Note

Regional priorities for wetlands conservation in West Asia and North Africa

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Though characterized by a scarcity of water, West Asia and North Africa region has a large number of wetlands of various types supporting a rich biodiversity. However, the government efforts to reverse the trend of wetlands degradation fail short of the policy goals due to various reasons. The paper outlines the priorities for wetlands conservation in the region. © 1997 United Nations

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North Africa and West Asia display a high degree of ecological homogeneity in terms of flora and fauna as well as biophysical and climatic features. The twin arid regions, connected until the recent past, by the corridor of Sinai, share similar ecological problems as well. Central to the ecological constraint of the region is the scarcity of water. Therefore, the biogeography of the region and, indeed, the patterns of its civilizations, have largely been defined by the availability or otherwise of water.

The region nevertheless has a large number of wetlands supporting a rich and varied biodiversity. The Ramsar Convention defines wetlands as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters”. Thus from Ichkeul Lake (Tunisia) to the Mesopotamian marshes (Iraq) to the Al Hair watercourse of Riyadh a wide range of lakes, pools, rivers, and streams, sabkhas, swamps, farm lagoons, irrigation reservoirs and mangroves is found in the region (see Figure 1 for the distribution of wetlands in Saudi Arabia). These wetlands serve as centres of biodiversity, as is illustrated by the presence of millions of migratory waterbirds at these sites.

The overriding importance of wetlands and their conservation has been recognized by the governments of the region and various governmental mechanisms for the management of wetlands have been established. West Asia and North Africa together have about 48.5 million ha under protection amounting to approximately 4% of the region’s total area, and key wetland habitats are placed within this network of protected areas (IUCN, 1990). Scott (1995) has identified 56 wetlands of international importance in West Asia that are under various degrees of protection, although the remaining 167 sites he lists receive no protection.

Governments’ endeavours to rationally manage wetlands often fall short of the policy goals. Such failures are due to a combination of reasons including lack of technical capacity, inadequacy of funds, misconceived approaches, and failure to involve local communities. Thus a large number of wetlands in the region are fast losing their ecological integrity and the damage will be irreversible unless urgent remedial action is taken. The major threats to wetland sites and their biodiversity are excessive hunting, irrigation projects, pollution, overgrazing of vegetation and land reclamation. Because of the cross cutting nature of the issues involved, wetland conservation could be addressed only as a cross-sectoral development issue, especially considering the economic functions of wetlands.
as well as the predicted water crisis in the region.

Priorities for action

The nature of the factors that threaten the resilience of wetland ecosystems shows that integrated planning of wetland management alone could offer an effective solution. Agenda 21 (United Nations, 1992) has identified fragmented responsibility for water resources development among different sectoral agencies as a serious impediment in integrated water management. Therefore, integration of the institutional structures for wetland and water management is of critical importance.

The countries of the region should be encouraged to fulfill their commitment made through Agenda 21 to formulate costed and targeted national action plans and investment programmes for water resource management. Governments should also be persuaded to seek optimization of water resources allocation under physical and socio-economic constraints as they have agreed through Agenda 21.

An overall attempt to expand the size of protected areas should be made. The 10% target set by the 1982 World Park Congress (McNeely and Miller, 1984) should be vigorously pursued and wetlands with high index of biodiversity should be prime candidates for protection. Local communities should be fully involved in the development of protected areas. Islamic law provides very effective and detailed provisions for water conservation and resource allocation. But in many cases the current water resources legislation in the region does not adequately make use of the relevant provisions of Islamic law. Therefore, a regional programme to develop a model legislation on wetland and water management based on Islamic law should be launched. Adoption of such legislation would have added possibilities for effective implementation.

Comprehensive information about the wetlands is crucial in order to develop feasible management regimes. Inventory development is currently at various levels of success in different countries, but is generally inadequate. Therefore developing comprehensive national inventories of wetland resources should be given priority. Socio-economic factors should be incorporated into such inventories.

Programmes for training of professionals in wetland and water management as a means to national capacity building should be developed. Since the region is still depen-
dent on often irrelevant outside expertise this assumes importance. Exchange of experts between countries as well as the establishment of mechanisms for regional training programmes should be vigorously pursued.

Considering the commonalities of problems in the region and the enormous potential of cooperation, governments in partnership with appropriate NGOs should seek to establish a regional body for wetland management. The fora offered by inter-governmental mechanisms such as Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab League, Organization of Islamic Conference etc could be mobilized towards this.

There are only two parties to the Ramsar Convention in West Asia although four countries of North Africa are parties to the treaty. While non-party states should be encouraged to become parties to the Ramsar Convention, a new track of international treaty approach may also be pursued. Most countries of the region are set to ratify the Biodiversity Convention and unlike most other environmental treaties this convention holds political clout, which is important in terms of implementation. Therefore governments may be encouraged to protect wetland biodiversity as an obligation towards the Biodiversity Convention. At the global level, an effort to develop a protocol for wetland biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, within the framework of the Biodiversity Convention, may be launched.

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