

Raising the Profile of Wisconsin's Wetlands through International Recognition

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What do the cities of Kyoto, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, Bonn, Basel, Montreal and Ramsar have in common? Besides being stops on the itineraries of avid globetrotters, these cities are also sites of major international environmental agreements. Perhaps the least known of these cities is Ramsar, a northern Iranian resort town on the shores of the Caspian Sea known for its natural hot spring baths and pebble beaches. Ramsar has been host to many international events, including the 1971 *Convention on Wetlands of International Importance*.

Conservation of wetlands and migratory waterfowl were among the first environmental issues to be addressed under modern international agreements. While the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar) was ahead of its time, the provisions of the convention are modest compared with more recent international environmental agreements.



Ramsar is non-regulatory; contracting Parties (currently 154 countries) make commitments, but there is no funding or enforcement to ensure results. Parties commit to applying a “wise use” concept to all wetlands within their territory and to engage in international cooperation on wetland issues.

The primary, and most tangible, function of Ramsar is to establish and maintain the *List of Wetlands of International Importance*. According to the text of the convention, wetlands should be selected based on “international significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology.” There is special emphasis on waterfowl – “wetlands of international importance to waterfowl at any season should be included.” Parties are required to designate one or more domestic sites as Wetlands of International Importance and make a commitment to conserving these “Ramsar sites.” Currently, 1651 wetlands around the world, totaling nearly 150 million hectares, have been designated as Ramsar sites. The United States currently has just 22 Ramsar sites, including Wisconsin's Horicon Marsh (see article p. 5).

Movement is afoot in this country to recognize many more worthy wetland sites with the Ramsar designation. I was recently honored with an invitation to serve on the U.S. National Ramsar Committee, the organization leading the charge to support the goals of Ramsar within the United States. The committee's 20 members represent a variety of public agencies, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations. Recent committee discussions have focused on how to encourage and facilitate the designation of additional U.S. wetlands

for international recognition.

Informing this discussion is a new report by Royal C. Gardner and Kim Diana Connolly that summarizes a survey of the existing U.S. Ramsar sites to determine what benefits these sites have gained with international recognition. The survey illuminated three main benefits of Ramsar designation, including 1) increased success raising public and private funds for site protection and management, 2) increased local support and partnership for protection of the site and surrounding areas, and 3) increased attention from research scientists and ecotourists. All of these benefits add up to a greater capacity for protecting and managing these wetlands and their associated values that are important on local, regional, national and international scales.

Wisconsin Wetlands Association, along with many of our partners, is interested in drawing these benefits to more of our state's wetlands. While all of our wetlands have value and merit protection, the Ramsar designation must be reserved for wetlands that best meet Ramsar's selection criteria. WWA plans to convene and facilitate a state committee of wetland experts and partners that will develop a prioritized list of potential Ramsar sites in Wisconsin and work together to obtain Ramsar designation for selected sites. This effort will build on WWA's Wetland Threats Analysis project, which has identified high quality and important wetlands that are representative of the diversity of wetland types in different geographic regions of the state. *If you would like to participate in this effort, please contact Laura England (608-250-9971 or programs@wisconsinwetlands.org). For more information, visit www.ramsar.org and www.ramsarcommittee.us.*