



IUCN – The World Conservation Union

Water Law Series – Issue 2

The Ramsar Convention: Wetlands *and* Water

The Convention on *Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, adopted in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971 is one of the first global conservation treaties, and the only global instrument in force dealing with water resources.

What are the Parties obligations under Ramsar?

Obligations of Parties to the Convention include the requirement to:

- designate at least one national wetland for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance;
- promote the conservation of the listed sites and establish nature reserves; and
- consult with other Parties about the implementation of obligations arising out of the Convention, particularly those regarding transboundary wetlands, international watercourses, and conservation of wetlands species.

The Ramsar Convention has 136 Contracting Parties and 1,252 sites designated by the Contracting Parties for the List of Wetlands of International Importance. While the obligations of the Contracting Parties may be seen as limited, the operation of the Ramsar Convention can be regarded as a success.

What is the focus of the Convention?

The original emphasis of the Convention on waterfowls has been extended by the Conference of the Parties to cover other species and to consider the importance of wetlands for, *inter alia*, the improvement of water management, local communities, and indigenous people.

Ramsar has also adopted a series of recommendations and guidelines on important issues, such as:

- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and risk assessment;
- the review of laws and institutions to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands;
- the integration of wetlands conservation and wise use into river basin management;
- strengthening local communities and indigenous peoples' participation in the management of wetlands;
- allocation and management of water for maintaining the ecological functions of wetlands;
- use of groundwater;
- cultural values of wetlands, and



- wetlands restoration.

What are the main challenges confronting the Convention?

The challenges that confront the effective implementation of the Ramsar Convention include:

- forging synergies and linkages with other multilateral environmental agreements, in particular, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD);
- better linking the Convention with mainstream issues; and
- encouraging the Contracting Parties to consider wetlands within the broader context of integrated water resources management.

On ground challenges in effectively managing wetlands include:

- preparing and implementing management plans for the wise use of wetlands;
- considering wetlands in a wider context, and linking their management to integrated water resources management;
- developing an effective legislative and institutional framework; and
- effectively engaging the community in the planning and implementation process.

What is the relationship of wetlands and water?

Wetlands play a key role in helping to sustain river systems health. They have important hydrological functions such as recharge of groundwater, improvement of water quality and flood alleviation

The main challenge in the relationship between wetlands and water is to find ways in which to integrate the conservation and wise use of wetlands into the management of river basins; in other words, to give real meaning to the Guidelines adopted by the Ramsar Convention.

Where do I go for further assistance?

The IUCN Environmental Law Programme: see below for contact details.

IUCN Environmental Law Centre for the IUCN Environmental Law Programme

Contact the IUCN Environmental Law Centre at: waterlaw@elc.iucn.org

Visit the IUCN Environmental Law Programme Website at: www.iucn.org/themes/law

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