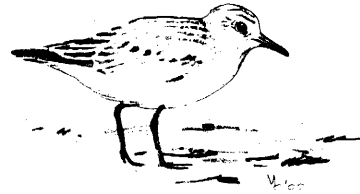


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THE RAMSAR CONVENTION MEETING 1987 IN REGINA, CANADA: CHANGING PROCEDURES AND PRIORITIES FOR A DEVELOPING WORLD

Nicola J. Crockford & Theunis Piersma

"Regina, Saskatchewan is the sunniest town in North America" said the VIP who welcomed 200 delegates and observers to the "Third Meeting of the Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention - 27 May to 5 June 1987". It was ironic to hear these words, having just flown in amidst a deluge of torrential rain and hail with lashings of sheet lightning. The delay this downpour caused in the unloading of our baggage from the plane, together with the prevailing bedlam at the airport due to President Mitterand's arrival in a Concorde 30 minutes previously, meant a much delayed arrival at the Regina Inn - site of the Ramsar meeting. Arriving 35 minutes before the reception banquet commenced and one minute before the registration desk closed, we hurriedly changed our travel stained clothes in the privacy of the registration room and stepped out into the melee of international faces.

Mike Smart (see *WSG Bull.* 49 Suppl./IWRB Special Publ. 7 (1987): 114-117) has already placed the Ramsar Convention in the context of waders, as being the most effective of the four modern global conventions on nature conservation for the conservation of wader habitat. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat was adopted at the city of Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, during one of a series of international governmental conferences on waterfowl and their wetland habitats organized by IWRB. Contracting Parties (i.e. nations which are signatories of the Convention) have to designate at least one wetland of international importance for the Convention's list, and also to make "wise use" of wetlands in their territory, whether or not they are included in the list. Once a site is listed, its ecological character has to be maintained. If a site has to be deleted from the list (only acceptable in the "urgent national interest"), another of the same type must be designated to compensate the loss. Currently there are about 45 Contracting Parties, which together have listed 380 sites covering over 25 million hectares.

The meeting in Regina was the Third Conference of the Contracting Parties. These meetings are



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organized to review the Convention, to evaluate its effectiveness by discussing national experiences and reviewing the status of listed sites, to introduce the Convention to observers from nations which are not yet Contracting Parties, to promote co-operative activities, to hear reports from international organizations, and also to promote wetland conservation in the host country. Certainly for this last aim the conference was a great success: Canada awarded Ramsar status to 11 new sites, several of which (e.g. Grand Codroy River in Newfoundland, Shepody Bay in New Brunswick, Muscadavit in Nova Scotia, and Point Pelee and James Bay in Ontario) are of great importance to waders.

The meeting in Regina is one of a series that started in Cagliari, Italy, in 1980, followed by a meeting in Groningen, The Netherlands in 1984. Its logo was an unidentified wader: a cross between a Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor* and a hybrid Knot *Calidris canutus*. Apart from the official delegates or observers from 50 countries, sitting in the front rows of the conference hall, a range of people backed up the meeting: academics, conservation lobbyists, publicists and environmental lawyers.

Since 1971 the Convention has been run by IUCN acting as the convention bureau, providing secretariat services on an *ad hoc* basis, with the assistance of IWRB as scientific advisors. UNESCO acted as Convention Depository. The Convention relied on voluntary funding from a minority of its member-governments and from conservation groups such as WWF. The point had been reached where the Convention could no longer be adequately serviced without a permanently funded secretariat to provide necessary information to its members, monitor compliance, organize working meetings and

co-ordinate essential scientific studies on the status and management of Ramsar sites. The so-called "Task Force" (composed of delegates from four European and two African nations) proposed amendments to the Convention, enabling it to have its own budget and secretariat. These recommendations were discussed at an Extraordinary Conference during the second day of the Regina meeting. There were no major objections to the proposed amendments, apart from a technical one from the USA. The USA, a member since December 1986, could not accept terms which demanded mandatory contributions on a scale which would require the USA to provide more than a quarter of the total annual budget. Consensus was finally achieved: the USA delegation registered the dissent of their government, but showed their intent to ask the government to find a way of accepting the amendments. IUCN and IWRB were confirmed as having joint roles in the running of the new permanent Ramsar Secretariat. The annual budget was raised from the voluntarily contributed US\$ 35 000 to US\$ 400 000, mandatorily provided by the member states.

The Extraordinary Conference was billed to take one day but instead took up most of 2.5 days, with numerous reconvenings during the course of the week. This illustrates the highly flexible nature of the programme of events, characteristic of diplomatic conferences. Many people with primarily ecological interests were frustrated to see the start of four workshops being postponed for 3/4 of a day. Indeed, the standard pattern seemed to be that the legalistic debates of those meetings concerned with administrative, institutional, issues took much longer than scheduled, so that those concerned with the aims of the Convention had to be squeezed into the remaining time.

WORKSHOPS

Criteria for identifying Wetlands of International Importance

The first workshop was concerned with the criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance. Four communications dealt with experiences in designating sites of international importance. A second group of presentations examined the effectiveness of the current Ramsar criteria, and each of these made proposals to revise the existing set of criteria. The presentations often expressed conflicting opinions and this led to heated discussions amongst the participants. The discussions centred around two issues: 1) the recognition that precise numerical criteria were not appropriate for the developing countries because of the lack of information on bird numbers and population estimates; and 2) the proposition that a series of "socio-economic" criteria might help developing countries to designate Ramsar sites. As the application of socio-economic criteria might lead to a devaluation of the ability of the convention to protect "natural" wetland sites in developed countries, these propositions were generally rejected. However, the workshop emphasized the importance of traditional cultures in the sustained use of wetland resources, and the importance of fisheries and hydrology as natural values of wetlands.

Flyways and Reserve Networks

During the second workshop, on flyways and reserve networks, the first four contributions were mainly concerned with ducks and geese and the last three with waders. Jean-Yves Pirot showed the dramatic effects of hunting on the

distribution patterns and population levels of ducks around the Mediterranean. Hugh Boyd wondered whether some duck and most goose species could still be considered as indicators of valuable wetlands, in view of the drastic changes that have occurred in their winter distribution: from natural marshes to managed meadows and stubble fields. Extending the proceedings of the 1986 WSG Workshop on "The Conservation of International Flyway Populations of Waders" (*WSG Bull.* 49, *Suppl./IWRB Special Publ.* 7), Theunis Piersma and Cor Smit examined populations and migrations of coastal waders of the East Atlantic Flyway. Duncan Parish discussed the waterbird numbers in East Asia in relation to the Ramsar criteria, and Pete Myers reported on shorebird numbers and conservation efforts in the Western Hemisphere. Apart from describing the situation as it is currently known, the contributions on waders alerted the meeting to the biological complexities of wader migrations and distribution patterns, issues which may complicate management decisions. A later session that summarized the findings of the workshop proved particularly illuminating, producing a series of suggestions to change the order and formulation of the criteria. It was recommended that the numerical criteria should be extended to include other types of waterfowl, such as divers, grebes, storks, herons and terns. The workshop also recommended that IWRB should form a technical committee to advise the Contracting Parties on the population levels and the application of numerical criteria, as part of its technical input into the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention. These suggestions were later accepted during the plenary session (see the Appendix for a listing of these criteria). The speakers at the Flyway Workshop also decided to produce papers to be published in a joint IWRB/CWS Special Publication. That document will provide detailed accounts of the wintering wader population levels in different parts of the world, population trends and the conservation status of the main sites.

The wise use of protection of wetlands

In a third workshop, papers on the wise use and protection of wetlands from 9 countries were sandwiched between reports on the UNESCO/MAB Biosphere Reserve concept and on the IUCN Wetland Office's views on wise use.

Some of the developing countries were particularly pleased about the emphasis in the prepared papers placed on the difference between developing and industrialized nations in their wetland conservation goals. However, several floor speakers from industrialized countries were concerned that this distinction should not be stressed. It was agreed that the integrated, wise use, approach to wetland conservation is universally important. The ultimate goal of wise use might differ between countries of different socio-economic conditions, but there are no fundamental differences between countries in the ways by which this goal can be achieved. In industrialized countries, wildlife conservation may be sufficient as the ultimate goal of wetland site protection. In developing countries the socio-economic role of wetlands is especially important, and may provide a much stronger basis for their conservation. For example, in Brasil environmental groups calling for a total halt to exploitation of wetlands have proved a hindrance, rather than a help, for site conservation. Emphasis should be placed on finding a balance between traditional and high technology uses of wetlands.

Much discussion centred around the amendments modifying the existing definition of 'wise use' in the Convention, to make it more clearly understandable for decision makers unfamiliar with wetland (and wildlife) conservation concerns. A drafting committee drew up a revised definition, which was adopted by the conference (see Appendix).

The workshop also recommended a set of elements to be included in national wetland policies which give guidance on how to achieve wise use of wetlands, ensuring that development projects permit sustainable utilisation and that wild fauna and flora are not overexploited. Priorities for sites must be defined in accordance with socio-economic conditions in each country. Prior approval of development projects, proper Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) must be carried out, with continued evaluation during the execution of projects to ensure that the recommendations made for environmental protection are put into effect. Very few countries yet have national wetland inventories and high priority should also be given to compiling such inventories.

The workshop additionally recommended that in establishing these national wetland policies, there should be much interchange of experience and information between countries, with training of staff to help implement the wise use of wetlands and incorporating traditional techniques of sustainable use. The activities of IUCN's Conservation for Development Centre could serve as a model.

Linking wetlands conservation with development

The fourth workshop explored a suggestion from the IUCN wetlands office of using the Convention as a vehicle for linking wetlands conservation with development, in a "clearing house" role similar to UNEP.

The background to this is the increasing drive to attract developing countries to join the convention. Most of the world's threatened wetlands are in these countries, where wetland conservation is low on the lists of national policies for funding. Governments in developing countries cannot be expected to implement the Convention effectively without monetary aid supplied specifically for this purpose. The Ramsar secretariat suggested that development assistance agencies (taken to mean "all banks, government institutions and international governmental agencies (e.g. EEC) with a significant role in providing funds to countries for their development") are the most likely prime sources of these monies. By acting as a "Wetland Project Development Service" (WPDS) the secretariat proposes to channel funds from these agencies to developing countries with threatened wetlands. It will also channel appropriate knowledge and expertise in the same direction in order to demonstrate that wetlands conservation is of direct importance to local rural populations and an integral part of the socio-economic development process. Only when development agencies have seen that are they likely to make funds available for wetlands conservation.

The seven presentations to this workshop reported on various examples of bilateral and multilateral development aid. In the discussion, high praise was given particularly to the newly formulated Norwegian policy for wetland conservation and development funding. Constructed around the findings of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development - the "Brundtland Commission"- it was recommended that

the Norwegian policy be taken as a model for other development agencies. This approach gives priority to projects directed towards reducing poverty problems and aiming at ecologically sustainable development, rather than to traditional nature conservation or development projects.

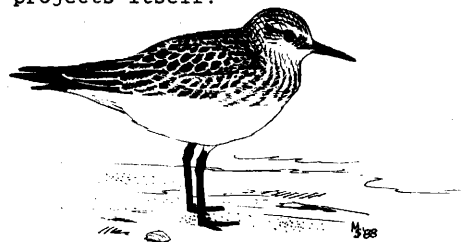
In helping development agencies to assess programmes requesting aid, WPDS would tend to favour the funding of projects from contracting parties seeking to effect wise use of wetlands, giving priority to projects which are run from the bottom up rather than the top down, which promote sustainable use, and which are harmless to the environment.

During the discussion the view was expressed that, in encouraging developing countries to join the Ramsar Convention, the social, non-economic and less tangible benefits of becoming a member must also continue to be emphasized, as well as the promised monetary ones. Some people were worried that developing countries might join the Convention for the wrong reason - such as obtaining more money for development.

Pat Dugan (of the IUCN Wetlands Office) reiterated his view, expressed in *WSG Bull.* 49 *Suppl./IWRB Special Publ.* 7: 146-148, that funds are desperately needed for more basic research into the best means of conserving sites in ways which contribute to sustainable development. Spokesmen from Botswana and Mexico made similar pleas.

The development banks have hitherto often funded projects which unnecessarily and short-sightedly destroy the values of wetlands. These often have the reverse effect to assisting the developing countries. However, these banks are becoming increasingly interested in ecologically sustainable development. For instance, the World Bank has just increased its staff involved in environmental issues from 17 to 60. These banks have the means to achieve non-destructive development. In the light of the workshop a statement was drafted to the Development Assistance Agencies urging them to incorporate coherent wetland development policies. These should take into account all biophysical and socio-economic values (and traditional uses) of wetlands to people, and so give higher priority than at present to conservation or sustainable use of wetlands.

Very few developing countries have ministries of environment. For example it is only Venezuela in South America. However, all have ministries of finance, which tend not to approve funding of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). So the aid agencies are requested to promote the strengthening of ecological expertise within their own structure, and amongst the decision-making ministries and authorities in project regions, and by training personnel at the project implementation level. The Convention aims to help a developing country gain the expertise to assess projects itself.



Luc Hoffmann pointed out that EIAs are not a luxury or a tool for obstructing development aid. Rather they are necessary to achieve the best long-term results. So the development agencies should be urged to ensure that projects are not funded until an adequate EIA has been made, and unless the recommendations of the EIA are implemented during the project. The agencies are also urged to coordinate their programmes at the international level to ensure that their independent activities do not, in combination, adversely affect wetlands.

In the plenary session, the Conference mandated the secretariat's proposal in this workshop to pursue the use of aid funds for wetland conservation.

NATIONAL REPORTS

The welcome to developing countries was stressed and observers from 14 non-member countries (4 South American, 5 South East Asia and 5 African) gave brief reports on the state of wetland conservation in their countries. All were in the process of joining the Convention.

It was encouraging to note that prior to Regina no contracting party had deleted a wetland from their list through damage. However, many are under threat. In developing countries the major threats are from projects affecting water supplies, and in developed countries from industrial construction projects. The Iranian delegation reported that two of its wetlands have been removed from the list of designated wetlands (to be replaced by two others) partly due to the prolonged drought conditions and partly due to chemical warfare, for which the conference was asked to condemn Iraq. A spark of tension zipped through what was, on the whole, a remarkably harmonious conference, when the Jordanian delegate (there being no Iraqi representation present) disputed the Iranian claim that chemical warfare was the source of destruction of the wetlands, saying that the degradation was simply a consequence of location in the war zone.

In response to some of the National Reports, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the conference prepared a statement expressing their concern over the destruction, degradation and serious threats to a number of listed sites. Greece and Spain were noted as particular offenders, as all of their Ramsar sites are under threat.

EXCURSIONS

The weekend featured two excursions to prairie wetlands. Saturday 30 May was spent at Last Mountain Lake. The centennial of this nature reserve, North America's oldest, was celebrated immediately after the conference. Just after the peak of spring migration, many Black-bellied Plovers *Pluvialis squatarola*, Semipalmated Sandpipers, White-rumped Sandpipers *Charadrius fuscicollis* and some Sanderlings *C. alba* were still around. Marbled Godwits *Limosa fedoa*, Wilson's Phalaropes and Killdeer were seen breeding. Although considered a natural wetland, large parts of Last Mountain Lake habitat have been "improved" as duck breeding habitat by the private company "Ducks Unlimited". The managed areas were inhabited by many ducks and grebes, but gave much the same impression as the "managed wildernesses" of some Dutch polders, rather than the wildernesses we would expect from America. After a big open air prairie barbeque, Mark Colwell gave a few of us a guided tour

around his Wilson's Phalarope study site. He had found his second polyandrous female that very day! The rainbowy Sunday afternoon was spent amongst White Pelicans, Least *C. minutilla* and Stilt Sandpipers and Mountain Bluebirds at Nicolle Flats, another pocket of wetland in the vast prairies of Saskatchewan.

CONCLUSIONS

For the two representatives of the WSG (along with most observers from the other NGO's) the main focus of interest at the conference was the workshops. It was disappointing that the "Flyways" and "Criteria" workshops ran concurrently with those on "wise use" and the "Clearing house". The workshop on flyways was attended primarily by those with more biological concerns and the latter two especially by those with interest in and sympathy towards the proposed increasing involvement in socio-economic development by the Convention, as encouraged by IUCN. In the criteria workshop, people with primary allegiances to each of the different camps met and the sparks flew.

Throughout the Regina meeting, heated discussion - formal and informal - centred around the direction in which application of the Ramsar Convention should move. To what degree should it now compromise the fundamental grounds of ecological wetland conservation with emphasis on wildfowl (the original basis of the Convention) to make it more relevant to the needs of developing countries by incorporating a more socio-economic approach, so emphasizing the importance of sustainable development?

This debate has already been introduced to the WSG by Dugan, and Davidson *et al.* (*WSG Bull.* 49 *Suppl./IWRB Special Publ.* 7: 146-148, 149-150). There is a growing movement to broaden the scope of the Convention to make it more attractive to the developing world (which contribute only a quarter of the present 45 signatories). Whilst many developing countries are enthusiastic about this expansion, several delegates from industrialized countries are distrustful of it since it is their governments which will have to foot the bill. People with more purely ornithological affinities, several of whom were instrumental in the original shaping of the Convention, are also worried by this trend. They are concerned about the level of biological realism/ecological thinking which will be involved in modernized Ramsar Convention work.

At the Regina Conference, the Ramsar Convention certainly came of age, with the establishment of a permanent budget and secretariat. This places it in a better position to pursue the recommendations of the "wise use" and "clearing house" workshops. However, it is clear that the time is not ripe for the Ramsar Convention to leave its roots in pursuit of the wider, more power-seeking, objectives of socio-economic criteria. At this stage, in order to maintain its credibility (and the support of the richer nations) it must keep its objectives clearly grounded on the principles of basic ecological conservation, whilst also taking into account the cultural and socio-economic values of wetlands in order to accommodate better the developing world.

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APPENDIX 1

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE FOR DESIGNATION FOR THE LIST UNDER ARTICLE 2 OF THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

as revised at the Third Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties in Regina, June 1987.

A wetland is suitable for inclusion in the List if it meets any one of the criteria set out below:

1. Criteria for assessing the value of representative or unique wetlands.

A wetland should be considered internationally important if it is a particularly good example of a specific type of wetland characteristic of its region.

2. General criteria for using plants or animals to identify wetlands of importance.

A wetland should be considered internationally important if:

a. it supports an appreciable assemblage of rare, vulnerable or endangered species or subspecies of plant or animal or an appreciable number of individuals of any one or more of these species, or

b. it is of special value for maintaining the genetic and ecological diversity of a region because of the quality and peculiarities of its flora and fauna, or

c. It is of special value as the habitat of plants or animals at a critical stage of their biological cycles, or

d. it is of special value for its endemic plant or animal species or communities.

3. Specific criteria for using waterfowl to identify wetlands of importance.

A wetland should be considered internationally important if:

a. it regularly supports 20 000 waterfowl, or

b. it regularly supports substantial numbers of individuals from particular groups of waterfowl indicative of wetland values, productivity or diversity, or

c. where data on populations are available, it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterfowl.

Guidelines

A wetland could be considered for selection under Criterion 1 if:

a. it is an example of a type rare or unusual in the appropriate biogeographical region, or

b. it is a particularly good representative example of a wetland characteristic of the appropriate region, or

c. it is a particularly good representative of a common type where the site also qualifies for consideration under criteria 2a, 2b, or 2c, or

d. it is representative of a type by virtue of being part of a complex of high quality wetland habitats. A wetland of national value could be considered of international importance if it has a substantial hydrological, biological or ecological role in the functioning of an international river basin or coastal system, or

e. in developing countries, it is a wetland which, because of its outstanding hydrological, biological or ecological role, is of substantial socio-economic and cultural value within the framework of sustainable use.

Waterfowl indicative of wetland values, productivity or diversity under Criterion 3b include divers (loons), grebes, pelicans, storks, ibises, spoonbills, herons, flamingos, swans, geese, ducks, cranes, rails and coots, waders (shorebirds), gulls and terns.

APPENDIX 2

DEFINITION OF WISE USE OF WETLANDS

"The Wise Use of wetlands is their sustainable utilisation for the benefit of humankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem"

Sustainable utilisation is defined as "human use of a wetland so that it may yield the greatest continuous benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations".

Natural properties of the ecosystem are defined as "those physical, biological or chemical components, such as soil, water, plants, animals and nutrients, and the interactions between them".

