

Briefing Note

The Ramsar Convention

02 July 2010

Introduction

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, also known as the Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty providing the framework for national action and international cooperation in the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. This convention was originally intended to protect waterbird habitats but has now expanded in scope to include all wetland biodiversity.

Brought about by countries and non-governmental organizations concerned by the loss and degradation of wetland habitat for migratory waterbirds. It is the only global environmental treaty that deals with a particular ecosystem, and the Convention's member countries cover all geographic regions of the planet.

Australia signed up to the Convention in 1974 by being the first State to deposit an instrument of accession to the Convention. Australia now has the third highest number of and eighth highest area of Ramsar sights of the 160 members.

What is the Ramsar Convention

The Ramsar Convention was first signed by representatives from 18 nations in Ramsar, Iran in 1971 but did not come into force until December 1975 when the seventh instrument of accession was received.

Eligible countries acceding to the Convention forward their instrument of accession (an act by which a State signifies its agreement to be legally bound by the terms of a particular treaty), signed by the head of state or government or the foreign office, to the Director General of UNESCO¹. They then must designate their first Wetland of International Importance with suitable information including a map identifying its boundaries.

Article 9.2 of the Convention on Wetlands states *“Any member of the United Nations or of one of the Specialized Agencies or of the International Atomic Energy Agency or Party to the Statute of the International Court of Justice may become a Party to this Convention”*².

By joining the Convention, countries signal a commitment to work actively to support the “three pillars” of the Convention. These three pillars are:

- 1) ensuring the conservation and wise use of wetlands it has designated as Wetlands of International Importance;

¹ UNESCO serves as the depositary for the Ramsar Convention but has no other institutional role in the Convention's governance or legal affiliations.

² Page 15 of Ramsar Convention Manual, 4th Edition

2) the further identification, designation and management of sites for the List of International Importance, contributing to a global ecological network; and

3) consulting with other Parties about implementation of the Convention, especially in regard to transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, and shared species.

There are presently 160 Contracting Parties, listing 1890 Wetlands of International Importance covering an area of 185,450,731 hectares. Every three years a Conference of the Contracting Parties meets to adopt resolutions and make recommendations for administering the work of the Convention. The last meeting was held in Changwon, Republic of Korea in November 2008.

Ramsar Mission

The Convention's mission is *"the conservation and wise-use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world"*³.

The definition of what constitutes a wetland in the Conventions mission is quite broad and includes:

- lakes
- rivers
- wet grasslands
- peatlands
- swamps
- marshes
- estuaries
- deltas
- coral reefs
- mangroves
- tidal flats
- as well as man-made sites (fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs, and salt pans)

Defining Wise-Use

Within the Ramsar philosophy is the "wise use" concept.

*"Wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development"*⁴.

The new concept replaced the original definition.

³ The Ramsar Convention Manual, 4th Edition

⁴ Page 49 – The Ramsar Convention Manual, 4th Edition

“The wise use of wetlands is their sustainable utilization of wetlands for the benefit of mankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem”.

The main focus remains on the environment, but now the purpose for their existence is not for the benefit of mankind, rather existing within sustainable development.

Australia’s Involvement

Apart from being the first State to sign up to the Convention in 1974, Australia now has the third highest number of and eighth highest area of Ramsar sights of the 160 member countries.

| By Number of Sites | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------|
| Member | Since | Sites | Area |
| United Kingdom | 05.05.76 | 168 | 1,274,323 |
| Mexico | 04.11.86 | 114 | 8,190,991 |
| Australia | 21.12.75 | 65 | 7,510,177 |
| Spain | 04.09.82 | 63 | 281,768 |
| Sweden | 21.12.75 | 51 | 514,675 |

| By Area of listed Sites | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------|
| Member | Since | Sites | Area |
| Canada | 15.05.81 | 37 | 13,066,675 |
| Chad | 13.10.90 | 6 | 12,405,068 |
| Russian Federation | 11.02.77 | 35 | 10,323,767 |
| Congo | 18.10.98 | 7 | 8,454,259 |
| Mexico | 04.11.86 | 114 | 8,190,991 |
| Sudan | 07.05.05 | 4 | 8,189,600 |
| Bolivia | 27.10.90 | 8 | 7,894,472 |
| Australia | 21.12.75 | 65 | 7,510,177 |
| Democratic Republic of Congo | 18.05.96 | 3 | 7,435,624 |

| | | | |
|------------|----------|---|-----------|
| Kazakhstan | 02.05.07 | 7 | 6,626,768 |
|------------|----------|---|-----------|

Ramsar Sites in NSW

In NSW, there are 12 Ramsar sites, with the latest one (Paroo River Wetlands) being added in 2007.

| Ramsar site in NSW | Date Listed | Location |
|----------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Blue Lake | 1996 | Kosciuszko National Park, Snowy Mountains |
| Fivebough and Tuckerbil wetlands | 2002 | Crown lands near Leeton |
| Gwydir wetlands | 1999 | Four private properties near Moree |
| Hunter Estuary wetlands | 1984 | Kooragang Nature Reserve and Shortland Wetlands (The Wetlands Centre, private land), near Newcastle |
| Lake Pinaroo | 1996 | Sturt National Park near Tibooburra |
| Little Llangothlin Lagoon | 1996 | Little Llangothlin Nature Reserve near Glen Innes |
| Macquarie Marshes | 1986 | Macquarie Marshes Nature Reserve and Wilgara Wetlands (private land) near Quambone |
| Myall Lakes | 1999 | Myall Lakes National Park near Forster |
| Narran Lake | 1999 | Narran Lake Nature Reserve near Narrabri |
| NSW Central Murray state forests | 2003 | State forests near Deniliquin |
| Paroo River Wetlands | 2007 | Nocoleche Nature Reserve and Paroo Darling National Park |
| Towra Point | 1984 | Towra Point Nature Reserve near Botany Bay |

* Information from NSW Environment, Climate Change & Water website

Ramsar Sites in Other States

There are a total of 65 Ramsar sites in Australia, distributed as follows:

Western Australia – 12

New South Wales – 12

Victoria – 11
Tasmania – 10
South Australia – 5
Queensland – 5
Northern Territory – 3
ACT – 1
External – 6

Comparison of Performance with other Contracting Parties

At present there is no “comparison” of one Contracting Parties sites or performance against protecting those sites with what other Contracting Parties are undertaking. Comparisons if undertaken are usually associated with comparing policies and processes used by other countries to implement the Convention in the context of their respective domestic circumstances.

Reviewing notes from the last meeting of Ramsar, there are some items which give evidence to a difference in the level of work between done by various Contracting Parties.

As part of joining Ramsar, Contracting Parties commit themselves to provide an updated Ramsar Information Sheet for all their sites at least every six years or when there has been a significant change to a sites ecological character.

Notes from Ramsar⁵

*“CONCERNED that for **1,057 Ramsar sites (58% of all Ramsar sites) in 123 countries** (see Annex 1 to this Resolution), Ramsar Information Sheets (RISs) or adequate maps have not been provided or updated RISs and maps have not been supplied to the Secretariat for more than six years, so that information on the current status of these sites is not available”*

Australia appears on this list however there is no specific explanation as to why or what is missing.

“CONGRATULATES⁶ Contracting Parties for their reports and their statements made to the Secretariat or at this meeting concerning site-specific ecological character and boundary issues, notably”

- a) *the government of Australia for information concerning measures to recover and deliver increased environmental flows to six Ramsar sites along the River Murray to meet the environmental objectives for these six sites: Riverland, New South Wales Central Murray State Forests, Barmah Forest, Gunbower Forest, Hattah-Kulkyne Lakes, and The Coorong & Lakes Alexandrina and Albert;*

There were only eight “Congratulates” notes listed, of which Australia was one.

The Montreux Record⁷

⁵ Information from 10th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Wetlands – Resolution X.13.

⁶ Page 5 of the Ramsar COP10 Resolution X.13

The Montreux Record, first formulated in Montreux, Switzerland in July 1990 is a record of Ramsar sites where "if the ecological character of any wetland in (their) territory and included in the List has changed, is changing, or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference".

There are presently 51 sites listed on the Montreux Record from 29 Contracting Parties. Many of these have been on this list since the record was created (1990) or were added in the early 90's.

Since inception, a total of 32 sites have been removed from the list, with only one being re-added to it. At no time has Australia been on this list.

However, Australia does appear on the "List of Ramsar sites in which human-induced negative changes have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur (Article 3.2), as indicated in COP10 National Reports."

Australia lists the Coorong and Lakes Alexandria and Albert as well as the Gwydir Wetlands under this list.

"RECOGNIZING⁸ the submission of Article 3.2 reports by the governments of 18 Contracting Parties concerning 22 Ramsar sites:"

- *Australia for its October 2008 updated notification concerning the status of the Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar site and the measures and studies being implemented to address the effects of severe water shortage in that site"*

"RECOMMENDS⁹, pursuant to Articles 6.2 (d) and 8.2 (e), the following with respect to alterations to the List or changes in the ecological character of specific Ramsar sites and other wetlands listed in the Report of the Secretary General to this Conference:

- xiv) *that the government of Australia continue to provide the Secretary General with updates on actions underway to manage the effects of severe water shortages in the Coorong and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert Ramsar site and consider the appropriateness of proposing this site for inclusion on the Montreux Record"*

What is Australia doing now?

Discussion with an Ian Krebs, Assistant Director, Wetlands Section DEWHA gave some insight into what Australia is presently doing.

Australia has undertaken to implement a Rolling Review on the status of Australia's Ramsar sites. This will be done to provide targeted information, based on Ecological Character Descriptions, assessing threats to the ecological character of Australia's Ramsar sites.

⁷

http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-montreux-montreux-record/main/ramsar/1-31-118%5E20972_4000_0_#remove

⁸ Page 3 of the Ramsar COP10 Resolution X.13

⁹ Page 8 of the Ramsar COP10 Resolution X.13

- Allow investments to be targeted to imminent threats;
- Provide benchmark and ongoing data to support monitoring and evaluation;
- Help fulfil Australia's Ramsar obligations;
- Support effective implementation of EPBC Act.

Ian advised the first stage of implementing the Rolling Review has commenced with the commissioning by the Australian Government of consultants to develop site specific status forms for the 65 Ramsar sites and to pilot the Rolling Review at 20 of these sites across Australia. The 20 were not identified.

Listing of new sites

The Australian Government largely relies on State and Territory governments to suggest new nominations to the Ramsar List as the States and Territories are the responsible land managers.

Under the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council (NRMMC) there are a number of actions are currently being looked at which will guide future development of the Australian approach to new nominations. One such action is the development of a framework to identify High Conservation Aquatic Ecosystems.

There is guidance provided by the Ramsar Convention on this issue (Strategic Framework and guidelines for the future development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance of the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971).

Available for viewing here: http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-guidelines-strategic-framework-and/main/ramsar/1-31-105%5E20823_4000_0

Questions

Are we doing more than other similarly sized countries?

Is Australia being too ambitious with so many small sites spread over such a vast dry continent?

Australia is the largest of the top 10 countries with the most Wetland sites.

Can we afford to balance all of these in the context of “sustainable development”?

Under the Conventions definition, some members of NSWIC operate wetlands. Rice paddies and reservoirs, should they be protected and guaranteed water?