

7th Ramsar COP

Wetlands and Sustainable Development

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The Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP7) to the 1971 Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) was held from 10–18 May 1999 in San José, Costa Rica.

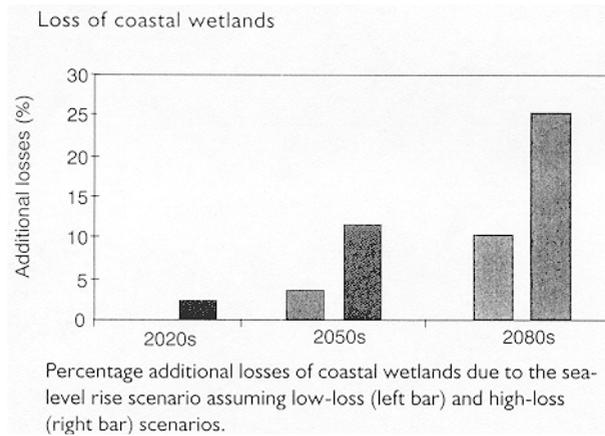
The San José Conference was attended by representatives from 110 Contracting Parties, 15 observer States and a large group of non-governmental organizations, as well as delegations from treaty secretariats and intergovernmental organizations, donor agencies and wetland

scientists. The delegates met in several plenary and 5 technical sessions.

A wide range of issues was addressed at COP7 under the general theme “People and Wetlands – The Vital Link.” In his opening statement Ramsar’s Secretary-General, Delmar Blasco, emphasized that “the Convention should not move away from protecting wetlands as aquatic areas for birdlife, but should also be seen within the context of sustainable development.” The Conference demonstrated a willingness among many of the parties and organizations involved to broaden further the scope of the Convention into the wider setting of sustain-

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able development and address the conservation and wise use of wetlands in an integrated manner.

COP7 reviewed the progress made since the last meeting of the Contracting Parties in 1996 and remaining challenges. Presentations were made on the implementation of the Convention in each of Ramsar's regions, as well as on several special topics. The Conference resulted in the adoption of 30 resolutions and 4 recommendations containing decisions on a wide variety of policy, programme and financial issues. These decisions provide clearly defined objectives for the coming years and further tools and guidance for the Contracting Parties to improve the implementation of the wise use principle.

One of the results of COP7 was the adoption of the Strategic Framework and Guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance. The Strategic Framework provides a general vision and long-term objectives for the development of the Ramsar List. The vision is "to develop and maintain an international network of wetlands which are important for the conservation of global biological diversity and for sustaining human life through the ecological and hydrological functions they perform." The Framework includes a short-term target for the Ramsar List of 2000 sites to be achieved by COP9 in 2005. In another resolution the Contracting Parties also agreed to raise the target for the application or preparation of management plans from 50 per cent to at least 75 per cent of the sites on the Ramsar list by COP8.

The Strategic Framework is accompanied by guidelines to assist Contracting Parties in taking a systematic approach to identifying priority wetlands for future designations in order to contribute to the achievement of the global network of wetlands. These include further guidance for the application of the criteria for designating sites on the list. The criteria have been regrouped under two general headings: sites containing representative,

rare or unique wetland types (Group A) and sites of international importance for conserving biological diversity (Group B, subdivided in three sub-criteria based on species and ecological communities, waterbirds and fish). Specific guidelines were adopted with regard to the identification and designation of karst and other subterranean hydrological systems as wetlands of international importance.

The San José Conference also resulted in the adoption of several decisions aimed at improving the implementation of the wise use principle. These included resolutions containing:

- Guidelines for developing and implementing national wetland policies
- Guidelines for reviewing laws and institutions to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands
- Guidelines for establishing and strengthening local and indigenous people participation in the management of wetlands
- An Outreach Programme for the period 1999–2002
- A Framework for wetlands risk assessment, including methods to predict and monitor changes in the ecological character of wetlands.

Other decisions adopted at the Conference included, *inter alia*, resolutions on incentive measures to encourage application of the wise use principle; impact assessments; restoration as an element of national planning; enhancement of the conservation and wise use of intertidal wetlands; the review of boundary definitions of listed sites; compensation for lost wetland habitats and functions; and measurement of environmental quality.

A resolution was also adopted on alien species, one of the new issues on the Ramsar agenda. It calls on the Contracting Parties to, *inter alia*, make an inventory of alien species in wetlands; identify those that pose a threat and may be controlled or eradicated and prepare legislation and programmes to prevent the introduction of new and environmentally dangerous alien species and the movement or trade thereof. Ramsar's Scientific and Technical Review Panel is directed to prepare wetland-specific guidelines on this issue.

One of the more controversial issues discussed at COP7 concerned water and river basin management. Two important resolutions were adopted containing guidelines to integrate conservation and wise use of wetlands into river basin management and to stimulate international cooperation under the Ramsar Convention in respect of shared wetlands and river basins. Several States (in particular Turkey) opposed the inclusion of the text on cooperation in respect of transboundary watercourses and management of shared river basins, which they considered as issues that should not be dealt with under the Ramsar Convention. The final text of the resolution on cooperation was subject to several amendments, but retained the references to shared river basins.

The debate on the new regional categorization of Contracting Parties and the status of Yugoslavia in the Ramsar Convention were also the subject of considerable debate.

A resolution was adopted approving the categorization into the regions: Africa, Asia, the Neotropics, Europe, North America and Oceania. The controversy regarding Israel's categorization in the regional group of Asia was resolved through a compromise that allows it to participate in the European Region. The resolution on the status of Yugoslavia in the Ramsar Convention was adopted with several States abstaining from voting.

The importance of closer cooperation with non-governmental organizations and other environmental conventions was reaffirmed at COP7 by the adoption of two resolutions and the signature of a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ramsar Secretariat and the World Heritage Convention. One of the resolutions calls upon the subsidiary bodies of the Ramsar Convention to cooperate more closely with equivalent bodies established under the relevant conventions. The Contracting Parties are in their turn called upon "to enhance coordinated implementation of these conventions, where appropriate, so wetland conservation and wise use can be considered within the broader sustainable development framework."

COP7 also approved the budget for the coming 3 years. The delegates agreed on a moderate increase of 5 per cent from the 1999 budget for the year 2000 and an additional increase of 2 per cent in each of the following

years based on the United Nations scale of assessment for membership contribution. The delegates also adopted a resolution reiterating that the resources to the Small Grants Fund should be increased to at least US\$1 million annually.

The Ramsar Convention continues towards becoming one of the most widely ratified nature conservation conventions. At COP7 two more States – Lebanon and Cuba – announced their accession to the Convention, bringing the total number of Contracting Parties to 116. The Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance recently reached the milestone of 1000 listed sites, covering a total area of more than 71 million hectares.

COP7 proved to be successful in adopting many important decisions providing additional tools and guidance for the Contracting Parties. However, not all decisions received unanimous support and some important issues remain to be dealt with in future meetings. The expanding global water crisis and its impact on wetlands will undoubtedly be one of the most important challenges that will have to be addressed within and outside the Ramsar framework. Closer cooperation with other relevant frameworks will in this respect be of crucial importance.

COP8 will be held in Spain in 2002.

