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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

OUTCOMES OF THE 8TH RAMSAR CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 2002

Discussion paper by Elizabeth Moore and David Stroud

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its September meeting last year, the Committee received briefing on the forthcoming Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on wetlands (JNCC 02 N09). This paper provides an update on the main outcomes of the Conference and some of the main implications for the UK statutory agencies over the next three year period.
- 1.2 Ramsar CoP8 was held in Valencia, Spain from 18 to 26 November 2002. The UK delegation was lead by Huw Thomas from Defra with technical support from JNCC. Liz Charter from the Isle of Man Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry also participated on the UK delegation.

2. World Summit on Sustainable Development

- 2.1 The Conference followed shortly after the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in August 2002. There were a number of significant implications arising from WSSD decisions which impacted on discussions at Ramsar CoP8.
- 2.2 The Summit put special emphasis on five areas identified by the UN Secretary General as the key issues for the future of the planet (of which the first two are of direct significance to Ramsar):
 - i. water and sanitation;
 - ii. biodiversity and ecosystem management;
 - iii. energy;
 - iv. health; and
 - v. agricultural productivity.
- 2.3 The WSSD Implementation Plan stressed the fact that the three pillars of sustainable development — economic development, social progress and environmental protection — are inseparable. Accordingly, WSSD reinforced, at the highest political level, the intimate linkages between these issues, and the consequent need for addressing them jointly and holistically.

- 2.4 In similar vein, CoP8 discussions and outcomes also stressed integrated approaches to wetland conservation, and the role that wetland wise-use can play both in sustainable development and in poverty eradication. This further developed a growing theme within the Convention's business of centring wetland conservation activity around those goods, services and values that wetlands provide for dependent human communities. This is slowly moving the Convention away from traditional approaches of promoting nature conservation for its own sake, to more socially integrated and utilitarian approaches.
- 2.5 There was significant debate however, as to the extent that the Convention should cloak all of its activity in sustainable development and poverty eradication 'clothing' - especially given the fact that there already exist a range of other multilateral agreements and agencies (*e.g.* Agenda 21 and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development) whose core business is already sustainable development. However, in the long-term, WSSD outcomes will undoubtedly serve to refocus significant elements of the Convention's activity.
- 2.6 For Ramsar, it was noted that the following agreements in the WSSD Plan of Implementation¹ are particularly relevant:
- i. Clean drinking water and adequate sanitation are necessary to protect human health and the environment: halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of people without drinking water and the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation.
 - ii. Governments should give priority to water management and develop integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans by 2005.
 - iii. Develop and implement national/regional strategies, plans and programmes with regard to integrated river basin, watershed and groundwater management.
 - iv. Improve the efficient use of water resources and promote their allocation among competing uses: give priority to basic human needs while attending to the preservation or restoration of ecosystems and their functions, including safeguarding drinking water quality.
 - v. Support actions to monitor and assess the quantity and quality of water resources.
 - vi. Improve water resource management and the scientific understanding of the water cycle.
 - vii. Increase understanding of the sustainable use, protection and management of water resources to advance long-term sustainability of freshwater, coastal and marine environments.

¹ http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/summit_docs/131302_wssd_report_reissued.pdf

- viii. Implement programmes to address deforestation, erosion, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, disruption of water flows and retreat of glaciers.
 - ix. Encourage the application by 2010 of the ecosystem approach for the sustainable development of the oceans, including the implementation of the Ramsar Convention.
 - x. Develop and facilitate the use of diverse approaches and tools, including the ecosystem approach, the elimination of destructive fishing practices, the establishment of marine protected areas consistent with international law and based on scientific information, including representative networks by 2012.
 - xi. Establish by 2004 a regular process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment.
 - xii. Achieve by 2010 a significant reduction in the current rate of loss of biological diversity.
 - xiii. Take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation by 2005.
- 2.7 Whilst many of these targets are of particular priority for the developing world, many are also of direct policy relevance for the UK. In particular, note that several (*e.g.* those related to tackling unsustainable fisheries) align closely with JNCC priorities.
- 2.8 In the context of taking forward the development of its strategy, JNCC should review the WSSD Implementation Plan to identify those elements where the UK statutory conservation agencies can assist with delivery.

3. Main issues under discussion at Ramsar CoP8

- 3.1 Ramsar CoP8 was attended by 119 of the 133 Contracting Parties (136 in February 2003), as well as many observer states, UN agencies and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. Delegates adopted 46 Resolutions (significantly more than at CoP7 in 1999) addressing a broad range of policy, technical, programme and budgetary matters. All CoP8 decisions can be found on the Ramsar Bureau's website: http://ramsar.org/key_res_viii_index_e.htm.
- 3.2 A number of the issues under debate proved to be highly contentious and resulted in prolonged and difficult debate. Final Resolutions related to many of these issues proved to be significantly weaker than initial drafts, consequent upon consensual decision taking. In particular, there were intensive discussions concerning Resolutions on climate change, alien species, the importance of agriculture for wetland conservation, the selection of Ramsar sites on the basis of their cultural importance, and issues related to

management planning and data collection. The UK played an active role in most of these (and other) discussions.

- 3.3 In contrast to previous CoPs, it was notable that national stances in debate were increasingly 'joined-up' with national political stances in other fora — a position very far from early Ramsar CoPs which might be characterised as 'wetland conservationists debating with themselves'. Thus, the US position with respect to the Kyoto Protocol dominated debate on climate change issues, whilst discussion on agriculture centred around potential interactions with World Trade Organisation free-trade principles.
- 3.4 The centre-piece of the CoP was the adoption of a Strategic Plan for 2003-2008, which builds on the first Ramsar Strategic Plan 1997-2002. This will be used as the basis for implementation of the Convention through targets and a detailed Work Plan for 2003-2005. The Strategic Plan recognizes a broad approach to wetland conservation and sustainable use, taking into consideration WSSD outcomes. Full implementation of the Plan will need effective synergies with other Multilateral Environmental Agreements and increased involvement of NGOs, foundations and institutions and significantly increased private sector involvement.
- 3.5 Outcomes of CoP8 of particular significance to the UK statutory agencies are summarised in Annex 1.

4. Future directions

- 4.1 A recurring theme stressed by the UK on behalf of the EU related to the need to minimise administrative burdens in order to maximise the availability of resources for conservation implementation. This is particularly an issue in the further development of wetland conservation 'tools' and procedures by the Convention. It was noted that EU Member States already collect a substantial amount of information related to protected wetlands, for example through site mapping and environmental impact assessment, and that opportunities to share information about sites and species collected under EU legislation with the Ramsar Convention should be explored.
- 4.2 The EU strongly emphasised the need to be 'outcome focused' and that the framing of further guidance and advice, and the setting of objectives and actions by Ramsar, should take into account other means of delivery of the same objectives, for example in relation to site-management planning, and the assessment and monitoring of sites. This issue related directly to Resolutions on wetland inventory, on reporting obligations under Article 3.2, on designating under-represented wetland types, and on management planning guidelines.
- 4.3 As a practical expression of synergies between international treaties, the EU recorded the wish to explore means by which information collected in support of European Directives might be harmonised with the requirements of the Convention.

5. Other items of note:

5.1 *Golden Duck Award for UK!*

On a number of occasions the UK was congratulated on its a range of good practice related to the implementation of the Convention. Indeed, as part of a publicity event, the delegation were presented with a 'Gold Duck Award' by WWF (with Algeria and Bolivia also) in recognition of outstanding national achievement in wetlands conservation and management.

5.2 *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*

A progress report from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment² (MEA) was presented³. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has provided a mechanism for the collective international review of the climate change science, so the internationally managed MEA is currently reviewing the status of global ecosystems. The reports will be highly influential in informing knowledge of the status of global biodiversity and future directions. Opportunities for JNCC engagement with this process should be explored.

5.3 *Article 3.2 reporting*

Strong emphasis was placed on the timely reporting of information on sites where changes to the ecological character of Ramsar sites has occurred or is likely to occur (as this is an obligation under Article 3.2 of the Convention).

5.4 *CBD-Ramsar work plan*

The central importance of the Ramsar Convention in delivering wetland-related aspects of the Convention on Biological Diversity's agenda was stressed, with further joint work programmes between CBD and Ramsar agreed.

5.5 *UK implementation of the Ramsar Convention 2002-2005*

Implementation of obligations arising from CoP8 will be co-ordinated by the UK National Ramsar Committee, on which all statutory agencies are represented together with relevant government departments and administrations, and NGOs. As following previous CoPs, the Committee will draw up a prioritised work programme at its next meeting (April 2003) which will guide the UK's implementation over the next three years.

5.6 *Future meetings*

CoP9 will take place in Kampala, Uganda in 2005.

² <http://www.ma-secretariat.org/en/index.htm>

³ http://ramsar.org/cop8_doc_08_e.pdf

Ramsar CoP8 outcomes of particular significance for UK statutory conservation agencies

	Main elements	Implications for UK statutory agencies
i. Inventory and Assessment⁴	Contracting Parties are urged to complete comprehensive national wetland inventories as high priority in the next triennium, using the adopted <i>Framework for Wetland Inventory</i>	Already highlighted as a priority by Defra in their provisional national targets for the next triennium (submitted CoP8 in August 2002).
ii. Selection and management of Ramsar sites on the basis of their cultural values⁵	<p>A highly contentious issue concerning the role of cultural values in the selection and management of Ramsar sites. The cultural importance of Ramsar and other wetlands has long been recognised and was again reinforced at CoP8. However, more explicit proposals to select Ramsar sites on the basis of their cultural and socio-economic values have emerged.</p> <p>Contracting Parties broadly fell into two divergent groups on the issue of setting additional guidelines and criteria for these values. Developing countries especially were much in favour, arguing that additional criteria are essential for designating sites, whilst many more developed countries were hostile to the development of socio-economic and cultural criteria, arguing that granting such criteria equal status with scientific and ecological criteria would jeopardize the Convention's implementation and exceed its scope.</p> <p>Resolution VIII.19 recognizes however, that sustainable traditional uses of wetland resources have created landscapes of significant value to wetland conservation and wise use. It takes note of the Guiding Principles annexed to the Resolution and encourages Parties to consider using the Principles to conserve and enhance the cultural values of wetlands.</p> <p>The final adopted Resolution (VIII.10) instructs Ramsar's Scientific and Technical Review Panel to develop additional criteria and guidelines for the identification and designation of Ramsar sites, on the basis of socio-economic and cultural values relevant to biodiversity as listed in Annex I of the Convention on Biodiversity.</p>	<p>UK expressed considerable scepticism as to the need for and utility of guidance related to selecting and managing Ramsar sites for socio-economic and cultural values.</p> <p>Whatever the ultimate result of this debate — Ramsar's Scientific and Technical Review Panel will bring draft guidance to CoP9 for consideration in 2005 — it would seem unlikely that UK government would seek to apply these even if adopted by CoP9.</p>
iii. Management	New 'best practice' guidelines were adopted. UK ensured that the final	The implications of the Resolution are that the range of management planning

⁴ Resolution VIII.6

⁵ Resolutions VIII.19 and VIII.10

Ramsar CoP8 outcomes of particular significance for UK statutory conservation agencies

	Main elements	Implications for UK statutory agencies
planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands	Resolution recognised that other management planning processes exist, especially where other designations apply to the same areas that are listed as Ramsar sites, and that these may be valid alternatives for delivering management planning where such approaches adequately and fully implement clearly stated conservation objectives to ensure the conservation and wise use of these wetlands.	practises at Ramsar sites in the UK are now considered valid approaches as long as these deliver the favourable conservation status of these sites according to clearly stated conservation objectives.
iv. Invasive species in wetlands⁶	Resolution stresses the impact of invasive and non-native species as one of the primary threats to global biodiversity - especially on islands. Cross-reference made to the utility of guidance from other Conventions (especially the CBD Guiding Principles ⁷) to address the problems posed by invasive alien species.	The Resolution gives a new obligation to report on the presence of invasive species in wetlands. For the UK this can largely be delivered via interrogation of UK level data and information sources (e.g. BSBI's <i>Millennium Flora</i> and the WeBS waterbird database). JNCC will present a discussion paper on options to the April UK Ramsar Committee. Note that UK implementation of CBD Decision VI.23 (April 2002) also gives reporting requirements for alien species. An audit of invasive species on the UK Ramsar network would deliver this need also. Where invasive species impact directly on Ramsar site qualifying interests (e.g. Hedgehogs on North and South Uist Machair and Islands Ramsar sites), formal reporting of these impacts and remedial measures under Article 3.2 of the Convention are necessary.
v. Improving the implementation of the Strategic Framework and Vision for the Ramsar list⁸	Contracting Parties encouraged to renew efforts to take a more strategic approach in the establishment of coherent national networks of Ramsar sites (as agreed in 1999: <i>Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the Ramsar List</i>). The EU stressed that it has a substantial body of binding legislation that already aims to deliver broad outcomes that are compatible with Ramsar aims. Fulfilling obligations under EU legislation is a substantial contribution towards Ramsar objectives: for example under the Birds and Habitats Directives and	The UK has already commenced its strategic review of the Ramsar site series and Defra has established a formal Steering Group to oversee this process which will include the update of all Ramsar information sheets and maps, and culminate in the provision of a report with the data to COP9 in 2005. This is a significant piece of work and is being led by Defra, with support from JNCC and the Country Agencies.

⁶ Resolution VIII.18

⁷ Convention on Biological Diversity Decision VI.23: Alien species that threaten ecosystems, habitats or species

⁸ Resolution VIII.10

Ramsar CoP8 outcomes of particular significance for UK statutory conservation agencies

	Main elements	Implications for UK statutory agencies
	<p>the Water Framework Directive in particular. The EU highlighted the need for dialogue with the Convention regarding compatibility of definitions, concepts, advice and guidance to enable synergistic approaches.</p> <p>Resolution additionally requires the Ramsar's Scientific and Technical Review Panel to undertake a fundamental review of the Convention's information needs and report back to CoP9.</p>	
<p>vi. <i>Agriculture, wetlands and water resource management</i>⁹</p>	<p>A Resolution co-sponsored by the UK which proved very contentious — especially in parts of the world <i>without</i> long-established cultural landscapes (where agriculture of any type is seen as a primary threat to biodiversity). After lengthy debate the Resolution was adopted by consensus. Contracting Parties are urged to identify and enhance positive incentives for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, including sustainable agricultural systems related to these wetlands and to identify, when reviewing agricultural policies, possible subsidies or incentives that may have negative impacts on water resources and wetlands.</p> <p>The Resolution also requests Parties to ensure that activities and measures for conservation do not result in agricultural policies that are inconsistent with trade-related agreements — a major concern of developing countries that conservation support mechanisms, such as agri-environment measures, are not used as hidden protectionism.</p>	<p>The strong UK sponsorship of this Resolution is of significant note in the context of current statutory agency discussions with HMG regarding reform of agricultural policies (at least in wetland-related contexts).</p>

⁹ Resolution VIII.34