

Ramsar COP14 Highlights: Tuesday, 8 November 2022

The workload of delegates to COP14 increased in complexity with the tabling of a new draft proposal on the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on wetlands. Delegates shared perspectives on ten proposed resolutions, with one on potential delisting of Ramsar sites drawing opposition from many countries who objected to mixing ecological and political considerations.

By the end of the day, another three new contact groups, and several other informal groups had meetings planned to hammer out differences, where possible.

Plenary

Procedural matters: Parties received a legal interpretation on the meaning of “consensus” in response to a query from Indonesia in plenary on Monday. The Legal Advisor to the Secretariat explained that for the purposes of the Convention, and consistent with other UN practices, consensus means that there is no formal objection to the matter under discussion, but does not require unanimous agreement; parties may note reservations or provide a statement clarifying perspectives.

Consideration of Draft Resolutions

Review of Ramsar Criteria, and delisting Ramsar Sites:

Delegates resumed discussions from Monday on the draft resolution and considered Algeria’s revised version (COP14 Doc18.16.Rev.1). IRAN and MEXICO highlighted the importance of respecting international law and territorial integrity. MAURITIUS said all agree that actions of the contracting parties must be in line with the provisions of the Convention, including Article 2.1, and encouraged constructive discussions to address the issue. NEW ZEALAND and the UK opposed the resolution. NEPAL, EQUATORIAL GUINEA, BURKINA FASO, GABON, and Sierra Leone on behalf of the WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES also opposed, cautioning against mixing political and ecological issues. GABON further emphasized that wetlands should bring people together. MOROCCO urged parties to reconnect to the foundations of the Convention. SWEDEN and others suggested the revised wording would still have the same effect as delisting.

COLOMBIA and MEXICO requested clarification on how to verify if a designated site is located within the territory of the party who proposed its listing. BURUNDI, EQUATORIAL GUINEA, Czechia, on behalf of the EU, and SOUTH AFRICA requested more time to review the revised resolution. BENIN and CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC proposed postponing the decision to COP15.

ALGERIA emphasized that the reference to delisting had been removed and that the resolution seeks to improve the work of the Secretariat. He also said it reflects an international, not bilateral issue, and intends to ensure protection of territorial integrity, rather than implode transboundary issues. A contact group was established to further discussions.

Environmental emergency in Ukraine relating to damage of Ramsar Sites: Alternate COP14 President Wu Zhimin, acting as COP14 President, informed delegates that the COP Bureau had decided to submit to COP14 the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.24). He invited delegates to provide input on process and scheduling. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION said a contact group would not be fruitful and UKRAINE deferred to the Secretariat on when to schedule the discussion. The COP14 President said this would be decided on Wednesday morning by the Bureau.

Enhancing the Convention’s visibility and synergies: The Secretariat introduced the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.8). The PHILIPPINES stressed the importance of enhancing synergies with other MEAs, asking for alignment with work at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Along with the AFRICAN GROUP, GEORGIA, and others, she also proposed strengthening references and interlinkages with the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. BRAZIL and ARGENTINA preferred not including reference to targets or goals not yet agreed upon in other fora. They also opposed including references to nature-based solutions, which was not supported by ECUADOR or the AFRICAN GROUP.

CHINA and COLOMBIA each proposed additional text including reference to work under the Convention on Migratory Species on intertidal wetlands, coastal habitats, and migratory species. SOUTH AFRICA stressed the need for cooperation with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, saying that wetlands and drylands are two sides of the same coin, and highlighted the increasing frequency, intensity, extent, and duration of droughts in many parts of the world. BRAZIL stressed that efforts for enhancing synergies must respect the mandates of other Conventions and take into account unique country circumstances.

On tools and processes for enhancing synergies between biodiversity-related MEAs, SWITZERLAND, supported by the EU and COLOMBIA, highlighted the Bern Process, which brings together MEA Secretariats and parties via a cross-convention working group. She also highlighted the Data Reporting Tool for MEAs (DaRT) aimed at supporting parties in collecting, sharing, and maintaining data for biodiversity knowledge-sharing and reporting.

Regarding the Observer status of the Convention Secretariat at other international fora, COLOMBIA, MEXICO, VENEZUELA, and others supported establishing an open-ended working group. Finland, on behalf of the EU, opposed, suggesting instead further consideration of options and for a decision to be taken at a later stage. JAPAN noted “administrative fatigue” on the topic and said funds could be used more effectively to address operational issues at the heart of the Convention.

The COP14 President noted there were no strong diverging views and asked the Secretariat to conduct informal consultations and share a revised version of the draft.

New CEPA approach: Sweden introduced the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.10) on communication, capacity building, education, participation, and awareness (CEPA). THAILAND called for mainstreaming the new approach across public and private sectors, including with youth. CHINA emphasized the value of new media, events, and educational activities for sharing science-based knowledge on wetlands. The UK suggested ensuring sufficient resources for the approaches.

BRAZIL called for replacing the term “nature-based solutions” with “integrated approaches” and, with CANADA, urged use of the CBD-compliant term “Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs).” ZIMBABWE stressed that wetland conservation activities should be community-driven.

Germany, on behalf of the EU, requested an update of the CEPA Oversight Panel nomination procedure to allow work to start earlier in the triennium and proposed an annex on terms of reference for operating guidelines. Sweden will submit a revised draft resolution.

Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs) – operational guidelines: Costa Rica introduced the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.9). The REPUBLIC OF KOREA stressed that the operational guidelines need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the RRIs by, *inter alia*, promoting formats that can attract sponsorship. Along with FRANCE, he also cautioned against overburdening smaller RRIs with additional reporting requirements. SWITZERLAND stressed that RRIs, after the first six years of Convention funding, need to manage their own budget and “fly on their own,” arguing against extension of the Secretariat’s role.

UGANDA and TOGO stressed the importance of transparency in governance and management, noting this could be enhanced with help from the Secretariat. COLOMBIA called on parties to draw on best practices and lessons learned from existing RRIs. NEW ZEALAND, noting the lack of RRIs in the Oceania region, asked to retain text encouraging parties to establish initiatives in parts of the world where none yet exist. CAMBODIA agreed, proposing additional text encouraging the Secretariat to provide necessary support. Both parties suggested text promoting collaboration with international organization partners (IOPs) to address gaps in implementation capacity. A contact group was established to continue discussions.

How to structure, write and handle Convention documents and messages: This draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.7) was deleted following its withdrawal by Sweden.

Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards: Sweden presented the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.11). The UK, CHINA, and others supported the proposal with minor amendments. NEW ZEALAND, supported by BOLIVIA, and COLOMBIA, requested including an award category for Indigenous Peoples. New Zealand will work with the Secretariat to prepare a revised draft.

Future implementation of scientific and technical aspects for 2023–2025: Chair Lei Guangchun (China), Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), introduced the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.17), highlighting that its preparation included discussion rounds with National Focal Points. COSTA RICA, LIBERIA, Czechia for the EU, and other parties supported the proposal. Many parties encouraged the timely nomination of candidates for the STRP. BRAZIL asked to replace specific mentions of post-2020 global biodiversity framework targets with CBD-relevant targets. Minor amendments were suggested, including on the prioritized activities, which will be addressed by an informal group coordinated by New Zealand.

Enhancing the conservation and management of small wetlands: China introduced the draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.18). The REPUBLIC OF KOREA noted that the proposal will also enhance development of policies for management of small wetlands.

TUNISIA, with PAKISTAN and CAMBODIA, emphasized needing a clear definition of “small wetland.” Kenya for the AFRICA REGION highlighted specifying the size and extent of a small wetland.

Czechia, for the EU, called for application of the Ramsar Classification of Wetland Types for small wetland identification that where no national guidelines are available. BRAZIL said countries already doing so should continue using national measures to enhance the conservation, wise use, and sustainable development of small wetlands. The UK and US requested clarification on how activities would be funded and suggested including “subject to financial resources.” ZIMBABWE said designation of small wetlands will enhance the livelihoods of local communities dependent upon them for their survival.

The proponents will meet to revise the draft.

Review of all previous resolutions and decisions, and Draft list of defunct resolutions: The Secretariat introduced the two draft resolutions (COP14 Doc.18.6). He noted that the document for the draft list is subsumed under COP14 Doc.18.6 under Annex 1, which contains options for the process of consolidating and retiring outdated resolutions, along with a draft list of the status of resolutions.

SWITZERLAND, along with the EU, UK, MEXICO, and others, proposed following Option 1, under which the COP approves a categorized list of existing resolutions from which the SC selects three or four subjects, and for which the Secretariat would provide draft consolidations, to be considered at the following COP. SWEDEN made a reservation, noting that while they preferred Option 1, they have several proposed amendments to the text related to process. ZAMBIA, supported by SWEDEN, requested that retired resolutions be retained in a database so that countries may still consult them for guidance.

COLOMBIA warned against the additional workload that would be caused by the resolution and asked for more detail on the process and potential implications on ongoing, outstanding discussions.

The UK and JAPAN asked for clarification on funding and the UK proposed additional wording making the work “subject to available resources” and suggested that funding not come from the Convention’s core budget. The Secretariat will work with parties to seek agreement on the draft resolution.

The plenary adjourned for the day with COP14 President noting that delegates and the Secretariat would be working into the evening to revise proposed resolutions.

In the Corridors

As delegates went into contact groups in the evening, the mood overall was constructive, which some attributed to COP14 President Wu Zhimin’s skillful navigation of the meeting agenda, noting his sense of humor and ability to create a good working atmosphere while directing delegates toward consensus.

On the controversial draft resolution proposed by Algeria on delisting sites in disputed territories, some delegates sighed as they headed off to the contact group, saying it was a “last chance” effort for an unlikely compromise.

During the eventful morning plenary session, delegates learned that the Bureau had agreed to put forward the Ukraine resolution on the “environmental emergency” and damage to wetlands “stemming from the Russian Federation’s aggression.” This action, coupled with clarification by the legal advisor on the meaning of consensus, promises interesting discussions later in the week, with one delegate suggesting that the Convention may have its first-ever resolution adopted by majority voting. Whether procedural hurdles could be overcome for such an event remains to be seen over the next several days.