e-ISSN:2582-7219

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

Volume 6, Issue 6, June 2023

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.54

International Journal Of Multidisciplinary Research In Science, Engineering and Technology (IJMRSET)

| ISSN: 2582-7219 | www.ijmrset.com | Impact Factor: 7.54|

| Volume 6, Issue 6, June 2023 |

A Brief Review on Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and Its Mission

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ABSTRACT: The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat is an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of Ramsar sites (wetlands).[2] It is also known as the Convention on Wetlands. It is named after the city of Ramsar in Iran, where the convention was signed in 1971.

Every three years, representatives of the contracting parties meet as the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), the policy-making organ of the convention which adopts decisions (resolutions and recommendations) to administer the work of the convention and improve the way in which the parties are able to implement its objectives.[3] COP12 was held in Punta del Este, Uruguay, in 2015. COP13 was held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in October 2018.

KEYWORDS: Ramsar convention, wetlands, habitat, sustainable, sites, waterfowl, conservation

I.INTRODUCTION

The list of wetlands of international importance included 2,331 Ramsar sites in May 2018 covering over 2.1 million square kilometres (810,000 sq mi). The countries with most sites are the United Kingdom with 175 and Mexico with 142. The country with the greatest area of listed wetlands is Bolivia, with around 148,000 square kilometres (57,000 sq mi).[4]

The Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS) is a searchable database which provides information on each Ramsar site.[5]

As of 2016 there are 18 transboundary Ramsar sites, and 15 Ramsar regional initiatives covering regions of the Mediterranean, Asia, Africa, and South America.

The Ramsar Convention works closely with six other organisations known as international organization partners (IOPs). These are:

- BirdLife International
- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- International Water Management Institute (IWMI)
- Wetlands International
- WWF International
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)

These organizations support the work of the convention by providing expert technical advice, helping implement field studies, and providing financial support. The IOPs also participate regularly as observers in all meetings of the conference of the parties and as full members of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel.[1]

The convention collaborates with a network of partners:

- Biodiversity-related conventions including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the World Heritage Convention (WHC), and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES);
- Project funding bodies including global environmental funds, multilateral development banks and bilateral donors;

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- UN agencies such as UNEP, UNDP, UNESCO, and the UN Economic Commission for Europe, and specific programmes such as UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB);
- Non-governmental organizations including the Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, the Society of Wetland Scientists, the International Association for Impact Assessment, and many others;
- Since 1998 the convention has also benefited from a strong partnership with Danone including the Évian brand, and since 2007 from the Biosphere Connections partnership with the Star Alliance airline network.[2]

Conference of the Contracting Parties

- This is the convention's governing body consisting of all governments that have ratified the treaty. This ultimate authority reviews progress under the convention, identifies new priorities, and sets work plans for members. The COP can also make amendments to the convention, create expert advisory bodies, review progress reports by member nations, and collaborate with other international organizations and agreements.

The Standing Committee

- The Standing Committee is the intersessional executive body which represents the COP between its triennial meetings, within the framework of the decisions made by the COP. The contracting parties that are members of the Standing Committee are elected by each meeting of the COP to serve for the three years.[3]

The Scientific and Technical Review Panel

- The Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) provides scientific and technical guidance to the Conference of Contracting Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Ramsar Secretariat.

The Secretariat

The Secretariat carries out the day-to-day coordination of the convention's activities. It is based at the headquarters of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Gland, Switzerland.

The implementation of the Ramsar Convention is a continuing partnership between the Conference of Contracting Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Secretariat, with the advice of the subsidiary expert body, the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), and the support of the international organization partners (IOPs).

Musonda Mumba is the seventh secretary general of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.[4]

February 2 is World Wetlands Day, marking the convention's adoption on 2 February 1971. Established to raise awareness about the value of wetlands for humanity and the planet, WWD was celebrated for the first time in 1997, and has grown since then. In 2015 World Wetlands Day was celebrated in 59 countries. The convention was co-founded by Eskandar Firouz (former environment minister of Iran), Luc Hoffmann of Tour du Valat research station in the Camargue in France, and Geoffrey Matthews of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge in the late 1960s. The conference, which adopted the terms of the agreement, was held in the Iranian Caspian Sea resort of Ramsar on 2 February 1971.[6] The convention turned 50 in 2021.[7] Despite its quasi-universal application, the domestic response to this treaty is often half-hearted and inadequate. By way of example, Germany joined the Convention in 1976 and has, "to date, failed to give effect to the Ramsar Convention in the manner set out by the constitution of Germany."[8]

II.DISCUSSION

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance holds the unique distinction of being the first modern treaty between nations aimed at conserving natural resources. The signing of the Convention on Wetlands took place in 1971 at the small Iranian town of Ramsar. Since then, the Convention on Wetlands has been known as the Ramsar Convention.

The Ramsar Convention's broad aims are to halt the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain. This requires international cooperation, policy making, capacity building and technology transfer.

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Under the Ramsar Convention, a wide variety of natural and human-made habitat types ranging from rivers to coral reefs can be classified as wetlands. Wetlands include swamps, marshes, billabongs, lakes, salt marshes, mudflats, mangroves, coral reefs, fens, peat bogs, or bodies of water - whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary. Water within these areas can be static or flowing; fresh, brackish or saline; and can include inland rivers and coastal or marine water to a depth of six metres at low tide. There are even underground wetlands.[5]

The Ramsar Convention encourages the designation of sites containing representative, rare or unique wetlands, or wetlands that are important for conserving biological diversity. Once designated, these sites are added to the Convention's List of Wetlands of International Importance and become known as Ramsar sites. In designating a wetland as a Ramsar site, countries agree to establish and oversee a management framework aimed at conserving the wetland and ensuring its wise use. Wise use under the Convention is broadly defined as maintaining the ecological character of a wetland. Wetlands can be included on the List of Wetlands of International Importance because of their ecological, botanical, zoological, limnological or hydrological importance.

For a wetland to be designated to this list it must satisfy one or more of the criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance.

Australia designated the world's first Wetland of International Importance in 1974: Cobourg Peninsula in the Northern Territory. Australia currently has 66 Wetlands of International Importance listed under the Ramsar Convention, covering approximately 8.3 million hectares, an area greater than Scotland or Tasmania.

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar Convention) was signed in Ramsar, Iran on 2 February 1971. The Ramsar Convention aims to halt the worldwide loss of wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain. The Convention encourages member countries to nominate sites containing representative, rare or unique wetlands, or that are important for conserving biological diversity, to the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites). Australia was one of the first countries to become a Contracting Party to the Convention and designated the world's first Ramsar site, Cobourg Peninsula, in 1974.[6]

Australia's 65 Ramsar sites cover more than 8.3 million hectares, forming an impressive estate of diverse wetland types; freshwater and marine; permanent and ephemeral; in every climatic zone. The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) establishes a framework for managing Ramsar wetlands. Under Schedule 6 of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2000 general principles are outlined for the management of wetlands of international importance. In addition to the Australian Ramsar management principles, other guiding principles are ones established by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

Australian Ramsar management principles cover matters relevant to the preparation of Ramsar site management plans, including community consultation processes.

A management plan for a Ramsar wetland cannot be recognised by the Australian Government as a Ramsar management plan unless it is in accordance with these principles. The principles may also be used for the management of any wetland throughout Australia.

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Concerns about the loss of wetlands and waterbirds throughout Europe in the 1960s led to the creation of the first modern international treaty aimed at managing natural resources sustainably. The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar Convention) was signed in Ramsar, Iran on 2 February 1971. The Ramsar Convention aims to halt the worldwide loss of all wetlands and to conserve, through wise use and management, those that remain.

The Convention encourages member countries to nominate sites that are important for ecological, botanical, zoological, limnological or hydrological significance, to the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites). Member countries are obliged to promote the conservation of Ramsar wetlands and wise use of all wetlands and work to ensure that Ramsar sites are managed to protect their ecological character. To mark the anniversary of the signing of the treaty, World Wetlands Day is celebrated on 2 February each year to raise public awareness about wetlands and promote their conservation and wise use.[8]

III.RESULTS

The Convention's mission is "the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world".Wetlands are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems. They provide essential services and supply all our fresh water. However they continue to be degraded and converted to other uses. The Convention uses a broad definition of wetlands. It includes all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans.Under the "three pillars" of the Convention, the Contracting Parties commit to:work towards the wise use of all their wetlands;designate suitable wetlands for the list of Wetlands of International Importance (the "Ramsar List") and ensure their effective management;cooperate internationally on transboundary wetlands, shared wetland systems and shared species.

The mission of the Ramsar Convention is "Conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world".
The wise use of wetlands, defined as "the maintenance of ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development", contributes to poverty eradication, as has been expressed in Resolutions of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention and reflected in the Wise Use Handbook.
Wetlands are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems. They provide essential services and supply all of our fresh water. Beyond water availability and quality, they are invaluable in supporting climate change mitigation and adaption, disaster risk reduction, supporting health as well as livelihoods, local development and poverty eradication. Investment in maintenance of the services provided by wetlands should be integral to poverty-reduction strategies and related policies and plans. It is thus central to implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development agenda and the SDGs.

Wetlands play a role in improving human well-being, including through poverty reduction. While poverty alleviation is a key target for some parts of the world, the principle that conservation and wise use of wetlands will help reduce poverty and promote human well-being is well recognized as wetlands provide a wide range of environmental services vital for local communities and can form a key element of their livelihood strategies.

Ramsar Contracting Parties have provided an overarching framework to address issues of poverty eradication in relation to wetland conservation and wise use in various COP Resolutions, such as Resolution IX.14 on Wetlands and poverty reduction, Resolution X.3 The Changwon Declaration on human well-being and wetlands, Resolution X.28 on Wetlands and poverty eradication and Resolution XI.13 An Integrated Framework for Linking Wetland Conservation and Wise Use with Poverty Eradication. The framework is focused on the vital link between wetlands, livelihoods and the well-being of people around the world, as well as the importance of providing the guidance and mechanisms for underpinning this vital link and the

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valuable contribution that wetland ecosystem services can make to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 1.

The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024 also contributes to the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 1 (Poverty eradication), Goal 2 (End hunger and promote sustainable agriculture), Goal 6 (Ensure water and sanitation for all), in particular target 6.6.1 , Goal 13 (Combat climate change), Goal 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources), Goal 15 (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems) and Goal 17 (Strengthen means of implementation). The following link provides a reference to how the Ramsar Strategic Plan contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals: http://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/ramsarsp4_sdglinks_poster_e.pdf.

(B) The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges

Wetlands are the most threatened ecosystems, with higher rates of loss and greater numbers of threatened species than any other type of ecosystem. The degradation and loss of wetlands is more rapid than that of any other ecosystem (with a loss of 64% to 71%of wetlands since 1900), and this trend is accelerating, because of major changes in land use, water diversions, and infrastructure development. Similarly, the status of both freshwater and coastal wetland species is deteriorating faster than that of species inhabiting other ecosystems. Populations of freshwater species have declined by 37% in 38 years, between 1970 and 2008, a larger decline than for any other biome.

Access to freshwater is declining for 1-2 billion people worldwide; some 1.1 billion people worldwide lack access to water; and a total of 2.7 billion find water scarce for at least one month of the year. By 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world's population could be living under water stressed conditions.This in turn negatively affects food production, human health, and economic development, and can increase societal conflict.

There is an urgent need to improve water governance. Water governance that is demand-driven promotes over-allocation of water, as a result of increasing demand and over-use of water. Instead, water governance should treat wetlands as our “natural water infrastructure”, integral to water resource management at the scale of river basins. Actions to support water allocation to ecosystems, such as environmental flows, placing upper limits on water allocations (water ‘caps’), and new water management legislation, must be strengthened.

Without wetlands, the water cycle, carbon cycle and nutrient cycle would be significantly altered, mostly detrimentally. Yet policies and decisions do not sufficiently take into account these interconnections and interdependencies.[9]

Action is needed to maintain the benefits provided by wetlands for economic development and the livelihoods of people, especially the poor. Wetlands provide natural infrastructure that can help meet a range of policy objectives. Even with current attempts to maintain water flows for ecosystems, the capacity of wetlands to continue to deliver benefits to people and biodiversity, including clean and reliable water supplies, is declining.

Wise use, management and restoration of wetlands should help to build opportunities for improving people’s livelihoods. Wetland degradation affects livelihoods and exacerbates poverty, particularly in marginalised and vulnerable sections of society. Setting of well-stated goals for restoration of wetlands offers an efficient and cost-effective means of increasing ground and surface water storage, improving water quality, sustaining agriculture and fisheries, and protecting biodiversity.

Protect our wetlands. Commitments and measures taken by Ramsar’s 169 Contracting Parties to identify Sites of International Importance and to conserve all their wetlands are an important contribution to the implementation of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

Improving the ecosystem services of water and wetlands can have a positive effect on poverty alleviation by contributing to food, water and energy security. By addressing several policy objectives and understanding the values and benefits that water and wetlands provide to society, such improvement creates a more sustainable foundation for management action to protect and enhance water and wetland ecosystem services.

Stop our wetlands from becoming degraded or lost. Wetland loss can lead to significant reductions in human well-being, and can have negative economic impacts on communities, for example through exacerbating water security problems. It is important to recognize that we all depend on healthy wetlands for our water security.[10]

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(C) Valuable Lessons Learned On Eradicating Poverty And Promoting Prosperity

Resolution XI.13 (2012) An Integrated Framework for Linking Wetland Conservation and Wise Use with Poverty Eradication of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands encourages Contracting Parties to utilise the framework provided in conducting assessments of interlinkages between wise use and poverty in wetlands and within the development of site level management plans, as well as using it as a means to develop collaboration and cooperation with development agencies to address poverty issues within wetlands.

In accordance with this Resolution, and the work plan of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel of the Convention, a review was conducted of nine case studies and best practices on the application of the framework for assessing poverty in wetlands in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Some of the key lessons learned from these case studies are:

Lobbying can be effective in influencing policy. To influence key decision-makers, it is essential to use well-informed arguments, and a knowledge of the economic value of a wetland can provide valuable support;

Traditional knowledge should be utilised. A key element of the participatory approach is placing value on traditional knowledge. This can be used to understand issues from the local stakeholder's perspective;

Poor communities should be engaged in alternative livelihood strategies. The feasibility of alternative livelihood strategies must be understood before being implemented, otherwise the desired outcomes may not be achieved. To ensure the participation of the poor in these activities there is merit in demonstrating the advantages of full participation and providing space for local communities to become involved;

A long timeframe maybe needed. It is clear from the case studies that a long time frame is often required for projects to effectively balance poverty eradication with wise use of wetlands. On the other hand, from the review of National Wetland Policies or similar instruments adopted by Contracting Parties, by 2012 a total of 68 countries had developed poverty-reduction strategy papers, and these were amongst the poorest countries in the word. Wetland Polices have shown a good integration of Ramsar wise-use principles, which incorporate the sustainable use of wetland resources to benefit local communities.

By COP12, in 2015, 39% of Contracting Parties had incorporated wetland issues in poverty-eradication strategies and 16% had implemented wetland programmes or projects that contributed to poverty alleviation objectives or food and water security plans . This progress clearly contributes to SDG Goal 1 and Target 1.1, as well to Ramsar Strategic Plan Target 1 and Aichi Biodiversity Target 2.

(D) Emerging Issues Likely To Affect The Realization Of Poverty Eradication And Achieving Prosperity[11]

Wetland loss and degradation

Wetland ecosystem services (the benefits people derive from wetlands) form an integral part of the livelihood strategy of wetland-dependent communities. Failure to follow wise-use principles can prevent a recovery from poverty or can push people into poverty or deeper into poverty than they were.

Policies that trigger deterioration

It is clear that policy changes can improve the well-being of communities and maintain good ecological character of wetlands. Conversely, a policy change that triggers deterioration in ecological character beyond the limit of natural tolerance can push communities into poverty.

Ecosystem functions and the ecosystem services they provide to people and nature

The services, benefits, values, functions, goods and products that wetlands provide have not yet been integrated in national development plans. The lack of recognition of the role of wetlands in facilitating the human right to water and poverty reduction, and the modesty of the efforts invested in restoring wetlands, both contribute to a continued failure to realise the potential benefits of wetlands. The integral values and benefits, both material and non-material for people and nature, in a non-consumptive approach, include spiritual, existential and future-oriented values.

Climate change

The adverse effects of climate change, such as sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and changes in hydrology and in the temperature of water bodies, will lead to a reduction in the services provided by wetlands. Removing the existing pressures on wetlands and improving their resiliency is the most effective method of coping with the adverse effects of climate change. Conserving, maintaining, or rehabilitating wetland ecosystems can be a viable element in an overall climate change mitigation strategy.

(E) Areas Where Political Guidance By The High-Level Political Forum Is Required

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Water security

Wetlands play an important role in ensuring water security and are fundamental to human health and well-being. The role played by wetlands within the hydrological cycle provides an important opportunity for linking local public health concerns to wetland conservation.

Food security

Food security is one of the most significant contributions of wetlands to human health. Wetlands contribute to all three elements of food security, i.e. availability, access, and nutrient sufficiency. They also directly support the health and livelihoods of millions of people worldwide through the provision of important food items such as rice and fish. Almost a billion households in Asia, Africa and the Americas depend on rice growing and processing for their main livelihoods. More than 660 million people rely on fishing and aquaculture for a living; most commercial fish breed or spawn in coastal wetlands, and 40 % of all fish consumed are raised in aquaculture.

Future food security is also dependent on the genetic materials contained in plants, including those in wetlands. Wetlands also provide products that form the basis of subsistence incomes for local communities.

Cross-sectoral approaches

A conceptual shift among policy-makers and decision-makers is required to ensure that cross-sectoral approaches are adopted and implemented, incorporating the principles of consultation and transparency, and ensuring the long-term future of the services provided and supported by wetlands. As these approaches place greater emphasis on the sustainable use of wetlands and their resources, they will better support sustainable development and improved human well-being.

(F) Policy Recommendations On Ways To Accelerate Progress For Those At Risk Of Being Left Behind[12]

Addressing indirect and direct drivers of change

Many of the responses designed with a primary focus on wetlands and water resources will not be sustainable or sufficient unless other indirect and direct drivers of change are addressed. For example, the sustainability of protected areas for wetlands will be severely threatened by human-caused climate change. Similarly, the management of ecosystem services cannot be sustainable globally if the growth in consumption of services continues unabated. Responses also need to address the conditions that determine the effectiveness and degree of implementation of the wetland-focused actions.

Consideration of the trade-offs among different wetland ecosystem services and the need for cooperation across sectors

It is not uncommon for strategies aiming to increase food production and reduce poverty to propose the conversion of marshes to agriculture, conversion of mangroves to aquaculture, and significant increases in the use of fertilizers to increase crop production. Such actions, however, reduce wetland habitat area (and hence the magnitude of the services they provide), increase the input of water pollutants, remove the natural water-filtering service provided by wetlands, and remove ecosystem services provided by mangroves, such as timber and charcoal supply and fish habitat, on which the poor in particular rely. This will make the development goal of improved water and sanitation more difficult to achieve and may increase poverty for some groups. In contrast, a development strategy that aims to safeguard the full range of benefits provided by wetlands might better achieve the set of development goals while minimizing future harm to the wetlands.

Wetland restoration

A primary goal of wetland recovery projects is to restore and enhance wetland benefits by re-establishing natural ecological processes. Some wetland functions can be mimicked with engineered structures, but engineered methods typically do not provide the maximum ecological benefit. The key to success is the setting of well-stated goals that form part of a broader comprehensive and rigorous process for planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the restoration projects and adopting an adaptive management approach.

Systems of protected areas in international, regional, sub-regional, and national frameworks

A regional or landscape approach is necessary especially for aquatic systems that are not easily “fenced” from surrounding areas. Protected area networks at all levels, including the designation and management of Ramsar sites (currently 2,741) play an important role, especially as individual sites are often functionally interconnected by reason of shared hydrology, migratory species, and so on.

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Climate change

Removing the existing pressures on wetlands and improving their resilience is the most effective method of coping with the adverse effects of climate change. Sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and changes in hydrology and the temperature of water bodies will lead to a reduction in the goods and services provided by wetlands. Further, efforts to respond to climate change may have equally negative and compounding effects on freshwater and coastal zone ecosystems. Information about the consequences of climate change on specific wetland types and river basins is sorely needed to allow managers of water resources and wetlands to integrate changes in climate into their planning and management efforts. Conserving, maintaining, or rehabilitating wetland ecosystems can be a viable element of an overall climate-change mitigation strategy.

IV.CONCLUSIONS

The Ramsar Convention, signed in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran, is the only global treaty that focuses specifically on wetlands. Today 170 nations are signatories to the Ramsar Convention. A contracting party agrees to nominate at least one wetland in its territory to the List of Wetlands of International Importance based on enumerated criteria. By August 6, 2018, over 2323 wetland areas were inscribed on the Ramsar List, comprising over 248 million ha (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2018). In addition, contracting parties agree to manage all their wetlands based on the concept of "wise use." Wise use means the maintenance of the ecological character of the wetland and allowance of sustainable use for the benefit of people and the environment. The Convention also mandates contracting parties to adopt National Wetland Policies, produce wetland inventories, conduct wetland monitoring and research, raise public awareness of wetlands, and develop integrated management plans for wetlands sites. The Ramsar Secretariat has prepared numerous manuals to assist wetland decision-makers. Ramsar Handbook 18 contains Guidelines for Wetland Management (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2010b). Ramsar Handbook 12 concerning Coastal Management also stresses many of the same principles that should guide management of coastal wetlands (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2010a). In 2002, the eighth Conference of the contracting parties to the Ramsar Convention (COP-8) adopted Resolution VIII.14—"New Guidelines for Management Planning for Ramsar Sites and Other Wetlands." At the COP-8, contracting parties also adopted specific Ramsar guidelines for mangrove management—Resolution VIII.32—"Conservation, Integrated Management, and Sustainable Use of Mangrove Ecosystems and their Resources."[12]

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Impact Factor
7.54

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

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