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**Specialist Group Workshop**  
**Proceedings - 4-5 November 2000**

**Summary outcomes of the 4th November 2000 Ramsar Workshops on:**

**Threatened Water Birds**

**Wet Grasslands**

**Peatlands**

**(Note that the following are drafts only, and require review by members of the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel)**

**APPLICATION OF CRITERIA FOR RAMSAR LISTING OF SITES FOR THREATENED WATERBIRDS**

A workshop to discuss and advance criteria for the designation of Ramsar sites for threatened waterbirds was held at the Wetlands International Specialist Groups Scientific and Technical meeting in Wageningen (4-5 November 2000). The workshop:

- Recommended a holistic approach, involving all continents and all of the 14 waterbird orders recognised by Ramsar as being wetland dependent;
- Identified the products required by Contracting Parties:
  - Species list;
  - Atlas (based on the AEWA Atlas of Anatidae Populations), incorporating:
    - Distribution map;
    - List of sites meeting Ramsar criteria;
    - List of sites currently designated;
  - Coverage targets (eg. most important sites in need of protection, proportion of sites which should be protected).
- Suggested that a small Ramsar Working Group be established to:
  - Suggest criteria which should be used to designate sites for threatened waterbirds (based on an amended version of the criteria used by the BirdLife IBA programme);

Conduct a gap analysis of the above products by region and waterbird family in order to identify products which can be provided to Ramsar Conferences of Parties in the short, medium, and long term.

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## DRAFT GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNATING WET GRASSLAND RAMSAR SITES

### Definition of "Wet Grasslands"

Wet grasslands are natural and near-natural ecosystems with a vegetation characterised and dominated by lower growing perennial grasses, sedges, reeds, rushes and/or herbs. They appear under periodically flooded or waterlogged conditions and are maintained through mowing, burning, natural or man-induced grazing or a combination of these.

Wet grasslands include among others: floodplain grasslands, washlands, polders, water meadows, wet grasslands with (intensive) water level management, lakeside grasslands, vegetation dominated by relatively large, perennial, competitive herbs and ground-water dependent dune slacks. These grasslands occur on different soils: heavy clay, loam, sand, gravel, peat, etc. and can belong to fresh or brackish water systems.

Vegetation types that fall under this definition can appear in mosaic with one another or with other wetland types, such as peatland, reedbeds, water-dependent shrubs, forests and others.

### Link with Ramsar wetland classification

Wet Grasslands are covered by the following wetland types of the Ramsar Classification System:

- a. As a *floodplain component*, wet grasslands fall under category **Ts** (seasonal/intermittent freshwater marshes on inorganic soils, including **seasonally flooded meadows and sedge marshes**) and category **U** (non-forested peatlands, including **swamps and fens**).
- b. Among the *human-made* wetland types, wet grasslands fall under category **3** (**irrigated land**, including irrigation channels and rice fields) and category **4** (**seasonally flooded agricultural land**, including intensively managed or grazed wet meadow or pasture). Irrigation channels with natural vegetation cutting through wet meadows fulfil substantial ecological functions; they are therefore considered part of wet grasslands.
- c. *Wet grassland habitats* can also occur in a series of wetland types belonging to categories **E** (sand, shingle or pebble shores including dune systems and humid dune slacks) and **H** (intertidal salt meadows, raised salt marshes, tidal brackish and freshwater marshes), or can be found at the edges of wetlands of categories **J** (coastal brackish/saline lagoons), **N** (seasonal/intermittent/irregular rivers/streams/creeks), **P** (seasonal/intermittent floodplain lakes), **R** (seasonal/intermittent saline/brackish/alkaline lakes and flats), and **Ss** (seasonal/intermittent saline/brackish/alkaline marshes).

## Values and function of wet grasslands

Wet grasslands support specific wildlife and biodiversity, comprising rare and threatened plant and animal species and communities, including internationally important bird populations, a range of mammals, invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians.

In recent years there has been increasing awareness about the value of wet grasslands to perform hydrological and chemical functions:

- a. Flood alleviation – wet grasslands can contain floodwater.
- b. Groundwater recharge – wet grasslands retain water within a watershed enabling groundwater to be replenished.
- c. Water quality improvement – riparian wet grasslands retain nutrients, toxic substances and sediment, preventing them from entering watercourses.

Economic benefits accrue from these functions. When wet grasslands are destroyed, these functions are lost and have to be replaced at enormous financial cost. These benefits include:

- a. Water supply – wet grasslands can influence both water quantity and quality.
- b. Health of freshwater fisheries – backwaters, ditches and other open water habitats within wet grassland areas are important for river fisheries.
- c. Agriculture – floodplains provide some of the most fertile agricultural land.
- d. Recreation and tourism opportunities.

## Threats to wet grasslands

From an early stage in human history, floodplains have been subject to modifications. Since the industrial revolution, pressures on rivers and floodplains increased significantly in many areas. As part of this process, wet grasslands have declined much in industrialized areas, but are also exposed to specific threats in other regions. This is being brought about by:

- a. Changes in agricultural practices – increased drainage and use of fertilizer, change from hay-making to silage, re-seeding, herbicide use, conversion to arable, higher stocking densities, neglect or abandonment, use of aquatic herbicides.
- b. Land drainage – modification of natural hydrological regimes, isolation of floodplains from river flows, rapid evacuation of winter floods and early fall of spring water tables, maintenance of low water levels in drainage channels.
- c. Abstraction for drinking water and crop irrigation – leading to lowered river flows and in-channel water levels, lowered water tables, exacerbation of drought-related problems.
- d. Eutrophication – leading to changes in grassland plant communities and increased sward vigour.
- e. Sea-level rise and construction of flood defences are threatening coastal wet grasslands.
- f. Development and mineral extraction – leading to a decline of routinely flooded area and increased

frequency of flooding of the remaining washland.

- g. Site fragmentation – leading to isolation of sites, threatening species restricted to wet grassland and vulnerable to extinction, and to problems with water level control and implementing agricultural management.

## **Application of the Ramsar selection criteria to wet grasslands**

Group A of the criteria for sites containing representative, rare or unique wetland types.

### **Criterion 1 (particular wet grassland ecosystems)**

A wetland should be considered internationally important if it contains a representative, rare or unique example of wet grassland ecosystem of the appropriate biogeographic region. This holds particularly if the wet grassland ecosystem performs specific hydrological functions, is of particular socio-economic interest, and/or represents particular historical or cultural values.

Group B of the criteria for sites of international importance for conserving biological diversity.

Criteria based on species and ecological communities:

### **Criterion 2 (endangered species and communities of wet grasslands)**

A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species, or threatened ecological communities of wet grassland ecosystems.

### **Criterion 3 (biodiversity of wet grasslands)**

A wet grassland should be considered internationally important if it supports populations of plant and/or animal species important for maintaining the biological diversity of a particular biogeographic region.

### **Criterion 4 (support of specific wet grassland-dependent species)**

A wet grassland should be considered internationally important if it supports plant and/or animal species at critical stages in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions.

Specific criteria based on birds:

### **Criterion 5 (support of 20,000 waterbirds)**

A wet grassland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 20,000 or more waterbirds.

### **Criterion 6 (support of 1% of a flyway population)**

A wet grassland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 1% of the individuals in a

population of one species or subspecies of waterbird.

Specific criteria based on fish:

**Criterion 7 (support of fish biodiversity)**

A wet grassland should be considered internationally important if it supports a significant proportion of indigenous fish subspecies, species or families, life-history stages, species interactions and/or populations that are representative of wetland benefits and/or values and thereby contributes to global biological diversity.

**Criterion 8 (support of fisheries)**

A wet grassland should be considered internationally important if it is an important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery and/or migration path on which fish stocks, either within the wetland or elsewhere, depend.

**Particular issues to be taken into account**

Wetlands are generally dynamic ecosystems. This is particularly true for wet grasslands. As part of river or coastal floodplains, they are maintained by periodical floods or waterlogged conditions, either natural or human-induced.

Additional ecological factors are crucial to prevent gradual vegetation succession transforming wet grasslands to tall reedbeds, peat bogs or forested wetlands. Natural or man-induced grazing, mowing, or burning, or a combination of them are the most common ones. In many cases, these factors need to be maintained through specific management measures or traditional forms of land and wetland resource uses to maintain the ecological character of wet grasslands.

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**DRAFT GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNATING PEATLAND RAMSAR SITES**

The workshop, co-chaired by Jack Riely (IPS) and Doug Taylor, and attended by Richard Lindsay (IMCG), Henk Zingstra, Marcel Silvius, Scott Frazier (Wetlands International), Herbert Diemont (Alterra), Randy Milton (Canada), considered the *Draft guidelines for the identification and designation of peatlands as Ramsar Sites - initial review*, produced by Wetlands International for the Ramsar STRP meeting in June 2000.

Comments received on the draft had been produced by Richard Lindsay of the International Mire Conservation

Group (IMCG) and by STRP member, Randy Milton, and were considered at the workshop.

Further work is necessary to draft a new version of the guidelines for consideration by the STRP at its next meeting in 2001. The latest version of the draft guidelines will be posted on the Wetlands International website as it becomes available.

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