



World co-operation for wetlands: the Ramsar Convention

Drawn up in the 1960s and still expanding, the Convention on Wetlands (or 'Ramsar Convention') remains one of the most effective intergovernmental environmental treaties. The BirdLife Partnership is involved at all levels, helping to implement and develop global policy, legislation, training, research, water resources planning, local awareness-raising and site management. Dave Pritchard reviews the current situation and future prospects for the Convention.



In this era of 'globalisation' it is hard to imagine a world without international agreements on the management of environmental resources. Yet, when the Convention on Wetlands was signed in 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar, it was the first conservation agreement of its kind, focusing on a particular ecosystem, aiming at global participation, and seeking to combine conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. BirdLife International's predecessor, the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), was among the architects of this pioneering instrument, and the early emphasis was on threats to waterbirds. The Convention's activities have since broadened to include everything from groundwater modelling to sustainable fisheries, climate change and indigenous culture, but it remains a primary instrument for conservation of sites and species, and BirdLife remains at the heart of its day-to-day operation.

'Wetlands', as defined by Ramsar, cover not just marshes and lakes, but also coral reefs, peat forests, temporary pools and even underground caves. The Convention addresses the role of national planning, including water planning, and emphasises management of the entire catchment of river-basins. Little falls outside its scope!

When a state signs the Convention and becomes a Contracting Party, it accepts three main commitments. The first of these is a requirement to designate suitable wetlands for inclusion in a List of Wetlands of International Importance ('Ramsar sites'), according to fixed criteria. Parties are required to promote the conservation of



sites in this List. Second, they must promote the 'wise use' (sustainable use) of all wetlands in their territory. Third, Parties must consult each other about implementation of the Convention, and endeavour to co-ordinate policies, which provides a legal basis for transboundary, regional and global co-operation.

By February 2003 there were 136 Parties to Ramsar and more than 1,200 Ramsar sites, covering more than 106 million ha. An array of information materials, formal policy pronouncements and technical guidelines has been produced, to aid different stakeholders taking the Convention's aims forward. Regular decision-making conferences, scientific meetings, training courses, awareness-raising events and high-level diplomatic contacts are part of this process. Work programmes cover topics such as wetland inventories, ecosystem restoration, remote sensing and invasive species, and funding is channelled to small projects. Many countries have enacted wetland legislation, adopted wetland policies and set up national Ramsar Committees. A small and highly dedicated Secretariat (the Ramsar Bureau), based in Switzerland, co-ordinates central services for these efforts.

Ramsar is viewed by many as more open than many UN-based international treaties (Ramsar is non-UN). Non-governmental organisations, including many BirdLife Partners, are integrated into much of the scientific, technical and publicity work of the Convention, and also contribute actively to field research and site management at ground level.

Internationally, BirdLife (co-ordinated through the RSPB) is one of four long-standing 'International Organisation Partners' of Ramsar (the others are IUCN – the World Conservation Union, Wetlands International, and WWF), a unique arrangement among Conventions. In this capacity, BirdLife participates in the Standing Committee (which oversees

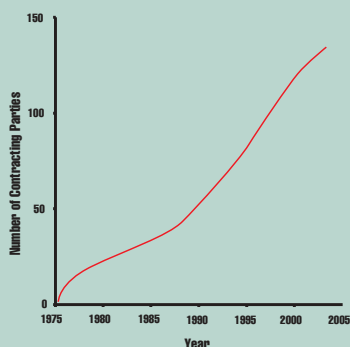
Above: Specific, defined criteria are used to identify Ramsar sites. For example, a site qualifies if it regularly supports more than 20,000 waterbirds.

the work of the Convention), and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (which is its technical 'powerhouse'). BirdLife has undertaken specific tasks such as the elaboration of guidelines on environmental impact assessment and legal interpretation of the Articles of the Convention, and regularly acts as advocate for the Convention's objectives in other fora. As the Convention puts greater emphasis on water shortage, sustainable trade, community participation, socio-cultural values and poverty alleviation, BirdLife is helping to keep Ramsar focused by championing the core issues of the Convention's legal framework, for example, through casework in defence of sites, policy tests and proper reporting of ecological change in wetlands, impact assessment, habitat compensation and the coherence of site networks.

There is a particularly close overlap between BirdLife's Important Bird Area (IBA) programme and the Convention's 'listed sites' work. BirdLife Partners can promote wetland IBAs that meet Ramsar's criteria as priority sites for designation to their respective governments, and BirdLife has recently published reports detailing these sites to assist this process, based on the European and African IBA books. Others are planned.



Increase in number of Contracting Parties with time



Opposite: Biebrza, in north-eastern Poland, was designated a Ramsar site in 1995. It harbours an exceptional variety of birds including several threatened or localised species.

Insets: Left, Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, Belize. Right, a sign declaring Crooked Tree is a Ramsar site, managed by Belize Audubon Society (BirdLife in Belize).

It is impossible to quantify just how much Ramsar has contributed to the protection of wetlands world-wide, but undoubtedly it has had significant impact. The vast (but still incomplete) area of habitats receiving official protection is one indication. A growing appreciation at all levels of the values and functions of wetlands, including the considerable economic advantages of maintaining their natural ecological functioning, is due in large part to efforts stimulated by the Convention. Hydrology, wildlife population dynamics, sustainable exploitation, rehabilitation techniques and control of invasive alien species are some of the areas where scientific understanding has been increased through Ramsar's programmes. Harmonising the approaches of different nations, and equitable sharing of rights and opportunities, helps prevent the worst practices concentrating in those countries that have the weakest safeguards. Although Ramsar has no legal 'enforcement' procedure, it does have 'accountability' mechanisms, and these create strong political pressure for countries to 'do the right thing'.

Ramsar, unlike some other international treaties, has managed to avoid becoming too politicised. Knowledgeable wetland specialists usually undertake governmental responsibility for implementing Ramsar. These people often do not have high political authority, and a future priority must be to strengthen their partnerships with other sectors.

In November 2002, there was a strong BirdLife presence at the 8th triennial Conference of Parties to Ramsar that took place in Spain. 1,200 delegates attended and 46 Resolutions were adopted. Indeed, the increasing size and complexity of the Convention's work is becoming an issue. The World Summit on Sustainable Development concluded in Johannesburg a few weeks before the Ramsar meeting and demonstrated how it is becoming increasingly difficult to fix meaningful intergovernmental commitments on biodiversity issues. Nowadays agreements need to be more legally watertight, and therefore more complex, than previously. As appreciation grows of the weight that treaties may carry, there are moves in some quarters to weaken them. This applies particularly to issues such as the precautionary principle, environmental liability, and the status of Convention guidelines. There are increasing concerns over sovereignty and 'subsidiarity'. These trends are evident not just amongst governments, but also increasingly within the corporate sector who are increasingly engaged with international conservation law. This is a good thing in many ways,

Further reading:

The definitive source is the Convention's own excellent web-site: www.ramsar.org

See also:

BirdLife International (2001): *Important Bird Areas and potential Ramsar Sites in Europe*. BirdLife International, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

BirdLife International (2002): *Important Bird Areas and potential Ramsar Sites in Africa*. BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.

BirdLife International and the Ramsar Convention – A Guide. (2nd edition, 2002) – produced by the RSPB and distributed for internal use in the Partnership

Matthews, G.V.T. (1993): *The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: its History and Development*. Ramsar Convention Bureau, Gland, Switzerland.

Ramsar Convention Bureau (2000): *The Ramsar 'Toolkit' – Handbooks for the Wise Use of Wetlands*. Available from the Ramsar Bureau, in hard copy or CD.

Ramsar Convention Bureau (undated): *The Ramsar Information Pack*. Available from the Bureau, and also for download from www.ramsar.org/index_about_ramsar.htm#info

Ramsar Convention Bureau (1997): *The Ramsar Convention Manual – a guide to the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) 2nd edition*. Gland, Switzerland. [Aspects now out of date]

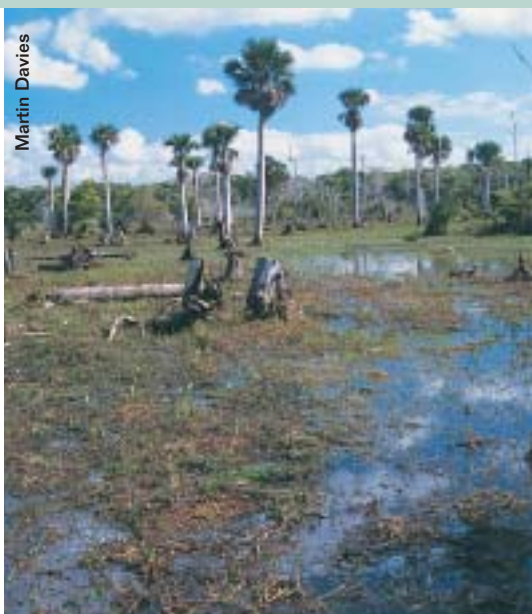
but it means BirdLife's technical advocacy now meets better technical opposition. Over time, international legal interpretations and rulings have been tightened, often the result of successful efforts by organisations like BirdLife to protect sites. Paradoxically, however, this can also result in resistance to site designation in the first place, and a delicate balancing-act is required.

The Ramsar Convention is making good efforts in working for maximum mutual benefit alongside other environmental treaties. BirdLife has been a key player in some of Ramsar's interactions with the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention on Migratory Species, and the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement. This is leading to discussions over future global funding for nature conservation, and debate about the governance of international institutions.

For two or three decades conservation treaties have evolved and defined a range of principles and policy. Some visionary strategies and powerful tools have resulted. Nowadays, agreements are more tightly constrained, and it is debatable whether a clear-sighted and far-reaching agreement like the Convention on Wetlands could be concluded in today's political climate. We must be thankful that it emerged when it did, that it has stood the test of time, and is now an indispensable aid to conservation in this age of globalisation.

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In January 2003, the Cuban Government designated five areas as Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. These sites are in addition to Ciénaga de Zapata (above) which is already listed under Ramsar, and home to several threatened species including the enigmatic Zapata Rail *Cyanolimnas cerverai* (Endangered).

The new sites include the Humedal Delta del Cauto, the largest delta in Cuba with some of the country's best preserved mangroves and home to threatened birds including Cuban Parakeet *Aratinga euops* and West Indian Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna arborea* (both Vulnerable). The delta is one of the focal areas for BirdLife's conservation work in Cuba, supported by the British Birdwatching Fair in 2001.

Another site, Humedal Río Máximo-Cagüey, is currently the research site for a BP Conservation Award team who are assisting the authorities and providing information to assist with management of the site. The area is the largest nesting site for flamingos in the Caribbean.