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## **Specialist Groups** **Strategic Plan Review**

### **Review of issues relating to Specialist Groups adopted by Board of Directors, April 2000**

Nick Davidson and Doug Taylor, International Co-ordination Unit

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### **Background**

This paper reviews issues relating to Specialist Groups, which are a traditional and voluntary feature of Wetlands International. Specialist Groups are primarily based upon the core interests of bird science, with thematic wetland subjects having been a later addition. Specialist Group co-ordinators liaise with the ICU. However, the day-to-day work of Wetlands International relies mainly upon the employed staff, rather than direct inputs from Specialist Groups.

Under major topic headings, key issues are identified, with suggestions for actions, including conducting reviews, meetings and provision of guidance on working relationships for use by Specialist Groups and by Wetlands International staff.

The current and future role of Specialist Groups should be mapped against both short term programmes and long term strategic objectives. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, that Specialist Groups have a general purpose role as sources of subject-based expertise, with a long term memory of work. Secondly, as suppliers of timely advice and specific data, they can act as supplementary contractors to Wetlands International.

### **Purpose of Specialist Groups and Wetlands International Objectives**

The purpose of Specialist Groups is to harness high quality science to the benefit of wetland management programmes. They should allow Wetlands International, partners and others to access credible expertise world-wide in an open and transparent manner, and their expertise should be trusted by Partners.

- Wetlands International staff may not know how best to use Specialist Groups' expertise
- Quality control of outputs is not at present in general subject to open peer review.

## **Suggested actions**

1. Open peer review mechanisms should be identified and implemented to assure global delivery of high quality science. These mechanisms would also be appropriate for Wetlands International staff science products.
2. It is important to test the Strategic Positioning needs of Wetlands International against the purpose and activities of Specialist Groups.
3. Raise awareness among staff about the roles and value of Specialist Groups

## **Motivation**

There are several motivators for a Specialist Group to associate itself with Wetlands International. Groups may be self-sufficient, but benefit from Wetlands International's prestige and status. Motivation of Specialist Groups is constantly required.

- Co-ordinators and members may wish to enhance their reputation
- Members wish to see their specialist work applied to practical wetlands management
- Private consultancies may be promoted through Specialist Group membership
- Assistance with publications and meeting costs can be made available

## **Suggested actions**

While some Groups achieve good motivation internally, Wetlands International may be able to improve motivation through making Specialist Groups contractually responsible for delivery of certain products, inviting Groups to suggest project concepts, and encouraging task-based working for some projects, as outlined below.

## **Communication**

Good communications with Wetlands International and between Specialist Groups are essential, without it there would be no purpose to the maintenance of Specialist Groups. However, there are many anomalies concerning communications. Specialist Group co-ordinators are under no obligation to show that Specialist Group members are consulted or involved in work, and the extent to which this happens is often hard to establish.

- Without feedback to Specialist Group members, motivation will decline, and targeting of effort will reduce.
- Various Web-based bulletins and newsletters are being developed by several Groups independently at present.
- It is important that the contents of Reports (if available) reach a high standard and be peer reviewed.

## **Suggested actions**

1. The Specialist Groups Bulletin should be re-activated to raise awareness within Wetlands International staff and Specialist Groups and should also be Web-published.
2. Co-ordinators should be made accountable for effective communication, both within their Group and with Wetlands International. This could be achieved by offering direct communication support.
3. Wetlands International should set up review panels to ensure a high standard of publication is reached by Groups, particularly if Web-publishing is used.

## **Project development and implementation**

Wetlands International's project development process against Strategic Positioning needs is not easily accessible to Specialist Groups, who may have valuable insights into early stages of project definition.

- Encouraging Specialist Groups to become more engaged with project development would enhance Wetlands International's standing
- Staff in Wetlands International may feel that project development would be delayed by Specialist Group involvement

## **Suggested actions**

1. Wetlands International staff should be encouraged to call upon a skills register of Specialist Groups, in order to invite inputs to project development and peer review.
2. With respect to well-established Specialist Groups, e.g. Inventory and Monitoring Specialist Group; Wader Study Group, consider delegating project development under contract to such Groups.
3. Specialist Groups should be encouraged to suggest ideas for projects that could then be developed further in co-operation with Wetlands International staff.

## **Provision of training and expertise to countries or regions**

This is considered to be a core staff function rather than that of Specialist Groups, however, there is a significant resource of expertise available for Wetlands International to use in training programmes. The staff skills register will help to identify gaps, and it would be appropriate to source additional expertise from within Specialist Groups, or failing that, from external partners or associates.

## **Suggested actions**

Create a Specialist Groups Register to the same standard as the Wetlands International Staff Skills Register, in order to plug gaps but also to widen involvement among Specialist Groups members. This may help to prompt Co-ordinators to maintain an active list of Members who would have an interest in helping their Co-ordinator to keep it up to date.

Consider making the Specialist Groups Skills Register a public document, to enable Partner organisations and others to reciprocate with their equivalent registers.

## **Coverage of taxa, habitats and issues**

Thematic groups, with notable exceptions, are not as well owned by Group members as the core groups dealing with bird taxa. Wetlands International's interest in additional taxa is handled by joint working with the IUCN Species Survival Commission, as are the core interests of water birds, where by agreement, Wetlands International takes the lead.

- Amphibia, reptiles, fish and some other taxa are not covered by Wetlands International Specialist Groups at present.
- Specialist Groups are assumed to be in a "flat" structure, i.e. they are considered to be largely independent of each other, and to have little shared responsibility.

## **Suggested actions**

1. A Team-based protocol for enabling selected members from more than one Group to work together, is advisable for uniting

some taxa efforts within habitat work, e.g. for a country inventory that requires priority species action plans. Such protocols would be developed by the ICU on request.

2. A watching brief should be kept on the need for further MoUs with external groups or existing partners, to cover habitats or species not covered by Specialist Groups.

## Suggested key actions

Some existing Groups are clearly dysfunctional. Probable reasons for this are varied and include: no natural network; someone with inappropriate skills acting as Co-ordinator; long-standing Co-ordinators becoming over-stretched and needing active assistance; lack of Group committee structure to spread the task load from the Co-ordinator. Much improved communication will be necessary to identify appropriate actions in each case.

As the information in the Annex makes clear, the performance and commitment of Groups is variable, ranging from excellent to very poor. Suggested corrective actions are noted in the individual topic sections above, while priority actions are identified below.

It is important to note that while the commitment to Specialist Groups remains strong, it is recognised by Wetlands International's International Co-ordination Unit that not enough attention has been paid to Groups, neither has enough support and feedback been offered to them. This paper suggests a way forward to improve working relationships and to renew commitment with Specialist Groups.

## Priority actions are to:

1. Re-map the expertise and interests of Specialist Groups against Wetlands International Strategic Objectives
2. Solicit directly the views of Specialist Group Co-ordinators on their needs, and to test their responsibilities.
3. Use a proposed Wageningen-based September 2000 Scientific Staff and Specialist Groups Meeting to obtain well-structured reviews of issues and needs.
4. Identify key gaps in coverage of issues or taxa, or redundancy of coverage
5. Invite Specialist Groups to contribute towards the register of skills expertise
6. Invite Specialist Groups, via a simple guidance note, to propose project ideas to be developed.
7. Screen potential projects for those suitable as contracts for Specialist Group delivery
8. Re-activate the Specialist Group Bulletin produced by the ICU, and other more frequent communications, to strengthen dissemination and feedback
9. Encourage task and team-based working to encourage Specialist Groups to collaborate with Wetlands International staff and with each other.
10. Improve staff understanding of the role and potential for use of Specialist Groups
11. Appoint additional technical expertise to the Advisory Council on topics reflecting Strategic Positioning needs

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Douglas Taylor [Taylor@wetlands.agro.nl](mailto:Taylor@wetlands.agro.nl)