



RAMSAR COP7 HIGHLIGHTS MONDAY, 10 MAY 1999

The Seventh Conference of Contracting Parties (COP7) to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands met in a Plenary session to hear opening statements, present the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards, take care of procedural matters, and hear the reports of the Standing Committee, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel and the Secretary-General, as well as a number of special presentations.

OPENING PLENARY

Delmar Blasco, Secretary-General of the Convention, welcomed delegates, highlighting the importance of COP7 in conducting a detailed review of implementation and remaining challenges, establishing clearly defined objectives for the next three years, and enabling Contracting Parties (CPs) to achieve progress in the conservation and wise use of wetlands. He stressed that the Convention should not move away from protecting wetlands as aquatic areas for birdlife, but should also be seen within the broader context of sustainable development. He noted that Ramsar has always employed the ecosystem approach and must continue to do so in the future management of wetlands. He stated that COP7 would broach many crucial issues relevant to today's international agenda, and stressed that while Ramsar cannot act in isolation, discussions must remain within the Ramsar context and issues relevant to wetlands must be developed to ensure the COP's success. He expressed hope that the many resolutions before the COP would advance the objective of mainstreaming wetlands and making them a common concern for governments as well as society at large.

Jonathon A. Kusi, Director of UNESCO's Office of International Standards and Legal Affairs, on behalf of Frederico Mayor Zaragoza, Director General of UNESCO, highlighted the Convention's progress and Ramsar's working relations with the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). He noted that the Ramsar Secretariat and World Heritage Centre would sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) at COP7 aimed at enhancing cooperation. He stressed the critical role of wetlands in abating the global water crisis and encouraged Ramsar to improve the understanding of the economic value of wetlands, continue pursuing an ecosystem approach to wetland management, and enhance public education on wetlands.

Maritta R. Von Bieberstein Koch-Weser, Director General of IUCN, spoke on behalf of the four international NGO partners of the Convention. She highlighted links between wetlands, natural disasters and water management and noted that the increased frequency of

natural disasters, along with increasing mismanagement of natural resources, has created social and economic insecurity. Regarding water management, availability and access, she stressed that engineering solutions alone are ineffective and underscored the need for better "nature-made" options. She urged CPs to: consider a new vision for the Ramsar List; report on damage and ecological change in Ramsar sites and establish multi-stakeholder committees to monitor such changes; promote alternative approaches to planning and management of natural resources and water; finance wise use programmes; and reward the Bureau's effective management to enable them to make further gains in Convention implementation.

Elizabeth Odio Benito, Vice President and Minister of Environment and Energy of Costa Rica, reaffirmed Costa Rica's commitment to the Convention's objectives. She highlighted the role of wetlands in the water cycle and the urgent need to address the global water crisis. She urged CPs to propose recommendations that will advance efforts to ensure water quality and availability. She presented Costa Rica's proposal for the creation of liaison offices in each Ramsar region to improve information management and coordination among CPs and the Bureau. She expressed hope that COP7 would renew the commitments made at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to achieve sustainable development, combat poverty as the greatest predator of the environment, and place humans at the center of development.

Secretary-General Blasco presented the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards to the following individuals and consortia: Professor Vitaly G. Krivenko (Russian Federation); Victor Pulido (Peru); the Lake Naivasha Riparian Association (Kenya); the Society for the Protection of Prespa (Greece); and the Pacific Estuary Conservation Program (Canada).

Miguel Angel Rodriguez, President of Costa Rica, highlighted Costa Rica's efforts to implement fiscal incentives to encourage mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and conservation of forests, water resources and biodiversity. He stated that the notion that economic growth is incompatible with environmental protection is no longer widely held. He emphasized the need for decentralization and greater participation of stakeholders in government activities. Noting that the international community has recognized a series of environmental services that protect natural resources for present and future generations, he stressed that the marketing of such services can be an effective means of facilitating sustainable development.

Louise Lakos, Chair of the Standing Committee, emphasized the importance of COP7 in mainstreaming wetlands and highlighting the role of people in safeguarding this critical ecosystem. She asked delegates to observe a moment of silence for the late Cyril de Klemm, a



Ramsar legal advisor and key figure in the Convention's development. She presented the COP7 agenda (COP7 DOC.1 Rev.2), which delegates adopted with the addition of an extra Plenary session to consider the draft resolution on regional categorization of countries under the Convention. She also presented the rules of procedure (COP7 DOC.2), noting that they had been revised to conform with those of other international environmental conventions.

INDIA stated that Ramsar needs to be brought in line with the post-Rio conventions, either by amending it or negotiating a protocol to address issues relating to a financial mechanism, rules of procedure, the Secretariat's role, a dispute settlement mechanism, provision of financial resources and technology transfer to developing countries as agreed at Rio, and review of implementation of the Convention's provisions. She recommended that an expert group investigate these issues. The REPUBLIC OF KOREA said these are substantive issues that should be addressed in the form of a protocol, not in the rules of procedure. CHINA expressed hope that India's proposals would receive full discussion at COP7. Secretary-General Blasco said they are matters for amending the Convention and suggested that if CPs want to address these issues, they should be put forward in a draft resolution. Delegates adopted the rules of procedure with the following amendments: that they "apply," rather than "enter into force," immediately after their adoption, and should be adopted at the outset of each COP.

Delegates elected Elizabeth Odio Benito (Costa Rica) as President of COP7 and Kezimbiri-Miyingo (Uganda) and Veit Koester (Denmark) as Vice Presidents. Delegates then viewed slides of "Water Seen from Space" and watched a video on the Ramsar Convention, which highlighted the threats, values and functions of the world's diverse wetlands. Delegates approved nominations for representatives of Togo, Canada, Mongolia, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Guatemala and Australia as members of the COP's Credentials Committee. Regarding admission of observers, delegates adopted the list of registered observers (COP7 DOC.3) with amendments to include Rwanda and UNEP.

Louise Lakos, Chair of Standing Committee, presented her Report (COP7 DOC.4). She said a draft resolution on regional categorization and composition and the roles and responsibilities of the Standing Committee would be presented at COP7. She detailed the main issues and decisions taken at the Committee's four meetings held since COP6. Noting that the Ramsar Convention has changed remarkably over the past three years, she called on governments to capitalize on this by strengthening and further improving national implementation of the Convention. She observed that the Strategic Plan adopted at COP6 is an efficient tool of the Convention that places great emphasis on education and public awareness, capacity building for all stakeholders, strengthened partnerships with other conventions and catalytic roles in generating funds for work on wetlands.

Makoto Komoda, member of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), introduced the report of the STRP's activities since COP6 (COP7 DOC.4, Annex). He highlighted the main issues addressed during the STRP's recent meetings, including: reviewing the Ramsar Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance; examining the working definitions of "ecological character" and "change in ecological character" adopted at COP6; defining guidelines on principles for wetland restoration and monitoring; monitoring the Guidelines for management planning; strengthening links with other conventions and agencies; and reviewing the Ramsar Database. He highlighted the Panel's recommendations, including: regrouping the Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance into those based on representativeness or uniqueness and those based on biological diversity; amending the working definitions of "ecological char-

acter" and "change in ecological character"; and applying the update of Ramsar Information Sheets to all sites designated before 31 December 1990.

Secretary-General Blasco presented his Report on the current status of Convention implementation (COP7 DOC.5). He noted progress made since COP6 in: implementation of the Convention in several CPs; effective functioning of the Convention's mechanisms; the broadening of the approach to wetland issues; cooperation with the Convention's international NGO partners and other institutions; and improvement of the Convention's standing at the international level and its working relations with other environment and development-related treaties. He emphasized that many challenges remain, such as increasing the number of CPs using the Strategic Plan as a planning tool.

Lord Enniskillen, Chair of the Lake Naivasha Riparian Association, summarized the consensus-building approach used to develop Lake Naivasha's management plan and recommended the promotion of, *inter alia*: local community and private ownership of resources; public education; the polluter pays principle; and family planning.

Yolanda Kakabadse, Minister of Environment of Ecuador and President of IUCN, summarized workshop discussions at the 13th Global Biodiversity Forum (GBF13) on: wetlands and the private sector; mitigating the impact of invasive species; the ecosystem approach to rehabilitation; global carbon and peatlands; participation of indigenous peoples and local communities; and water resource management and global change. She also presented GBF13's recommendations for COP7, including, *inter alia*: requirements for an ecosystem approach to wetland restoration; support for the Draft Global Peatland Action Plan; a MOU between Ramsar and the Framework Convention on Climate Change; and improved coordination between Ramsar and the CBD Working Group on Indigenous Knowledge.

Melissa Marin, Friends of the Earth, presented the recommendations of the recent Conference of NGOs, Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples, including, *inter alia*: extending the list of Ramsar Sites; demanding a moratorium on shrimp aquaculture in mangroves; recognizing and fostering the role of women in wetland conservation; developing mechanisms for the imposition of sanctions on non-complying CPs; and establishing mechanisms to facilitate participation of local communities, indigenous peoples and NGOs in all Convention processes and decisions.

IN THE CORRIDORS

COP7 began with a bang with India's proposal that, in order to place the Ramsar Convention on par with the post-Rio conventions, it must be amended to include financial and dispute settlement mechanisms, among others. Many delegates seemed to concur that the discussion of the rules of procedure was not the appropriate moment to table this proposal. Others saw this as a strategic move to signal early on that some delegations believe now is the time to give the Convention "teeth" by equipping it with the necessary tools to integrate conservation and wise use of wetlands into the broader context of sustainable development. Yet others expressed doubt that this proposal would be acceptable to all Parties.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: Delegates will convene in Plenary from 9:30 am-1:00 pm and 3:00-6:30 pm in the Salones La Paz to review implementation of the Convention in the African, Eastern Europe, Neotropical and North American regions, and from 7:30-9:30 pm to consider the draft resolution on regional categorization of countries under the Convention.