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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

THE 8TH CONFERENCE OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES TO THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

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1. Background

- 1.1 The 1971 Ramsar Convention was the first of the modern global intergovernmental treaties on conservation and wise use of natural resources, and came into force for the UK in 1976. The UK currently has 158 Ramsar sites (including 14 in the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies), with a surface area of 994,024 hectares. Of these sites only 3 are totally independent of the *Natura 2000* network (*i.e.* not intersected by a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Area (SPA) under the Habitats Directive and Birds Directive).
- 1.2 The UK has the largest single number of designated sites (13% of the global total) of the 133 Contracting Parties, but most of these sites are small and in terms of overall area the UK has less than 1% of the total surface area of listed sites.
- 1.3 The 8th Conference of the Parties to Ramsar (CoP8) will be held in Valencia, Spain from 18 to 26 November 2002 and the UK delegation will be led by DEFRA with support from JNCC. The triennial Conference is the governance body of the Convention with representation from all Contracting Parties. Since 1971 it has developed and interpreted the treaty text and kept the Convention's agenda abreast of changing global priorities and trends in environmental thinking.
- 1.4 The Convention has broadened its scope from an initial focus on site designation primarily for waterbirds, to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use, recognising wetlands as ecosystems of extreme importance not only for biodiversity conservation but also for the well-being of human communities. The recent move to promote ecosystem approaches for wetland conservation, and the conclusion of a joint work plans with the Convention of Biological Diversity have been particularly important developments for Ramsar. Much activity now has a clear sustainable development agenda.

2. Implementation in the UK

- 2.1 A National Ramsar Committee acts in an advisory capacity to assist government in the implementation of the Convention. The National Committee has established well-focused Terms of Reference and a rolling work plan based on the Convention's triennial Work Plan. The Committee is chaired by DEFRA with scientific support from JNCC.
- 2.2 Its membership includes representatives from the devolved administrations, the country agencies, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department of Culture, Media and Sports, the Crown Dependencies, the Environment Agency, the Ramsar Bureau, RSPB, UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum, Wetlands International, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust and WWF-UK (on behalf of Wildlife and Countryside Link). The Ramsar Bureau attends occasionally.
- 2.3 In many countries, Ramsar-related activity has become a major focus for public awareness of wetland conservation issues and of site protection. It does not seem to have such a role in the UK, in part given that much of this focus is provided by activities surrounding the Natura 2000 network of SACs and SPAs.
- 2.4 Since the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Convention, the 2 February has been promoted globally as World Wetland Day. This has given a major annual focus for events that raise awareness of wetland conservation issues, and in many countries conservation agencies have developed major programmes of events on the day. In the UK, some site designations have been announced on World Wetland Day, although generally there have been few other activities. Whilst climatically early February is not the best date for external events, there are certainly the potential for other UK events related to wetland conservation issues that could usefully be promoted at this time.

3. Main themes of the last CoP

- 3.1 The 7th Conference was held in San José in 1999 and the main themes were as follows:
 - i. development of a series of handbooks giving guidance and best practice on a range of issues such as implementation of the wise use concept;
 - ii. enhancement to guidelines for the applying site selection criteria and the need for national reviews of site networks;
 - iii. guidance on good practice in the involvement of local communities in wetland management;
 - iv. guidance on the development of national wetland policies;
 - v. agreement on the need for further guidance relating to policy on deletion of sites and restriction of site boundaries under a range of circumstances;

- vi. agreement on the need for further guidance on alien invasive species in wetlands;
- vii. development of a global peatland strategy endorsed by both conservationists and peat producers; and
- viii. UK sponsored Resolution on priorities for wetland inventory (Resolution VII.20);

4. Key issues at CoP8 and implications for the UK

- 4.1 Contracting Parties submit National Reports to each Conference. The UK's National Report, which was submitted in February 2002, provides a comprehensive overview of the UK actions under each of the eight General Objectives of the Ramsar Strategic Plan 1997–2002 (see Annex 1). The National Report Appendices and Site Supplement provides information at the site level on education, management plans and ecological factors affecting sites. The Ramsar Bureau intends to use National Reports to undertake a rigorous analysis of the implementation of the Convention at the global and regional level, and will report the results to the Conference.
- 4.2 For the first time, each Contracting Party has been invited to establish proposed national targets for the coming triennium (2003-2005) based on the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2003–2008, and submit these prior to the Conference. From the aggregated national targets, the Ramsar Bureau will prepare proposed global targets for the Convention's Work Plan 2003-2005, to be considered by the Conference. In this way, it is anticipated that the global targets to be proposed for adoption by COP8 will reflect the national priorities and planned activities of all Contracting Parties.
- 4.3 As part of the preparations for the Conference, JNCC is consulting widely on the draft Resolutions which will be discussed there, in order to help shape the overall UK position. There are a number of key issues that have direct relevance for the UK. These include issues of:
 - i. wetland inventory;
 - ii. reporting on the conservation status of sites;
 - iii. further site selection guidelines;
 - iv. new management planning guidelines for Ramsar sites; and
 - v. guidance on boundary modifications.
- 4.4 A main focus for discussion will be the Convention's Strategic Plan for 2003-2008. This has already been subject to extensive consultation in the UK through the National Ramsar Committee.

- 4.5 There will be a further information paper for the March Committee summarising the Resolutions and Recommendations from the Conference and outlining the implications for the UK for 2003 to 2005.

5. Future UK work areas under the Ramsar Convention

- 5.1 Other than in Gibraltar (which lies within the EU), Ramsar has particular significance for the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies as the only international site designation available. These areas are well acknowledged as being rich in biodiversity yet many of their species and habitats are threatened. There is great potential for site protection through designation whilst the challenge of bringing sites through to designation and ensuring their ongoing management is sustainable is also great. The exact advisory role of the JNCC with regard to the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies is still being defined through the FMPR.
- 5.2 A major challenge for the UK over the coming triennium will be unlocking and tapping into the expertise in wetland management in order to maintain our active role within the Ramsar Convention. As the Convention continues to broaden its scope to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use, the National Committee will need to review its capacity to provide advice and inputs on issues such as the cultural value of wetlands, and communication, education and public awareness.
- 5.3 For JNCC and the country agencies there are two major work areas anticipated over the next three years:

a. National review of Ramsar sites

In 1999, CoP7 urged Contracting Parties to undertake a review of their national site networks, and in response, the UK committed to undertake a strategic review of Ramsar site network coverage, giving special attention to the selection of sites for a number of under-represented wetland habitat types and globally threatened species. The timing of such a review is useful to the UK statutory agencies since it will allow potential to revise or update qualifying interests at Ramsar sites in line with recent reviews of European qualifying interests undertaken by SAC and SPA reviews. Such alignment of interests has benefits to country agencies in aiding clarity of site management objectives.

Progress to date has been slow but a Steering Group, has recently been convened by DEFRA to guide the process. It will report in advance of CoP9 in 2004. A review of possible sites in Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies will be undertaken separately and will be a component of the national review, with the aim of identifying gaps in the existing site series in each of the Territories.

b. Resubmission of data sheets on designated sites in 2004

A major future task involving JNCC and the country agencies will be the updating and re-submission of Ramsar Information Sheets. This is a requirement under the Convention at least once every six years. Country agencies have developed a timetable to deliver this work and so ensure the timely completion of this major task.

- 5.4 Both these major pieces of work will report to CoP9 in 2005. There is potential to maximise the conservation and public awareness benefits arising from this work through the production, in 2004, of a range of interpretative material drawing from these processes, including booklets and web-based data and information. Accordingly, objectives to this end are proposed in the national Ramsar targets for 2003-2005 and will be brought forward in corporate planning rounds.

Annex I

EIGHT GENERAL OBJECTIVES OF THE RAMSAR STRATEGIC PLAN 1997 – 2002 WHICH WERE REPORTED TO COP8 IN THE UK NATIONAL REPORT.

General Objective 1: To progress towards universal membership of the convention

Operational Objective 1.1: To endeavour to secure at least 120 Contracting Parties to the Convention by 2002.

General Objective 2: To achieve the wise use of wetlands by implementing and further developing the Ramsar wise use guidelines

Operational Objective 2.1: To review and, if necessary, amend national or supra-national (e.g., European Community) legislation, institutions and practices in all Contracting Parties, to ensure that the Wise Use Guidelines are applied.

Operational Objective 2.2: To integrate conservation and wise use of wetlands in all Contracting Parties into national, provincial and local planning and decision-making on land use, groundwater management, catchment/river basin and coastal zone planning, and all other environmental planning and management.

Operational Objective 2.3: To expand the Guidelines and Additional Guidance to provide advice to Contracting Parties on specific issues not hitherto covered, and examples of best current practice.

Operational Objective 2.4: To provide economic evaluations of the benefits and functions of wetlands for environmental planning purposes.

Operational Objective 2.5: To carry out environmental impact assessments (EIAs) at wetlands, particularly of proposed developments or changes in land/water use which have potential to affect them, notably at Ramsar sites, whose ecological character "is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference" (Article 3.2 of the Convention).

Operational Objective 2.6: To identify wetlands in need of restoration and rehabilitation, and to implement the necessary measures.

Operational Objective 2.7: To encourage active and informed participation of local communities, including indigenous people, and in particular women, in the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

Operational Objective 2.8: To encourage involvement of the private sector in the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

General Objective 3: To raise awareness of wetland values and functions throughout the world and at all levels

Operational Objective 3.1: To support and assist in implementing, in co-operation with partners and other institutions, an international programme of Education and Public

Awareness (EPA) on wetlands, their functions and values, designed to promote national EPA programmes.

Operational Objective 3.2: To develop and encourage national programmes of EPA on wetlands, targeted at a wide range of people, including key decision-makers, people living in and around wetlands, other wetland users and the public at large.

Operational Objective 3.3: To improve the Ramsar Bureau's communications activities and to develop a Convention Communications Strategy, capable of further promoting the Convention and its wider application, and of raising awareness of wetland values and functions.

General Objective 4: To reinforce the capacity of institutions in each contracting party to achieve conservation and wise use of wetlands

Operational Objective 4.1: To develop the capacity of institutions in Contracting Parties, particularly in developing countries, to achieve conservation and wise use of wetlands.

Operational Objective 4.2: To identify the training needs of institutions and individuals concerned with the conservation and wise use of wetlands, particularly in developing countries, and to implement follow-up actions.

General Objective 5: To ensure the conservation of all sites included in the list of wetlands of international importance (Ramsar List)

Operational Objective 5.1: To maintain the ecological character of Ramsar sites.

Operational Objective 5.2: To develop and implement management plans for all Ramsar sites, consistent with the Convention's Guidelines on Management Planning and emphasising involvement of local communities and other stakeholders.

Operational Objective 5.3: To obtain regularly updated information on wetlands of international importance, in accordance with the approved standard format.

Operational Objective 5.4: To keep under review the content and structure, as well as the hardware and software, of the Ramsar Database, in order to ensure that it retains its relevance in light of evolving information and communication technology.

General Objective 6: To designate for the Ramsar list those wetlands which meet the convention's criteria, especially wetland types still under-represented in the list and transfrontier wetlands

Operational Objective 6.1: To identify those wetlands that meet the Ramsar criteria, and to give due consideration to their designation for the List.

Operational Objective 6.2: To increase the area of wetland designated for the List of Wetlands of International Importance, particularly for wetland types that are under-represented either at global or national level.

Operational Objective 6.3: To keep under review the Ramsar Criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance (Resolution VI.3).

General Objective 7: To promote international co-operation and mobilise financial assistance for wetland conservation and wise use in collaboration with other conventions and agencies, both governmental and non-governmental

Operational Objective 7.1: To identify international and/or regional needs for managing shared wetlands and shared catchments, and develop and implement common approaches.

Operational Objective 7.2: To strengthen and formalise linkages between Ramsar and other international and/or regional environmental conventions and agencies, so as to advance the achievement of shared goals and objectives relating to wetland species or issues.

Operational Objective 7.3: To ensure that the development assistance community, and multinational corporations, follow improved wetland practices such as the Wise Use Guidelines in developing countries and countries whose economies are in transition.

Operational Objective 7.4: To obtain funds to fulfil obligations contracted under the Convention, notably for developing countries and countries whose economies are in transition.

General Objective 8: To provide the convention with the required institutional mechanisms and resources

Operational Objective 8.1: To maximise achievement of Ramsar's mission and objectives by evaluating and, if necessary, modifying the Convention's institutions and management structures.

Operational Objective 8.2: To provide the financial resources required to carry out Ramsar activities.

Operational Objective 8.3: To maximise the benefits of working with partner organisations.

Operational Objective 8.4: To secure at least one million US dollars per annum for the Ramsar Small Grants Fund for Wetlands Conservation and Wise Use (Resolutions 5.8 and VI.6) and to allocate these funds effectively.