

Ramsar COP14 Highlights: Thursday, 10 November 2022

Delegates finished initial considerations of all 23 draft resolutions, including the proposal by Ukraine and one thanking the host country, China. The afternoon plenary finished early, leaving additional time for contact group meetings and informal discussions to continue moving COP14 forward.

Plenary

During morning and afternoon plenary sessions, COP14 Alternate President Wu Zhimin, acting as President, asked for updates on the status of contact groups and informal consultations.

The election of contracting parties to the Standing Committee for 2022-2025 was deferred to the Saturday morning plenary. The Credentials Committee Chair (Indonesia) reported that the credentials of 110 parties have been validated and that some are still being received. He expected the COP quorum of 115 valid credentials to be reached and urged parties that have not submitted their credentials to do so.

Consideration of Draft Resolutions

Environmental emergency relating to damage to Ramsar wetlands: UKRAINE introduced the revised draft resolution (COP14 Doc.18.24.Rev.1), highlighting that 16 Ramsar Sites are under direct threat, and 33% of national wetlands have been adversely affected. She said the resolution seeks to support the Convention's mission by addressing grave environmental damage to the Ramsar Sites as a result of Russia's military invasion, and find ways under the Convention to assess damage, recommend mitigation measures, and identify financial assistance for restoration. She requested that her statement be included in the COP14 meeting report.

Among co-sponsors voicing support for the draft, the US called this an "uncomfortable" topic, arising out of necessity, not choice. Czechia, on behalf of the EU, and GEORGIA, CANADA, NORWAY, the UK, FRANCE, ALBANIA, NEW ZEALAND, JAPAN, and GUATEMALA also supported the draft resolution, with some highlighting concern about long-term consequences of

environmental damage. GUATEMALA invoked the importance of international law for safeguarding peace and human rights.

RUSSIA opposed the draft proposal, saying it has a pronounced political character which goes beyond the principle of the Convention under Article 6.2. He deplored its "one-sided" and discriminatory character, noting the text is an "incitement to hate," and requested clarification on the basis for claims to destruction of Ramsar Sites. He urged delegates to dismiss the draft.

Parties expressing concern about the resolution included BRAZIL, CHINA, IRAN, DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA, VENEZUELA, INDONESIA, NICARAGUA, GABON, CUBA, and BOLIVIA. Their comments urged COP14 to limit its deliberations to technical concerns, and to refer political questions to other UN fora. CHINA expressed deep sympathy for Ukraine's people, then described the draft resolution as "unacceptable" and outside the scope and mandate of the Convention, saying it could set a bad example in the field of environmental protection.

The COP14 President, noting that RUSSIA and UKRAINE did not want a contact group, stressed his responsibility under the Convention is to make every possible effort to seek agreement on all matters of substance. He recalled that in the history of the Convention a vote had taken place only twice and expressed his strong desire to avoid one. He encouraged interested parties to hold informal discussions and announced that a new proposal would be presented in plenary on Saturday.

Thanks to the Host Country, China: The UNITED ARAB EMIRATES introduced the revised draft (COP14 Doc.18.23 Rev.1). JAPAN proposed amendments to clarify that the high-level segment was organized under the initiative of the host country and not subject to the rules of the Convention. He said the Wuhan Declaration does not constitute negotiated text and that the resolution should not preempt its role in enhancing the work of the Convention. CHINA highlighted the challenges posed by the hybrid format of COP14 and asked for explicit reference to Wuhan in the resolution.

The COP14 President asked the Secretariat to revise the document, noting as a matter of protocol that it be modeled in accordance with similar resolutions from previous COPs.

Delegates also heard updates on previously-introduced proposed resolutions.

Financial and budgetary matters: Standing Committee Finance Subgroup Chair Mariana Olivera West (Mexico) reported that the original draft of the proposed resolution had minor changes and that the revised document (COP14 Doc.18.1 Rev.1) was ready for adoption.

Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs) – operational guidelines: COSTA RICA reported that the contact group had received the compilation of comments and will meet during the day to continue work on a revised draft proposal.

Wetland education in the formal education sector: REPUBLIC OF KOREA reported consensus through informal discussions on the draft resolution, adding that a revised version has been submitted to the Secretariat.

Review of the fourth Strategic Plan and key elements for the fifth Strategic Plan: AUSTRALIA reported completion of discussions by the contact group and said a revised version of the draft resolution has been submitted to the Secretariat.

Establishment of the International Mangrove Center: CHINA reported that the contact group has almost rewritten the draft resolution and is considering an RRI approach for the new proposal. He invited all interested in having an open, inclusive, and transparent discussion to join them.

Review of Ramsar criteria, and delisting Ramsar Sites: SOUTH AFRICA reported that an agreement had been reached to defer the draft resolution to COP15.

Future implementation of scientific and technical aspects for 2023-2025: NEW ZEALAND reported that informal consultations are ongoing.

Responsibilities, roles and composition of the SC and regional categorization of countries: The Secretariat presented the revised draft (COP14 Doc.18.2 Rev.1), noting changes from parties have been incorporated. The EU asked for more time to review changes and suggested informal discussions with interested parties. The AFRICAN GROUP requested more time for regional deliberations. PAKISTAN suggested postponing a decision until the next COP.

CANADA, AUSTRALIA, COLOMBIA, BRAZIL, and others noted they would not be in a position to discuss a change in the number of the Convention's regional groups, from six to four, and that this decision should be taken by governments. SWEDEN, supported by NEW ZEALAND, agreed to withdraw its earlier proposal to reduce the number of regions, as a potential basis for consensus on the revised draft.

The COP14 President proposed that parties engage in informal discussions to reach consensus. BRAZIL noted that a contact

group is required since the changes proposed so far are substantial. It was agreed that plenary would reconvene in the afternoon to introduce the revisions.

Wetland City Accreditation

The award ceremony for the Wetland City Accreditation took place in the afternoon. Delegates viewed a short film on urban wetlands and heard about the unique values and co-benefits that accrue to urban wetlands as well as the achievements of each Wetland City.

Secretary General Musonda Mumba presented the certificates to representatives of 25 cities from 12 countries that have demonstrated strong and positive relationships with wetlands, including: Sackville, Canada; Hefei, China; Jining, China; Liangping, China; Nanchang, China; Panjin, China; Wuhan, China; Yangcheng, China; Belval-en-Argonne, France; Seltz, France; Subaraya, Indonesia; Tanjung Jabung Timur, Indonesia; Bandar Khamir, Iran; Varzaneh, Iran; Al Chibayish, Iraq; Izumi, Japan; Niigata, Japan; Ifrane, Morocco; Gochang, Republic of Korea; Seocheon, Republic of Korea; Seogwipo, Republic of Korea; Kigali, Rwanda; Cape Town, South Africa; Valencia, Spain; and Sri Songkhram District, Thailand.

In the Corridors

During Thursday's plenary, progress reports on how effective the parties have been in finding common ground during contact groups and informal consultations prompted cautious optimism amongst delegates for a strong COP14 outcome.

Teamwork amongst the "Ramsar family" has led to delegates agreeing on draft revisions, or being within reach on others that had prompted lengthy exchanges in the early days of the COP. These included a compromise on the highly-contentious draft resolution on Ramsar Sites within disputed territories, which was deferred to COP15. Some delegates have held their breath all week in anticipation of the draft resolution by Ukraine on damage to wetlands due to "the Russian Federation's aggression." Unsurprisingly, its introduction brought contrasting views from parties taking the floor. Consensus on the draft resolution seemed unlikely, but it remains to be seen what will come out of the continued consultations. President Wu expressed a strong preference to avoid the matter going to a vote, preferring to resolve all issues through partnership, consultation, and teamwork, a statement that brought applause from the plenary.

Despite the difficult and, at times, uncomfortable topics under discussion, delegates pointed out that the overall atmosphere during plenary remains positive and collaborative, with one seasoned delegate attributing this not only to the steady guidance of the COP14 President, but also the approach of the new Secretary General, which has been described as energetic, passionate, and professional.