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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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Part 2.

Plenary papers





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Kenton D. Wohl

2.0 Plenary presentations. Introduction

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Stroud, D.A. 2006. Plenary presentations. Introduction. *Waterbirds around the world*. Eds. G.C. Boere, C.A. Galbraith & D.A. Stroud. The Stationery Office, Edinburgh, UK. pp. 50-51.



Throughout the world, much monitoring and surveillance of waterbirds is undertaken by amateur birdwatchers, with financial support of co-ordination provided by governments or state institutions. This has proved to be an extremely cost-effective model. The maintenance of such annual monitoring programmes is of critical importance to give conservation managers the data and information they need to respond to a rapidly changing world. Photo: Meinte Engelmoer.

The plenary presentations gave time to review the major themes that would be touched on throughout the conference programme. The topics covered in the plenaries were all subject to further discussion in the programme of parallel workshops. These gave the opportunity to further discussion of the issues involved.

One strand of the conference programme related to geographical regions and was structured around the world's main waterbird flyway systems. The presentations by Schmidt (2.2, Americas), Davidson & Stroud (2.3, Africa and western Eurasia) and Mundkur (2.5, East Asia and Australasia) provided contrasting reviews of knowledge and conservation activity of these flyways. Of particular note was the contrasting periods during which formal (and informal) international conservation structures have been in place in different parts of the world in order to support and encourage waterbird conservation (a theme further elaborated upon by Kuijken - 2.1). Thus, whilst the 1916 Convention for the Protection of Migratory Birds provided the early and initial stimulus for international co-oper-

ation between the two countries of Canada and USA, structures for international co-operation have only more recently been established in other parts of the world, most recently in the Neotropics through the informal Western Hemisphere Migratory Species Initiative. Whilst formal multilateral inter-governmental conservation treaties have still to be established in some regions, Schmidt and Mundkur both outlined the bilateral treaties involving USA, Russia, Japan and Australia in the East Asia-Australasian flyway. The development of the Agreement on the conservation of migratory African-Eurasian Waterbirds (AEWA) potentially includes 117 countries, and is the most ambitious multilateral treaty related to waterbirds yet to be developed (Lenten, 3.7.1).

Finlayson and colleagues (2.6) gave a stark assessment of the range and complexity of the potential impacts of changing climate on waterbirds and their wetland habitats. Evidence for these impacts is increasingly becoming apparent. Many such effects are predicted first to impact upon arctic environments,

and Wohl (2.10) summarised the global significance of this region as the ultimate source of most waterbird flyways, outlining also several recent initiatives to develop pan-arctic environmental co-operation.

The conservation of seabirds, especially whilst they are on the high seas, is an issue of major recent conservation concern. Indeed, nearly all the world's albatross species are now listed as globally threatened. Cooper (2.9) outlined the main approaches being undertaken to address these problems so as to reverse current negative trends.

The impact of fisheries on albatrosses is an example of bycatch or an unintentional harvest. Kanstrup (2.7) reviewed the other deliberate harvests of waterbirds and the basis through which some of these might be made more sustainable.

The critical role of science in understanding and deriving solutions for conservation issues was outlined by Piersma (2.4), and Lank & Nebel (2.8). They stressed the need for evidence-based approaches to the development and implementation of conservation policy.

Considering the wide range of material presented by the plenary speakers, it is clear that recent decades have given waterbird conservationists a wide range of tools with which to address

issues and problems. These range from formal inter-governmental treaties, to practical conservation responses such as species action plans (section 4.1), management planning processes to maintain the ecological character of protected areas, as well as wider-scale catchment/water-basin management planning, Integrated Coastal Zone Management and other land-use policies (5.4).

Despite the existence of these tools (notably the wide range of guidances and handbooks developed and published by international conventions such as Ramsar, AEWA and the Convention on Biological Diversity, waterbirds populations and the ecological quality of the wetlands on which they depend continue to decline markedly throughout most of the world. This is a reflection of the massive, unsustainable environmental impacts generated by increasing human populations and their economic demands.

Important though current responses are, the stark findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005 stress the urgent need for conservation responses to be urgently pro-active in engaging with the primary drivers of environmental degradation. This will take committed waterbird conservationists into increasingly unfamiliar territories.



Seasonal wetlands, such as the floodplain of East Alligator River, Kakadu, Australia are important habitats for many waterbirds. Photo: Nick Davidson.