

# The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands at 50

At 50, the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 1971) has a mixed legacy. To survive and stay relevant in the Anthropocene, the convention will need to embrace new ecological thinking and conservation approaches.

Peter Bridgewater and Rakhyun E. Kim

On World Wetlands Day, 2 February 2021, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat officially celebrates its 50th anniversary from its signing in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar. Originating from the MAR Conference on conservation of temperate marshes, bogs, and other wetlands even earlier in 1962<sup>1</sup>, it is one of the oldest multilateral environmental agreements (Fig. 1). Commentators have often praised the ‘Ramsar Convention’ (as it is commonly known) for its near-universal membership (171 parties), large number of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites), and a successful outreach programme linked to the private sector. Yet the state of the world’s wetlands tells a rather different, grim, story. As noted in its own Global Wetland Outlook<sup>2</sup>, approximately 35% of wetlands globally have been lost over the convention’s life, with larger numbers reported by other authoritative global assessments<sup>3</sup>. The relevant question, then, is not so much whether the convention has been complied with by its parties, but whether the convention in its current form will prove to have sufficient impact in the long term<sup>4</sup>.

## Ramsar’s site-based approach is a major flaw

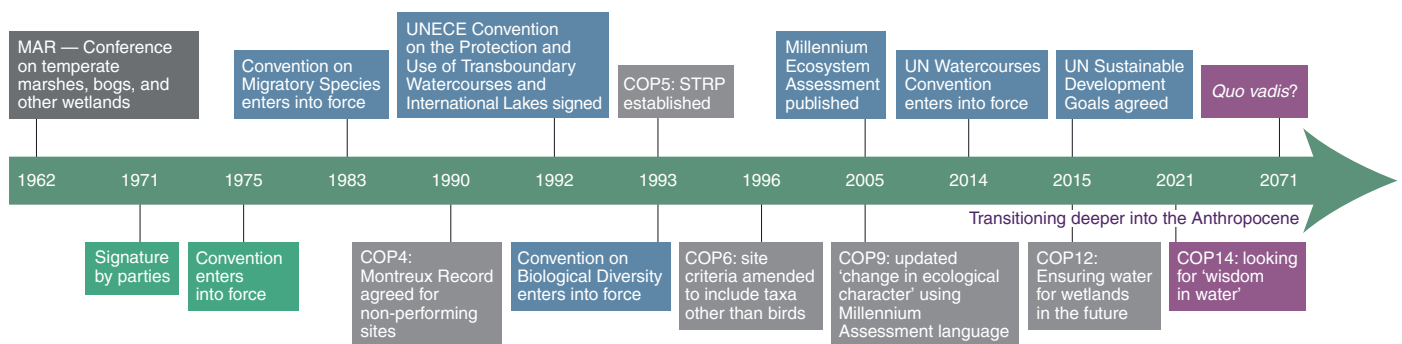
Much of the activity during the convention’s development has been dominated by Ramsar site listing. There are currently

2,413 Ramsar sites listed, covering over 255 million hectares, which is an impressive achievement, at least on paper. Clearly, expanding the Ramsar list has not been sufficient to improve the conservation status of wetlands<sup>3</sup>, although its absence may likely have produced even worse results for wetland conservation<sup>4</sup>. Why is this, and will it likely change in the future?

Listing of sites in the framework of an international convention is a complex political process where multiple factors are at play<sup>5</sup>. Importantly in the Ramsar context, listing is a relatively simple process subject only to secretariat scrutiny, rather than the independent evaluation as is the case for sites designated under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conventions and programmes (for example, World Heritage, Biosphere Reserve and Global Geopark). Site management, so that Ramsar sites do not suffer change in ‘ecological character’, is also left to the discretion of the parties with an absence of any meaningful penalties or incentives, apart from the practice of a ‘naming and shaming’ resolution debated during the triennial Conferences of the Parties. In 1990, the Fourth Conference of the Parties held in Montreux resolved to develop a record of non-performing sites, with a view to help parties who recorded such sites undertake actions to restore them (rather like the ‘in danger’ listing for World Heritage sites). This Montreux Record,

however, has made little material difference to site quality globally. In December 2020, 21 parties have 47 sites on the Montreux Record, but 36 of those sites were listed before 1993 and remain on the record. The Ramsar Advisory Mission, a technical assistance mechanism developed to assist parties to restore and remove sites from the record, has not realized its full potential<sup>6</sup>. So, the Ramsar list is the best (binding) tool there is, despite little sanction for poor site management or monitoring, resulting in weak wetland conservation overall.

Furthermore, the concept of ‘ecological character’, which emerged in the foundation discussions establishing the convention, has been left vaguely defined. It remains unclear which, if not all, human-induced adverse alterations of ecological character need to be prevented or managed<sup>7</sup>. This conceptual ambiguity extends to a lack of new understandings of Earth as a complex social–ecological system, even after the definition of ecological character was updated following the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment<sup>8</sup>. In today’s Anthropocene, no wetland can escape the impact of a complex array of systemic drivers interacting with each other across multiple scales<sup>9</sup>. As wetlands succumb to pressures and stresses from climatic and other global changes, they are likely to play an increasingly important role in the ‘new ecology’ to which our world is already subject. This questions *inter alia* the validity



**Fig. 1 |** The timeline shows key internal and external events that have influenced the development trajectory of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. For the next 50 years, the Convention faces dual challenges to both survive as an institution on an increasingly crowded institutional landscape and stay relevant in the Anthropocene. COP, Conference of the Parties.

of the site-based approach to wetland conservation by seeking to avoid any ecological change<sup>10</sup>. The Ramsar approach to maintaining ecological character in a global collection of emblematic, yet highly dynamic, ecosystems subject to often intensive anthropic action therefore appears no longer fit for purpose.

### Why the preoccupation with growing the Ramsar list?

We highlight below three key reasons why the preoccupation with the listing process has persisted, even in the face of mounting wetland loss.

First, the convention has retained close ties with several international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) responsible for the convention's origin, through being accredited as International Organization Partners. This mechanism has allowed for a special 'seat at the table' in convention discussions, where the ambition of the partners for increased listing becomes clear. Most of these organizations have morphed from being science-based to being more advocacy-oriented, so their advocacy for listing Ramsar sites has dominated their involvement. While designation is the prerogative of the parties, there remains constant lobbying by NGOs at all levels to establish more sites. Globally, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has operated with an explicit global vision to add as many wetlands as possible to the Ramsar list, with more examples found at the national level<sup>11</sup>.

Second, the Ramsar Convention has limited legal instruments at hand. It is largely a convention from the past as its text has undergone little change over the past 50 years, apart from a change in 1982, *inter alia* to provide better governance mechanisms. The bar for change to the convention is set high to ensure institutional stability: an amendment, for example, requires the support of a supermajority among the parties. But the cost of institutional stability has been reduced flexibility to adapt to the latest understanding of how wetland ecosystems are changing in the Anthropocene.

Third, we cite the convention's failure to link effectively with the wider scientific community. A key interface has been the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) appointed by, and offering guidance to, the Conference of the Parties. While having made considerable contributions to the convention following its establishment in 1993, the STRP remains a small group largely in its original, non-adapted form. The STRP is less well-structured and wide-ranging than similar subsidiary science bodies found in other conventions. It also

lacks effective links to policy process thus inhibiting the ability to co-design research and co-production across the knowledge-policy interface to help inform and review its work. Similarly, linking the convention to relevant sectors of society that impact on wetland systems such as energy, tourism, estate development, water management and indigenous knowledge has been largely non-existent in the STRP. Furthermore, the STRP's engagement with external scientific bodies (for example, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) has been lukewarm.

### Signs of institutional drifting

Although the convention retains its early focus on site-based conservation, it has not been stagnant, and has been broadening its horizons. For example, the systemic causes of the degradation of wetlands have been acknowledged through some strategic, albeit erratic, focus on climate change, natural disasters, and the role of culture in wetland management. The question is whether the convention has been adequately adaptive for the purpose of achieving its original objectives. Our assessment suggests not.

In fact, the Ramsar Convention has arguably been maladaptive or drifting in the search of a new niche for its own survival in the increasingly competitive institutional landscape. Despite its origins in waterfowl conservation, the convention has been gradually losing ground on that issue, as the Convention on Migratory Species and regional agreements develop action on global bird flyways. It is against this backdrop that the Ramsar Convention appears to have identified water as a niche area to which it could expand its mandate, dating from its sixth meeting in 1996.

Yet in a small but increasingly important way, the 1992 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Water Convention<sup>12</sup> and 1997 UN Watercourses Convention<sup>13</sup> are also filling this niche. So, what could the Ramsar Convention do as a 'water convention' that is different? Or more specifically, how can this opportunistic drift towards being a water convention be steered to help conserve wetlands, their biodiversity (including waterfowl), and ecosystem functions in an increasingly crowded institutional space? In our view, the Ramsar Convention will need to strike a balance between the imperative to survive as an institution and rethinking how to fulfil its original mandate. We offer our recommendations below.

### A more successful second 50 years?

The recently released fifth Global Biodiversity Outlook from the Convention

on Biological Diversity suggests that "a sustainable freshwater transition" is needed to guarantee "water flows required by nature and people, improving water quality, protecting critical habitats, controlling invasive species and safeguarding connectivity to allow the recovery of freshwater systems from mountains to coasts"<sup>14</sup>. Although the Ramsar Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity share a joint work programme, the outlook did not mention the Ramsar Convention, yet this 'transition' is exactly what the convention set out to accomplish in 1971, set within more current understandings.

In the next 50 years, the Ramsar Convention must seize this role. A critical task for the convention here is to assimilate new ecological paradigms, including the issue of ecological novelty, and developing ways and means for managing wetlands under rapid, unpredictable change<sup>15</sup>. This implies a departure from the existing focus on adding new Ramsar sites, with more emphasis on monitoring and managing the existing site network, and with renewed focus on the wise use of all wetlands in the parties' territories. The Ramsar Convention could take a 'wetscape' approach, that is, to focus on wetlands as key elements of multi-functional landscapes, building on its occasional deliberations on integrated water management since the late 1990s. Understanding aboveground and belowground water flows will help to achieve the twin aims of being a biodiversity (including waterfowl) convention, as well as one dealing with water protection, production and purification.

The wetscape approach would also integrate marine areas up to six metres depth which, among the biodiversity-related conventions, are uniquely included under the Ramsar Convention, and the convention is thus particularly well suited to serve as the interface between climate, marine and biodiversity conventions. Globally, coastal wetlands cover almost all areas important for 'blue carbon', which could be an important area of work for the convention into the future<sup>16</sup>. The convention also has much potential to bridge Sustainable Development Goals 14 on 'life below water' and 15 on 'life on land', as well as to link with efforts under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to include blue carbon in its decision-making. There are new opportunities provided by the UN Decades of Ecosystem Restoration and of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (from 2021 to 2030) to promote solutions to wetland sustainability through science, ensuring that wetlands can contribute their

potential to development, society and the environment.

Crucially, the Ramsar Convention must leverage on, and further strengthen its partnerships with, other relevant conventions and programmes. Ramsar discussions must focus on ensuring national implementation of decisions taken at the triennial Conferences of the Parties. Some structural change in governance and implementation mechanisms is necessary<sup>17</sup>. Only more adaptive and dynamic global governance mechanisms will help take global decisions through to implementation and action locally, nationally and regionally; restoring the balance needed between people, wetlands and the rest of their biodiversity in the Anthropocene. □

Peter Bridgewater <sup>1,2</sup> and Rakhyun E. Kim <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup>Institute for Applied Ecology and Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of

Canberra, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia.

✉e-mail: [p.bridgewater@uu.nl](mailto:p.bridgewater@uu.nl)

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#### Author contributions

P.B. and R.E.K. contributed equally to the conceptualization, writing and editing of the manuscript.

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