

## Heiligenhafen and the Wetland Convention

At the invitation of the Federal Minister of Food, Agriculture and Forestry of West Germany an International Conference on the Conservation of Wetlands and Waterfowl was held at Heiligenhafen, on the Baltic coast, 2nd–6th December 1974. The Minister himself opened the Conference.

This was the fifth in a series of such Conferences at governmental level; in 1963 at St. Andrews, Scotland; in 1966 at Noordwijk, the Netherlands; in 1968 at Leningrad, USSR; in 1971 at Ramsar, Iran. They have been growing in size, representativeness and importance. At Ramsar there were 70 governmental delegates or observers from 23 countries, together with representatives of 8 international organizations. At Heiligenhafen there were twice as many participants, while 39 countries and 10 international organizations were represented. Accredited governmental delegates came from Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Greece, Iceland, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Mali, Mauritania, Netherlands, Niger, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Senegal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Zambia. Observers attended for Czechoslovakia, Japan, Kenya, Portugal and Yugoslavia. In addition, written reports were received from Ethiopia, India, Israel and Madagascar. The interest evinced by the countries of Asia and Africa was especially welcome since they contain many great wetlands in near-pristine condition and can learn in time from European mistakes that have led to so much destruction of wetland habitats.

The Conference was well housed in a complex of multi-storey holiday apartments built, fittingly perhaps, on land 'reclaimed' from the coastal marsh. However a small area was preserved nearby as a waterfowl sanctuary and was visited by the participants. The basic local facilities for the Conference were organized by the Federal Institute of Vegetation Research, Nature Conservation and Landscape Management, whose Dr W. Erz was President of the Conference. Vice-Presidents were Dr I. Maximov, USSR, and Prof A. A. Haapanen, Finland. Sir Peter Scott was Chairman of the Drafting Committee, responsible for the texts of the recommendations and the conference report. The International Waterfowl Research Bureau (IWRB) had called the Conference together,

solicited the national reports and technical papers, carried out all the subsequent processing of recommendations, issuing the Report and, finally, publishing the printed Proceedings. Its Director, Prof G. V. T. Matthews, was Rapporteur-General of the Conference.

### The National Reports

Thirty-five written National Reports were circulated before or at the Conference, containing an immense amount of information. Developments, good and bad, concerning the wetlands and the waterfowl populations of each country were set out for international inspection, this being one of the main aims of the Conference. As each country formally presented its report its delegates could be questioned by those from other countries. Thus the United Kingdom was congratulated on the abandonment of plans to site the Third London Airport at Foulness and to industrialize the River Medway, Kent, (subject of a Recommendation at the Ramsar Conference). The improvement of the River Thames in London (later illustrated in a lecture by Dr J. G. Harrison) gave rise to a commendatory Recommendation. However the Icelandic delegate sharply criticized the proposal to designate Pink-footed and Greylag Geese as 'pest' species in six counties of central Scotland. This would have enabled them to be killed at any time of year and, in particular, would strike a blow at international efforts to abolish shooting in the spring when the pairing up process had already begun. A Recommendation was forwarded to the Secretary of State for Scotland, urging that the proposed Order be reconsidered. It is heartening to report that the Order was not confirmed and geese in Scotland remain quarry species, properly protected by a close season.

As the national reports unfolded, other Recommendations were made for the conservation of wetlands in various countries. They concerned the lower Elbe; the Haseldorf and Wedel marshes in Schleswig-Holstein; the Riselfelder near Münster, North Rhine-Westphalia; Riddag-hausen-Weddeler Teiche, Lower Saxony; wetlands in Italy; the Dollart area on the Dutch and German North Sea coasts; the Senegal Valley in West Africa. The need for regional cooperation in such conservation measures was also stressed.

There were many tales of wetlands lost since the Ramsar Conference. It is difficult to

overstress the urgency of wetland conservation. Of all habitats this is one of the most fragile; easily disrupted and eliminated by modern technology. And with the vanishing wetlands go the plants and animals which depend on them, including our especial interest, the waterfowl.

### The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

At Ramsar the text of a 'Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat' was agreed (see *Wildfowl* 22: 123-5). This would bind Contracting Parties to behave in a responsible way towards their wetlands in general. In particular a List of wetlands would be named and set aside to be conserved as an international responsibility. The necessary translation of the text into French, German and Russian, along with bureaucratic procedure, meant that it was not opened for signature at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris until July 1972. When the Heiligenhafen Conference was being called together only seven countries had signed the Convention as token of their intention to adhere to its principles. In many cases this was with reservation as to ratification, i.e. the legislative bodies of the country had to be given a final say before it became a Contracting Party. This is also a slow, bureaucratic process. Time, and wetlands, were slipping away. One of the main functions of Heiligenhafen was, therefore, to increase the number of countries signing the Convention, and especially to reach the required seven Contracting Parties needed to trigger it into action.

In this respect there was a fair measure of success. Our West German hosts signed a few days before the Conference, and Sweden while it was actually in session. Italy, Ireland, South Africa and Belgium followed soon after. Table 1 sets out the situation as of August, 1975. Even more important, the ratification of its signature by Greece triggered the Convention into action and its provisions came into play four months after this event, on 21 December 1975.

Many wetlands have been nominated by the Contracting Parties for conservation before the eyes of the international community. The fact that a country has only designated a few wetlands in no way prevents the addition of others at a later date.

Thus the first Convention in history to restrict the land-use of the signatory countries has been effected after 13 years of effort, particularly by the IWRB. The 'continuing

**Table 1. The sequence in which countries indicated their intention to adhere to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands**

Country	Signed Convention	Became Contracting Party
Iran	25.8.72	3.3.75
Finland	19.4.73	28.5.74
UK	6.9.73	
USSR	13.2.74	
Switzerland	21.2.74	
Australia	8.5.74	8.5.74
Norway	9.7.74	9.7.74
West Germany	28.11.74	
Sweden	5.12.74	5.12.74
Italy	10.1.75	
Ireland	10.2.75	
South Africa	10.3.75	10.3.75
Belgium	19.3.75	
Netherlands	7.7.75	
Greece	21.8.75	21.8.75

bureau duties' will now be undertaken by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), at its headquarters in Morges, Switzerland.

It is said that the international conservationist should have a notice permanently on his desk saying 'How many hectares of habitat have you conserved today?'. Too often the answer is 'none', but on the day the Ramsar Convention was triggered perhaps we could say '1,900,000'. But there must be no resting on laurels. That may look a vast area but it is only a tiny fraction of the important wetlands at risk. More and more countries must be brought in as Contracting Parties and the existing ones which have nominated but a few wetlands must be cajoled into increasing their lists to more than a token length and area.

### The Technical Sessions

Aside from the exchange of information on the wetland situation between the various countries, and bringing pressure to bear on governments to take proper conservation measures, the Conferences also present technical papers to provide a proper, scientific basis for such conservation.

The International Biological Programme (IBP) had recently been wound up after a decade of intense activity that not only advanced our knowledge but was a great force

for international co-operation across boundaries of national and ideological differences. It was therefore entirely appropriate that the technical sessions should start with contributions from IBP, drawing attention to the high biological productivity of wetland ecosystems. This is an urgent message for the administrator and planner—that we do not seek to conserve wetlands just for sentiment, but because they are tremendously important, integral parts of the whole environment, to be destroyed at our ultimate peril.

However, detailed assessment of biological productivity is a lengthy, painstaking procedure. A wetland might well be destroyed by the 'advance' of technological civilization before its value was established. Attention has therefore been focused by the IWRB on the waterfowl as indicators, by their usage and numbers, of the richness of the habitat. Two key papers surveyed the numerical distribution of ducks, geese, swans and coots (G. L. Atkinson-Willes of the Wildfowl Trust) and waders (A. J. Prater of the British Trust for Ornithology). This could be done in very considerable detail for Europe and part of Asia. The picture for Africa had to be painted with broader strokes, but, nevertheless, it is vastly more complete than it was a few years previously.

Further communications were made on the determination of the relative importance of wetlands and on progress being made on their registration by the IUCN. A Committee was appointed, under the Chairmanship of Sir Hugh Elliott, to draw up criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance. These are set out in Appendix I, and will help administrators in deciding which of their wetlands should be proposed for the list to be attached to their country's signature of the Ramsar Convention.

The especial necessity for international cooperation in the study of waterfowl migrations was emphasized in papers from the USSR (V. D. Ilyichev) and the USA (W. J. L. Sladen). The Conference welcomed the progress that had already been made in this field. The need for the rapid analysis of data using computer techniques was stressed. A Recommendation was also made for a world-wide system of letter-number codes on the leg-rings and neck-collars of swans and geese.

The evolving, labile nature of wetlands makes their scientific management of the utmost importance. Often we need to call a halt to their evolution at a particular moment in time; sometimes we seek to turn the clock back. Always we must attempt to counter the abuses to which wetlands are subject. A series

of papers on wetland management was therefore presented, drawing on experience in the USA, Canada, Africa, Latvia, Sweden, Denmark, United Kingdom and West Germany. It was pleasing to learn of successful techniques for making the optimal use of existing wetlands, for creating new ones and for restoring wetlands degraded by human interference and pollution. However the continuing threat to wetland fauna and flora by persistent biocides called for a special Recommendation. The absolute necessity for collaboration in wetland management at all levels, from Governments to individuals, was stressed. This should include the full range of those with special interests in wetlands, be they farmers, research workers, administrators, naturalists, hunters, fishermen, tourists, reed-cutters or local inhabitants of the marshland country.

In a way, education of people of all ages and in all walks of life is an important part of management. In heavily-populated countries in particular we cannot hope to lock wetlands away from the public. Rather we must seek to control and guide, and in guiding to educate the people to appreciate the quiet beauty of the marshes and the wonder of the massed flights of waterfowl. Always we must emphasize that wetlands are not wastelands, but something to be treasured, used and enjoyed by man.

It was, therefore, appropriate that Sir Peter Scott should read a paper setting out the 'Slimbridge Technique' of bringing large numbers of people to observe undisturbed wild birds at close range. This personal involvement is far more effective than exhibitions, films and television, important as all these are in their own ways. The necessary screening banks and observation posts may seem to some to be an intrusion on the wilderness. But the essence of the technique is that the wilderness, and its inhabitants, remain undisturbed, although enjoyed by the multitude. The creation of such 'honey pots' to gather tourists together also helps prevent them from despoiling the wilderness by spreading over it in all directions.

One class of user in the wetland environment over whom there has been much controversy is the hunter. Nowadays, however, his role as a predator in the system is widely recognized and accepted. What is required is control of both the harvest of birds shot and of the associated disturbance. The rationalization of waterfowl hunting on biological principles has long been the interest of specialized research groups within the IWRB. A final set of papers therefore

expounded the present situation. The hunters were seen to be themselves providing much of the evidence on which rationalization can be based. The way towards international agreement throughout the Old World, such as exists in the New, was clearly pointed by the Conference. It was announced that the Federal Republic of Germany's Government had undertaken to draw up a draft Convention to cover all types of migratory animals. This would be examined at a further Conference, which the Federal Republic offered to host, just as the final text of the

Wetland Convention had been agreed at Ramsar.

The Report of the Conference has been distributed to 120 Ministries and specialist agencies. The full Proceedings, which are being prepared for publication, will include not only the National Reports but the 34 Technical Papers which were presented.

At the conclusion of the Conference the delegation from Zambia proposed that the next Conference be held in Lusaka. This tentative invitation was accepted with acclamation.

G.V.T.M.

#### **Appendix 1. RECOMMENDATIONS for Criteria to be used in identifying Wetlands of International Importance**

1. *Criteria pertaining to a wetland's importance to populations and species*  
A wetland should be considered internationally important if it:
  - (i) regularly supports 1% (being at least 100 individuals) of the flyway or biogeographical population of one species of waterfowl,
  - (ii) regularly supports either 10,000 ducks, geese and swans; or 10,000 coots; or 20,000 waders,
  - (iii) supports an appreciable number of an endangered species of plant or animal,
  - (iv) of special value for maintaining genetic and ecological diversity because of the quality and peculiarities of its flora and fauna,
  - (v) plays a major role in its region as the habitat of plants and of aquatic and other animals of scientific or economic importance.
  
2. *Criteria concerned with the selection of representative or unique wetlands*  
A wetland should be considered internationally important if it:
  - (i) is a representative example of a wetland community characteristic of its biogeographical region,
  - (ii) exemplifies a critical stage or extreme in biological or hydro-morphological processes,
  - (iii) is an integral part of a peculiar physical feature.

3. *Criteria concerned with the research, educational or recreational values of wetlands*

A wetland should be considered internationally important if it:

- (i) is outstandingly important, well-situated and well-equipped for scientific research and for education,
- (ii) is well-studied and documented over many years and with a continuing programme of research of high value, regularly published and contributed to by the scientific community,
- (iii) offers especial opportunities for promoting public understanding and appreciation of wetlands, open to people from several countries.

4. *Criteria concerned with the practicality of conservation and management*

Notwithstanding its fitness to be considered as internationally important on one of the Criteria set out under 1, 2 and 3 above, a wetland should only be designated for inclusion in the List of Ramsar Convention if it:

- (i) is physically and administratively capable of being effectively conserved and managed,
- (ii) is free from the threat of a major impact of external pollution, hydrological interferences and land use or industrial practices.

A wetland of national value only may nevertheless be considered of international importance if it forms a complex with another adjacent wetland of similar value across an international border.