. The discussions revolved around enhancing the Convention’s engagement, given the significant role plastics play as primary pollutants of wetlands, adversely affecting the species reliant on these ecosystems, including humans.
34. The Secretariat continues to strengthen its relationship with the Geneva-based Permanent Missions to the UN and its agencies, through briefings in collaboration with the United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG), and the Secretary General and Regional Advisors also hold regular bilateral meetings with the Permanent Missions.
35. The Convention is one of the global partners in the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. The Secretariat’s activities broadly cover climate, water and biodiversity. It also contributes to the UN Decade’s Task Forces on Best Practices and on Monitoring. It continues to collaborate actively with other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), concentrating its efforts on cooperation and synergies with the biodiversity-related Conventions, in accordance with paragraph 32 of Resolution XII.3 (Rev. COP13) on *Enhancing the visibility and stature of the Convention, and increasing synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements and other international institutions*. More specific areas of cooperation continue to be implemented

with these MEAs within the existing memoranda, in particular with the CBD, the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the World Heritage Convention (WHC) as well as with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

36. The Secretariat supports advancement of the climate agenda through participation and engagement in UNFCCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and UNCCD. In this regard, the Secretary General attended UNFCCC COP28 where she participated in the High-level Presidential Summit. In a supportive capacity for our partners, UNDRR and WMO, she also took on the role of moderator for a session on the “Early Warning for All” initiative, featuring the presence of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Under his leadership, the initiative was launched with the ambitious goal of implementing early warning systems for every country by 2027. During COP28, she also had the privilege of engaging with several Contracting Parties, including Azerbaijan, which is set to host the next climate conference, COP29. In terms of biodiversity, the Secretariat works closely with the Biodiversity Liaison Group of the biodiversity-related Conventions and participated actively in COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Mobilizing resources to support implementation of the Convention

37. Availability of sufficient and predictable funding is essential for effective implementation of the Convention. The Secretariat has taken actions to encourage timely payment of contributions to the core budget by Contracting Parties and to raise funds for the non-core fundraising priorities identified in Annex 4 of Resolution XIV.1 on *Financial and budgetary matters*.
38. The resource mobilization work plan⁴ approved at SC62 in September 2023 outlines the Secretariat’s strategy and actions to secure funding for non-core priorities in this triennium. Additionally, Annex 2 of the work plan proposes activities to facilitate resource mobilization by Contracting Parties. The Secretariat continues to proactively seek out and engage with potential donors including seeking relevant partnerships and collaborations that align with the resource mobilization and fundraising goals of the triennium.
39. In 2023, total voluntary contributions received were CHF 1,672,000 in support of the non-core fundraising priorities of the triennium. The Secretariat would like to acknowledge and appreciate the governments of Finland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Danone for their grant contributions in support of the tasks outlined in the STRP work plan.
40. During this reporting period, in addition to contributions for non-core priorities, the Secretariat received funding for the implementation of specific Resolutions of the Convention. Specifically, the governments of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of the United States of America contributed funding to facilitate an assessment of the Ramsar Sites in Ukraine as requested under Resolution XIV.20. The government of Switzerland allocated additional funding through the Swiss Grant for Africa to assist Contracting Parties in the region to update their Ramsar Information Sheets, while Canada pledged support for the Secretariat’s initiatives aimed at advancing the mainstreaming of gender in the implementation of the Convention.
41. The Secretariat and the Government of the Republic of Korea in November 2023 signed a funding arrangement. Over the next five years, the Ministry of Environment will contribute to the Secretariat’s engagement with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) by supporting the work of the Wetland Finance Support Officer, the main task of

⁴ See <https://www.ramsar.org/document/sc62-doc18-resource-mobilization-work-plan-2023-2025>.

whom is to gather knowledge on international financial flow to wetland conservation and provide advice to Contracting Parties on how to access available funding.

42. Between July and September 2023, the Secretariat conducted a survey to assess the capacity and knowledge needs required to enhance fundraising and resource mobilization for wetlands. The survey sought to identify target audiences and understand their specific resource mobilization needs which would inform and assist the Secretariat in developing relevant resources. The survey results showed that nearly 25% of respondents have limited to no knowledge of resource mobilization, while only 5% rated their knowledge as excellent. Additionally, respondents mentioned writing effective project proposals, exploring innovative financing options for wetlands, and devising funding strategies as priority areas for capacity-building.
43. The Secretariat signed a new memorandum of understanding with the Nagao Natural Environment Foundation of Japan that will enable the Secretariat to provide implementation support to Contracting Parties in Asia and Oceania until 2025 through the Nagao Wetland Fund (NWF). Through the NWF, the Secretariat has been able to assist various small-scale projects in the developing regions of Asia and Oceania for sustainable management and conservation of Ramsar Sites since 2016. The Fund has been particularly integral in implementing the objectives of the Convention in the remote areas of the Pacific Islands, the Himalayas and the deserts of Central Asia.
44. Since 1997, the Secretariat, the United States of America's Department of State and Fish and Wildlife Service have operated an initiative, the Wetlands For the Future Fund (WFF), to benefit institutions and individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean through capacity building and training in the conservation and wise use of wetlands. This initiative promotes the implementation of the concept of wise use of wetlands and the Convention's Strategic Plan, through strengthening the capacity of countries to manage their wetland resources and promote wetland training activities currently underway or planned within the region or complement existing training and education initiatives with wetland-related instruction.
45. In conclusion, the Secretariat remains dedicated to sustaining the momentum achieved following COP14 throughout 2024. The commitment to operational excellence, heightened global visibility, collaborative efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, and resource mobilization will remain as core pillars of the Secretariat's mission. The Secretariat will continue fostering partnerships, engaging with Contracting Parties and stakeholders, and advocating for wetland conservation on the international stage. By leveraging its achievements and ongoing initiatives, the Secretariat aspires to further elevate the conservation of wetlands, ensuring their sustainable use and contributing significantly to global environmental goals.