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## **Specialist Group Workshop** **Summary of Proceedings - 4,5 November 2000**

### **Summary of plenary and breakout workshop discussions**

#### **1. Introduction**

The Workshop was held to renew working relationships with Specialist Groups and especially the International Partners of Wetlands International, Birdlife International, WWF International, and IUCN, over the issues of their shared relationship with Wetlands International over Specialist Groups and potential new ways of working.

A secondary, yet valuable purpose of the Workshop was to assist the Ramsar Convention Bureau with timely technical inputs, therefore synergy with this Workshop was tapped to assist the Ramsar Convention Bureau Scientific and Technical Review Panel with its work. Additional participants were invited from the Ramsar STRP panels. It was valuable because the parallel workshops provided practical work for members of Specialist Groups present, who otherwise would not have engaged in some purely scientific or technical discussions in this Workshop. Outcomes from the three Ramsar Workshops are presented in Appendix 1.

As part of the Workshop three parallel interactive sessions were also held on the second day (Sunday 5 November) dealing with Task-based working, Communications, and the Wetlands International-promoted Ramsar Training and Advisory Service. Little progress was made with task-based working, beyond acceptance of the principle. This topic is to be developed further as one of the actions listed in Section 5.

Background papers, and especially a Review paper, were supplied to Workshop participants. These papers should be referred to, therefore these Proceedings do not include details of the papers. Provided for reference in Appendix 3, is an Index to papers supplied and the timetabled session that referred to them. In addition, a draft of the 1996-1998 Triennial Reports from Specialist Groups was distributed to participants.

This summary of the Proceedings is presented to provide a record of the discussions, with a list of annotated end notes to identify key points and actions to bring forward. Finally, a table of prioritised actions is given, with lead responsibilities. Discussion time and informal meals in Wageningen were arranged for extra business to be done

#### **Opening of Workshop (Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> November)**

Welcome presentations were given by staff of Wetlands International:

Simon Nash, International Director  
Douglas Taylor, International Science Coordinator  
Gerard Boere, International Programme Coordinator

Evert Rougoor, Finance and Operations Manager  
Nicolette Petri, Administration Assistant

Apologies were received from: Kevin Erwin (Wetland Restoration), Stefan Pihl (Seaduck), Alan Johnson (Flamingo), Alain Crivelli (Pelican), Malcolm Coulter (Storks, Ibises, Spoonbills), Chris Tydeman (WWF), Jeff Kirby (Ducks), Jon Kusler (Wetlands & Water Resources), Barry Taylor (Rail)

### ***Introductory comments and aspirations***

All participants (40) were invited to introduce themselves, and state key issues for the Workshop. The main comments made included: That there is poor e.g. Asian and gender balance representation in Wetlands International across Specialist Groups. Therefore, take actions away from this meeting and implement better coverage and fairer representation.

Aim to build synergies between International Partners, Wetlands International and the shared expertise in the Specialist Groups

## **2. Comments on the opening review paper (from Plenary sessions)**

Where a Specialist Group identifies a need to work in developing countries, that Specialist Group will need Wetlands International help to raise necessary funds. One reason for poor Specialist Group coordination and representation in developing countries is that there are no funds to get the network up and running in those countries.

It was asserted that lots of funds are out there, but a strategic approach is required to obtain them, in order to build Specialist Group requests into this approach. However, Specialist Groups have in the recent past apparently not approached Wetlands International staff, especially country office coordinators, to seek support. However, an external group, the International Mire Conservation Group have approached Wetlands International to seek synergy in working.

Coordination is the key to the way forward. Workplans are needed to clearly get this area visible in communications with Specialist Groups

Beyond strategies and workplans, a catalyst is required, needing specific projects and targets to obtain funds. Current Specialist Group bias towards Europe and N America also distorts demands for support

Forward plans must be developed jointly by Wetlands International and Specialist Group. It is not good enough for staff to simply develop plans and then report these to Specialist Groups; Wetlands International consists of Specialist Groups and staff, therefore both must work together in a more integrated way. There is a need to start by reporting to Specialist Groups what is done NOW, before launching new plans, therefore send out existing Workplans now. Partner organisations should also be involved in this at the same time. There are at least two timescales of activity:

1. Cycle of activity – process driven by annual/triennial planning

## 2. Short term Project development areas

One single, annual, forward plan, incorporating both (or more) timescales is required from Wetlands International in communication with Specialist Groups and Partners.

In addition to inviting Specialist Groups to be involved with Wetlands International, should Wetlands International demand things of Specialist Groups? Rights and responsibilities are a key issue.

Round up of some big issues missed in the Review Paper: Assistance of the expert network as a whole is required, not just the Specialist Group Coordinator. A risk of too many forward plans whizzing about. Globalising expert networks is the big challenge – expert register or list may be a way forward.

IMCG were drawn in to cooperative working with Wetlands International not by financial support for the network, but for project activities. IMCG still has no funds. If Wetlands International wishes to use IMCG as a Specialist Group, then Wetlands International must fund or run this.

Need to consider a professional basis for supporting Specialist Groups, not good enough to do this via projects alone.

There is a need to deal with two separate sets of expert networks: Wetlands International's own Specialist Groups which are also involved in governance, and external groups, which are associated via MoUs. Both sets of relationships must continue in parallel.

*Birdlife, summary of relationship with Specialist Groups:*

The Specialist Group inheritance comes mainly from the former ICBP, IWRB, predecessors of Birdlife and Wetlands International respectively. Primary agenda is for work on globally threatened birds. Birdlife International acts as a "Specialist Group" for SSC. Documentation of globally threatened bird species, is its contribution towards the Red List. Birdlife International seeks all possible expertise: from individuals, part of groups, etc. IBA programme work also involves all appropriate experts. Monitoring of IBAs need to report at local national and global level, and involves the expert network. For the International Waterbird Census, Birdlife International intends to upgrade its relationship with Wetlands International and its Specialist Groups. Birdlife International values the inputs from good Specialist Groups, which can bring higher levels of attention to issues, than individuals may be able to do. Relationship is scale dependent, so at local and national level, a Specialist Group may not be relevant. Specialist Groups that exist by virtue of spontaneous working are the Specialist Groups most valued by Birdlife.

*IUCN-SSC view:*

120 Specialist Groups, for birds, share all waterbird groups with Wetlands International and Birdlife International. Quality of leadership and motivation are the key factors for IUCN. In the findings of a study of voluntarism across the SSC, the IUCN has divided Specialist Groups into four categories:

"Highly committed and very pro-active"

"Buried treasures", highly committed but not very visible or active

"Magnesium flares", suddenly very enthusiastic and active, then they fizzle out

"Ocean swell" – not committed and not active

### **3. General Discussions on Progress and outcomes**

(Plenary, 4 November, 16.15-17.30 and final plenary 5 November 12.00-12.30)

After the briefing and discussion sessions held earlier, these final plenary sessions aimed to capture statements from Wetlands International staff, Partners and from Specialist Group Coordinators, in order to achieve understanding and insights concerning problems, opportunities, and the way forward over these group identities and relationships.

A briefing was given by DT on the aims for the session, followed by brief statements from the leaders of the parallel Ramsar Workshops, including any recommendations for future working with Specialist Groups. These are reflected in the separate reports of these meetings.

The following is a summary of the main issues, needs, and suggestions from this plenary session, made in particular by Specialist Group Coordinators

The report on the SWOT analysis conducted by Wetlands International was seen as appropriate to the situation experienced by the Tour du Valat, home to three Specialist Groups. Overstretched staff, and poor communication in both directions were common problems, but the positive relationship with Wetlands International was also mentioned.

On another positive note, two project areas were identified for potential collaboration between Tour du Valat and Wetlands International (includes Specialist Groups) in collaborating on rice fields projects habitat in an Italian situation 5,000 square km, of which 1,500 sq. km rice fields, important for night herons, may be able to benefit from Wetlands International expertise, and for fundraising. Invasive species projects could also be the subject of cooperation. These examples come from an institution which is also a Specialist Group coordinator.

Suggestions for improvement included the need for more direct involvement in project development and fund raising, as a contribution from Wetlands International to the functioning of the Specialist Groups, over thematic and species issues. The importance of artificial habitats and endangered species on the global level was also mentioned.

The Goose Specialist Group, for example, was formerly well resourced as a Research Group of the former IWRB. Since Wetlands International's formation, Specialist Groups did not appear to be regarded as scientific research groups, rather they were seen as specialist advisors only. Poor engagement of Wetlands International in research was cited, and in particular, the Group did not want administrative duties assigned to it, instead of being seen as a research platform. Suggestions for support included the website, proper integration of the databases, production and distribution of a paper-based Newsletter, and travelling expenses for coordination. The advice is "keep it simple, and stick to research".

IUCN-SSC asked if there was already too much communication overload with Groups (the response was that this was not the case), and commented that the change of name from Research Groups was to harmonise labels, but did not change the tasks for Specialist Groups.

In general the Diver/Loon Specialist Group was satisfied with communications, and stated that the volunteers in the network (ca. 2000) accepted the need to work freely.

The Swan Specialist Group was concerned about the bottlenecks experienced by Coordinators in servicing the membership, and in particular about the poor regional network development, especially in Asia.

In respect to the suspended Hunting Group, the Woodcock and Snipe Coordinator called for re-activation of the Group. IUCN-SSC commented that the Sustainable Use Specialist Group has a good regional representation and could be useful in addressing harvest issues. CAFF countries also recently identified the need for figures on global waterbird harvest. In respect to some functions of the Hunting Group it was stated that existing waterbird groups might act as data holders, or take on some of these tasks to collect data.

The Education and Public Awareness Specialist Group were unclear about their function in their relationship with Wetlands International, because of the over-arching nature of the theme, and currently would prefer to work with the outreach agenda of the Ramsar Bureau. They also emphasised the need to look at new models to involve expertise from outside the organisation, and wanted task-based working, to reflect the changing demands upon Wetlands International and the Group, instead of continuing with the current Specialist Group system.

The Wetlands Inventory and Monitoring Group stated that Wetlands International has not yet after 5 years been able to accommodate the Specialist Groups effectively. Specialist Groups are professionals in their fields and in their posts within institutes, need to have returns on their investment over Specialist Group contributions. Wetlands International staff tended to go for project and programme money without inviting Specialist Group partnership. The result is that competition for funds was needlessly encouraged, and missed opportunities are the common result. Bring forward a projects development action plan for consideration, possible participation in and approval by Specialist Groups and other interested Partners.

More fundamentally, Specialist Groups were left out of the merger between IWRB, Asian Wetlands Bureau and Wetlands for the Americas, to form Wetlands International, and the current leadership should thoroughly brief staff about the role of Specialist Groups. A passive approach is not good enough. Bring forward training for staff, as a first step.

Wetlands International does not provide enough feedback or technical assistance to participating country members.

The emphasis should be on catalysing more effective involvement of the available expertise.

IUCN-SSC commented that "traditional" species-based Specialist Groups are increasingly distanced from the current priorities set by the ecosystem.

Birdlife International asked what is the incentive to be a member of a Wetlands International Specialist Group, and how do we find out about the rights and responsibilities of the relationship between Specialist Groups and

Wetlands International? Use an experts register for organising relationships, defining availability.

Wetlands International's science base is located outside the organisation, therefore Wetlands International should ensure full engagement with Specialist Groups and other groups. Realistic capacity within volunteer networks to take on tasks is, however, in question.

A formal network of associates is desired: well-managed expert network based on skills, for all Specialist Groups. Associates network can be much more than a simple consultant's relationship with Wetlands International.

Unresolved issues: Should Specialist Groups be treated differently from other groups? Perhaps only in governance. Develop joint work plans as the goal? No, perhaps we need more precise joint projects in forward plans.

Need more face to face plenary and break out sessions with Specialist Groups to get real work proposed agreed and done. Use needs as the key way forward, obtain means later.

Need more than just an Associates network, but need an active core membership with reciprocal rights, use letterhead and logos for this by developing a strong relationship with a smaller group of individuals

Give first call to Specialist Group Co-ordinators as a gateway, to find expertise, but use Associates network as a backup.

## 4. Conclusions

The discussions and recommendations arising from this Workshop call for many actions to be carried out in the short and long term by the governance and staff of Wetlands International, by Specialist Group coordinators and members, and by Partner organisations. Many of these actions are ongoing and essential part of normal working, however, they require explicit recognition and accountability when drawing up forward plans, or developing projects.

The discussion at the Workshop inevitably mixed *process* with *substance*. Ideally, relationships structures and procedures should serve substance, i.e. the technical and scientific work of Wetlands International. However, the Workshop provided a useful forum to Specialist Groups and Partners, which should provide a good basis for a renewal of the joint efforts of staff and experts around the world towards the common goals of wetlands conservation and wise use, based upon a sound science base.

In the endnotes shown below, the key points for action are listed. These are carried forward into the priority actions table which concludes this Proceedings. Some of the actions have deadline dates given or are marked ongoing, because they should be part of normal working. The proposed leader to carry out the action is also indicated. The International Coordination Unit is normally responsible for management of the relationship with Specialist Groups, and if in doubt, the ICU should be consulted.

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