

Wetland Science and Wetland Culture - Evolutions in the Ramsar Convention

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When the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands was signed forty-six years ago, the text of the treaty explicitly recognised the interconnected importance of ecology, economics and culture. Major investments have been made by Ramsar in scientific research and in techniques for economic valuation, but the cultural aspects of wetlands, or at least institutional attention to them, have taken longer to receive focused attention.

In recent years, however, this has changed markedly, not only with specific initiatives on culture, but also with the growth of a broader approach to forms of evidence, knowledge and understanding. This approach seeks to integrate traditional and indigenous wisdom and contemporary social science along with research on ecology and hydrology.

In 2002 and 2005, the Conference of Parties adopted two Resolutions on culture that address (*inter alia*) collaboration issues, rights issues, and the role of cultural values in wetland management and site designation. A list of 27 guiding principles was provided. A major guidance document was then produced by a Working Group in 2008.

The two main enduring Ramsar obligations are the wise use (or sustainable use) of all wetlands, and the conservation of listed sites. Those were once rather distinct ideas, but their respective interpretations have progressively converged, so they are both now defined in terms of “maintaining the ecological character” of wetlands. The definition of ecological character was changed to include the ecosystem services of the wetland, and ecosystem services include cultural services. So all Ramsar Parties are formally obliged to maintain cultural ecosystem services of wetlands. Research, assessment and documentation of such services (e.g., in wetland inventories, and on datasheets for Ramsar Sites) therefore need to address this dimension.

Many wetlands have great cultural significance, but sometimes this is just a matter of coincidence. For example, a site may be sacred because a saint was born there or a temple was built there, yet it also happens to be a wetland. With the cultural services idea, however, there is the added element of a necessary and intimate link with the functioning of the ecosystem. Examples of this include mythologies about the seasonality of the water regime, traditional uses of the wetland products, and reflections of the special aesthetic of these environments in contemporary art.

This is, in general, a two-way relationship: wetlands support culture, but culture also supports wetlands. Traditional sustainable management practices, protection afforded by religious taboos, and specialist knowledge and skills

passed on through social customs that are not text based, are some examples of this.

The Convention’s Scientific & Technical Review Panel (in which SWS is represented as an observer organisation) has a work programme which now includes tasks that embrace these issues in, for example, assessing the status and trends of wetlands worldwide, updating guidance on wetland management, and enhancing tools for evaluating wetland ecosystem services.

The current Strategic Plan for the Convention contains a target which mirrors Target 18 in the global Strategic Plan for Biodiversity concerning the documentation and integration of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities. Technical collaboration between Conventions is going to be helpful in operating indicators to measure progress towards achievement of this target.

Work on these subjects is supported by the Ramsar Culture Network - an expanding community of interest which includes both individuals and institutions and covers all regions of the world. The Network already includes a number of SWS members, and it remains open to any others who wish to join – details can be found at <http://www.ramsar.org/activity/ramsar-culture-network>. Project activities and Secretariat capacity have been generously part-funded until 2018 by the MAVA Foundation.

The scope for collaboration with the SWS on these issues is growing, and we look forward to further dialogue in the months ahead. Meanwhile look for a session on culture and wetlands to be presented by Ramsar contributors in the SWS webinar series in June of this year, where more will be revealed, and your thoughts and questions will be invited! ■

Attention Readers: *An excellent example of wetland culture can be found in South Sudan where the Sudd, perhaps the largest wetland complex in the Nile Basin (reportedly second in size in the world, behind South America’s Pantanal) and a designated Ramsar wetland, is vital to local peoples. An excellent UNEP report about the Sudd and human relations - The Economic, Cultural and Ecosystem Values of the Sudd Wetland in South Sudan: An Evolutionary Approach to Environment and Development - can be found at: https://evolution-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/20160913_ei_south-sudan_low-res.pdf. Several high-quality photographs by Yann Arthus Bertrand showing how people live among the wetlands can be viewed at: <http://blog.gessato.com/2012/08/24/wetlands-of-sudd-in-southern-sudan/>.*

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