Book - Unit 2 - Major components of the Ramsar Convention

Site: UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION PORTAL ON MULTILATERAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENTS
Course: Introductory Course to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands
Book: Book - Unit 2 - Major components of the Ramsar Convention
Table of contents

1. Definitions and wetlands types
2. Purpose and mission
3. Site Designation - The Ramsar List
4. Other obligations
5. National Implementation
6. Institutional arrangements
7. The Montreux Record
1. Definitions and wetlands types

Article 1 of Ramsar Convention defines “Wetlands” as “…areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters.”

Another relevant term is wise use, that has been defined as the sustainable utilization of wetlands for the benefit of human kind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem.

The Convention Manual states that five major wetland types are generally recognized:

- Marine: coastal wetlands including coastal lagoons, rocky shores and coral reefs
- Estuarine: including deltas, tidal marshes and mangrove swamps
- Lacustrine: wetlands associated with lakes
- Riverine: wetlands along rivers and streams
- Palustrine: meaning “marshy” - marshes, swamps and bogs
2. Purpose and mission

The purpose of the 1971 Ramsar Convention is to stop the loss of wetlands and to promote their conservation and wise use as a means to achieving sustainable development. Later on, the mission of the Ramsar Convention was more particularly identified as “the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution to achieving sustainable development throughout the world.”
3. Site Designation - The Ramsar List

Each state party shall designate at least one wetland for inclusion in a List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar List) and ensure the maintenance of the ecological character of each Ramsar site (article 2(1)). Wetlands should be selected for the List on account of their international biological, ecological, botanical or hydrological significance (article 2(2)). Countries are expected to include in the List as many wetlands as possible.

In case of urgent national interests, a state may also delete a wetland from the list or restrict its boundaries. The state then should compensate, however, for the loss by creating additional nature reserves for waterfowl either in the same area or elsewhere. The Convention classifies wetlands in three categories: Marine and Coastal, Inland and Human-made Wetlands.

The inclusion of a site on the list does not prejudice the sovereign rights of the territorial state. However, the state must conserve, manage and use wisely the listed wetlands and migratory stocks of waterfowl (article 2(6)).
4. Other obligations

Parties further commit themselves to include wetland conservation within their national land-use planning, with the purpose of promoting the wise use of all wetlands within their territory. Parties are obliged to establish nature reserves, whether they are listed or not, and to endeavour to increase waterfowl populations (article 4). Furthermore, they are obliged to report to the Ramsar Bureau on the status of their listed wetlands (article 3).

The Convention also provides for cooperation between state parties. Parties must consult with each other in implementing the Convention, especially where a wetland extends across the territories of more than one state.

Parties are encouraged to establish National Wetland Committees referred to as Ramsar Committees, involving all relevant government institutions at central and state level dealing with water resources, development planning, protected areas, etcetera. NGO participation is also actively encouraged.
5. National Implementation

The Convention does not place specific obligations on state parties to enact legislation to protect wetlands. However, the requirement to designate at least one wetland upon signing the Convention, together with the obligation under article 3 to “formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of wetlands included in the List and as far as possible the wise use of wetlands in their territory” implies a strong need to ensure that a domestic scheme of legislative protection is necessary.
6. Institutional arrangements

In 1987, an amending protocol established a Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) as a primary Ramsar Convention institution. The COP adopted some a number of decisions to give greater precision to the definition of wetlands and to standardize the information form to describe the designated sites.

The COP meets every three years and approves resolutions, recommendations and technical guidelines to further the application of the Convention. The Standing Committee includes Regional Representatives of Ramsar geographical regions and meets annually. A Scientific and Technical Review Panel provides guidance on key issues related to the application of the Convention.

The Secretariat shares headquarters with the World Conservation Union/IUCN in Switzerland, and coordinates the day-to-day activities of the Convention. It also administers the annual budget. Each party contributes a percentage related to its contribution of the United Nations budget. In addition, many countries and other donors make contributions to special Ramsar Secretariat projects.
7. The Montreaux Record

An additional special register, called the Montreux Record, was established to identify Ramsar sites facing problems related to the maintenance of their ecological character. The COP further established a fund in 1990, now known as the Ramsar Small Grants Fund for Wetland Conservation and Wise Use, which provides financial support for wetlands conservation activities.