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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 Elliot Morley MP, UK Minister for Environment and Agri-Environment

Sunday 4 April 2004

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Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an enormous pleasure to be here. Thank you to John Markland, Chairman of Scottish Natural Heritage, for extending such a warm welcome to Scotland. On behalf of the UK Government, I'd like to say that we have been delighted to play our part in the organisation of this conference and to welcome you to our shores. I'd like to extend a particular welcome to the Dutch Minister, Professor Cees Veerman.

It is quite extraordinary that this conference has attracted 456 people from 90 different countries round the world - as such it is certainly the largest assemblage of waterbird experts ever seen in the UK. When the first European Meeting on Wildfowl Conservation took place just up the coast from here, in St Andrews in 1963, there were just 81 participants from 17 countries. The increase in numbers, and the representation here from right around the world, is a real measure of how our international concern for waterbirds and their wetland habitats has grown over the last 40 years.

I must also say how especially honoured we are by the presence of some of the participants of that meeting in St. Andrew's, here today, continuing to give their support and expertise.

The UK is critically important for migratory waterbirds in the overall pattern of flyways. This is why we believe that it's vital to participate fully in the Bonn Convention and its African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement. The potential strength of that Agreement is manifested in the fact that it has no fewer than 117 Range States and is growing fast with already 46 Contracting Parties.

We were honoured to host a meeting of the Technical Committee of the African-Eurasian Waterbirds Agreement in North Berwick last week and are committed to the implementation and review of international action plans for species that are specially important to us in the UK, such as the Bittern, the Corncrake, the Roseate Tern and, - for rather different reasons, - the globally-threatened White-headed Duck which is threatened in Europe by the invasive Ruddy Duck, introduced by accident in the UK many years ago. We are implementing a strategy to deal with the Ruddy Duck, which could be seen as the opposite of conservation!

I am especially pleased that UK expertise is helping to assess the habitat priorities for waterbirds in Africa and South-East Asia, including the identification of sites of international importance, and applying restoration and rehabilitation techniques for waterbird habitats - especially those affected by invasive aquatic weeds, a big problem internationally and in the UK. In addition, funding from the UK's Darwin Initiative has been able to help develop waterbird monitoring in eastern Africa. This project stands to make major contributions to wetland and waterbird conservation in that part of the AEW region.

The Ramsar Convention is also very dear to our hearts in the UK. We have 243 Ramsar sites covering 6% of the land surface. These sites, and others of European importance, are home to



Elliot Morley MP. Photo: Dougie Barnett.

85% of our breeding seabirds, and about half of all the waterbirds over-wintering in the UK. As you will no doubt hear in some of the presentations to come, the UK has many different types of wetlands, from peatlands to estuaries, and from rivers to artificial reservoirs, and each of these habitats is important for different assemblages of waterbirds. We have examples of most of these wetland types within our national Ramsar network, and the UK is currently undertaking a strategic review to identify gaps in network coverage through a detailed audit of all the wetlands in the UK.

The designation of such sites is, of course, just the first step in ensuring their long-term wise-use. In a densely populated and highly developed country such as ours, protected areas face many habitat management challenges. In common with the Netherlands we find that our wetlands are under a whole range of threats. The precise issues may be slightly different from those in other parts of the world, but they are no less acute. The value of international conferences such as this one is the opportunity to share experiences and solutions, and so to learn from each other. I do urge you all to make the most of the opportunities presented in the next few days for such exchanges. This will undoubtedly help us all to deliver better, and more focused conservation.



Elliot Morley MP counting waterbirds on the Humber Estuary Ramsar site. Photo: Gareth Harford.

Throughout your conference, over the next few days you will hear a great deal about the problems faced by migratory waterbirds and the serious conflicts arising from human activities in many parts of the world. Amongst the most serious are of course the threats to some of our especially extraordinary and spectacular migratory seabirds - the albatrosses and petrels of the southern oceans. Only international action can help to address the issues of longline and illegal fishing, which are the principal threats to them.

So I am delighted to be able to announce today that the UK Government has just become the 6th state to ratify the Bonn Convention's Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels. Our instrument of ratification was deposited with the Australian Government on Friday 2 April. By happy coincidence the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett, was on a visit to Australia at the time and was able, during her visit, to reinforce our commitment to this treaty - the UK having played a key role in drafting the Agreement and was amongst the first to sign it. Our ratification covers the UK and three Overseas Territories - the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, and the British Antarctic Territory. We will be working hard to extend the ratification to a fourth Overseas Territory, Tristan da Cunha as soon as possible. We also look forward to participating in the first Conference of the Parties when it is convened in the coming year. Our aim, together, must be to make real changes to the fortunes of these amazing birds.

We must bring more and more people to an understanding of the challenges for biodiversity that we face. The plight of the mythical albatross connects peoples across oceans and between continents and captures the poetic imagination. But it can also generate more down-to-earth instincts! I was very interested to discover that the Conservation Foundation is working with Ladbrokes the bookmakers to help raise money for albatross research through what is called 'The Big Bird Race'. This is a serious scientific satellite tracking project based in Tasmania to find out where the Tasmanian Shy Albatrosses migrate. But it's combined with an innovative approach to betting, in which on-line clients back an albatross to win the migration race. This gives a whole new meaning to 'having a flutter'.

This idea could bring a whole new section of society to an interest in biodiversity and to research and data collection. We have come to call the mass involvement of people in research as

'citizen- science' - and the more of this we can encourage the better! Only by engaging the understanding and involvement of people at large can we hope to make the large-scale changes needed to slow the progressive loss of biodiversity worldwide. There are now many tools that we can use - with the Internet, web cams and satellite tracking - to bring these issues to a wider public.

Many of you will know what a strong tradition we have in the UK of using volunteer effort to collect biodiversity information. I'm pleased to say that I myself am a volunteer and have been involved in making low-tide counts on a monthly basis. This helps me to get out on the first Sunday in the month and talk to other enthusiasts and landowners and makes a contribution to the database. Time-series data is essential to monitor population trends and to try and establish what the influences are - and here we have had volunteers collecting data for over 50 years and there are between three and four thousand of them now who collect regularly. For example, we have discovered through our Wetland Bird Survey (or WeBS) monitoring data an early real manifestation of climate change. With increasingly mild winters, it seems that many waders and other waterbirds are not having to fly so far west to find mild winter feeding conditions. Our volunteers are discovering declines in the numbers of waterbirds on estuaries on the west coast of the UK, and commensurate increases on the east. Perhaps in the future - with climate change - these migrants will increasingly over-winter in Denmark and the Baltic. We can see these changes going on, and must consider their implications for conservation management.

I am sure that every one of you is aware of the immediacy of the challenge we face on global biodiversity loss - potentially as a result of long-term climate change - but also of course from the direct and pervasive influences that are apparent here and now. The global community has set itself the target of substantially reducing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. Conferences like this one are vital in exchanging ideas, understanding the problems and galvanising initiatives as we strive to achieve that objective. But we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that conferences themselves are a substitute for real action on the ground. I urge you, as you listen to the speakers this week, to consider how their messages can be translated into new, concerted activity that makes a real difference. It is the task of all of us, politicians, scientists and the research community and NGOs to make sure that our work engenders real conservation activity.

I hope that, - just as we look back on the first European wild-fowl conference, 40 years ago, as a key point when Governments and NGOs began to work seriously together in partnership internationally to address the conservation problems of waterbirds and wetlands - so we will reflect on this truly 'Global' Flyway Conference as a defining moment when the 2010 target came clearly into sight and became realisable.

The role of migratory waterbirds as indicators of wider ecological change is clear and important. They can be signals of broader environmental threats. Let us make sure that our data is robust and our actions are effective to serve the wider biodiversity community and, most importantly, the people we represent.

Whilst it is absolutely essential for national governments to make decisions in their own national contexts, they must not forget that action in one country impacts on conservation in another. It is wonderful to see so many countries gathered here, so I wish you a very successful conference - one that will help and guide our decision-making.