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Waterbirds around the world

A global overview of the conservation,
management and research of the
world's waterbird flyways

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Cover photography: Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* arriving at Martin Mere, England. Photo: Paul Marshall.
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Address by Cees Veerman, The Netherlands' Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality

Sunday 4 April 2004

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Ladies and gentlemen, recently, on a farm in Southwestern France, I heard the high-pitched wail of dozens of Common Cranes as they made their way, far up in the early spring sky, from their wintering sites in North Africa to their Siberian breeding grounds.

As I watched the birds fly steadily North, I stood once again in awe about the unfathomable phenomenon of bird migration. What makes these birds fly thousands of miles along well-defined routes, using the same wetlands as stop-over points for many decades? What moves the Arctic Tern each year to make the 35 000 kilometer round trip from the Arctic to the South Pole and back?

As we gaze deeper and deeper into the Universe, observing galaxies and stars billions of miles away, we haven't even begun to understand the mechanisms that cause bird migration. That is a humbling thought, teaching us profound respect not only for the tiny Arctic Tern on its epic annual journey, but for nature as a whole.

Over the past decades, we have witnessed a remarkable shift in the relationship between nature and man. Even 40 years ago, mankind was ruling the roost, viewing nature as an inexhaustible wellspring of resources that man could mine as he saw fit.

At the dawn of the 21st century, much of man's self-instilled authority over all things living has evaporated. Mankind has learned to see itself not as nature's supreme ruler, but as part of it. A vulnerable part, for there are limits to the extent that we can exploit our natural resources. If we exceed those limits, we now understand, our very existence on this planet may well be in jeopardy. We have discovered the principle of sustainability.

So we have a duty to take care of nature in all its richness and variety. For in my view, taking care of nature equals taking care of mankind itself. If you think this sounds as if I'm talking about nature conservation as an act of self-interest, you are partly right. But taking care of our natural environment is also an intrinsic duty. We are, after all, responsible for husbanding the resources that have been entrusted to us.

This is where biodiversity kicks in. Preserving and protecting it is of the utmost importance, because it is the measure of the richness and variety I was talking about only a minute ago. And it is well understood these days that the richness and variety of nature is the very cornerstone of it. Without biodiversity, our natural environment would not be functioning, or at least not be functioning that well.

Preserving and protecting biodiversity is the common responsibility of mankind. National governments play an important role, to be sure. They may reflect, in the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the *volonté générale*, or popular will. But governments also have an important trailblazing role. They must stir up popular support for policies that may seem tough or far-fetched at first sight. This is why governments around the globe have a direct responsibility in the quest to save biodiversity.



Cees Veerman. Photo: Dougie Barnett.

However, governments cannot go it alone. We need the cooperation of international bodies, regional and local authorities, non-governmental organizations, the business world and individual citizens. Only then will we succeed in tackling the global problem of the loss of biodiversity.

The growing effort to protect migratory birds is part of the worldwide struggle to halt the loss of biodiversity. It perfectly illustrates the necessity of cooperation: it makes no sense for one single nation to protect and preserve wetlands and other staging posts if the same is not done in other countries further up and down the line.

Co-operation, I am pleased to say, has become the norm in migratory bird conservation. It is one of the pillars of the 1971 Ramsar Convention. The Bonn Convention, whose 25th anniversary we celebrate this year, is exclusively dedicated to migratory species, birds figuring prominently among them. And then there are the broader frameworks such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Millennium Goals we all agreed upon during the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

I referred earlier to the mysterious and fascinating forces that trigger bird migration. But all this mystery and fascination

should not cause a kind of awestruck paralysis. For despite our lack of understanding, there is a lot we can do to let the Common Crane, the Arctic Tern and many hundreds of other species to travel the skies unhindered.

We know, for instance, that strings of connected sanctuaries, such as wetlands, are of the utmost importance to migratory birds. In the Netherlands, creation of a National Ecological Network is one of our priorities - a long slog indeed, for work on it began in the early 1990s and is due for completion in 2018.

Work on an analogous Global Ecological Network - presumably an even longer slog - is underway. International flyways, the routes that migratory birds follow, are an important part of this network. The Dutch government strongly supports the creation of this global network and its concomitant flyways.

One Dutch initiative has ensured the protection of the East Atlantic Flyway from the vast tundra in northern Siberia to the wetlands in the Netherlands and from there on to Africa. This flyway has official status since the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement came into force in November 1999.

But we also support flyways that are far from our doorstep: we are participating in the development of the Central Asian Flyway and the Flyways of the Americas. We do this inspired by the spirit of cooperation and by a strong conviction that we carry a global, if shared, responsibility.

So far, I have been stressing preservation and protection, conspicuously avoiding the words 'sustainable use'. But since one of the objectives of this conference is the presentation of an 'update on the harvest and sustainable use of migratory waterbirds', I feel I must briefly address the issue.

Words like 'harvest' would make any true-blue environmentalist shudder. And indeed, the hunt on most migratory water birds is forever closed in the Netherlands. But I stress that we understand and respect the needs of other peoples, whose livelihoods depend, for instance, on duck and goose hunting. As I

said before, man is part of nature and that implies us making use of its 'products'. The vital point is to emphasize the sustainability of such harvesting activities.

At the outset of this talk, I spoke about the past, when man was lording it over nature. I discussed the relatively recent shift in mankind's attitude towards its fellow creatures. In conclusion, let me give one example of that changed relationship.

As you may know, my country has been seriously hit by Avian Influenza last year. There are strong suspicions of a link between bird migration and outbreaks of the disease. In the past, we might have opened the hunt on migrating birds in order to curb Avian Influenza.

Nowadays, we employ monitoring and early warning systems. Simultaneously, we are studying ways to adapt the management of our chicken and duck farms. The simile is probably inappropriate here, but this way we are killing two birds with one stone: the migratory birds fly on, while our farms are protected from Avian Influenza.

It has been a pleasure speaking to you in Edinburgh, a city 'Crowded with Genius', to quote the title of a recent book on the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century.

It has also been a pleasure for my ministry to be involved in the preparation of this important conference, in close cooperation with Her Majesty's Government, the Scottish Executive, and Wetlands International, where the idea of this conference was originally conceived.

I particularly want to thank Professor Colin Galbraith, the chair of the Conference Steering Committee, for his unstinting efforts to make this conference a success.

I wish Professor Galbraith and all other participants a fruitful conference, whose outcomes will help migratory birds, after all our fellow creatures, to continue their age-old journeys along the flyways of the world.

Thank you.



The extensive wetlands and floodplains in the Netherlands are a very important wintering area for millions of waterbirds: floodplains of the IJssel river during high water; March 2006, Gorssel. Photo: Gerard Boere.