

ENTREVISTA / INTERVIEW

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MedWet is a long term initiative

– ***What are the most significant achievements of the Ramsar Bureau?***

– The Ramsar Convention was adopted in 1971 and came into force in 1975. At the outset, the “bureau duties” were carried out by IUCN with strong support from IWRB (now renamed Wetlands International). A full time Bureau or Secretariat was only established by the Contracting Parties in 1988. So the achievements of the Bureau have to be seen in the context of the earlier work of IUCN and IWRB.

The main achievement really is to have given full government recognition, through an intergovernmental treaty, to wetlands; to have their own convention. It should not be forgotten that the word “wetland” (in English, as well as other languages) is a new coinage which covers a very broad range of habitats –not just marshes or freshwater swamps, but also lakes, rivers, coastal lagoons, peatlands, mangroves, even coral reefs. Before Ramsar there was no coordinating conception of this type.

To be fully effective, any treaty needs a secretariat; while the partial conservation work on the ground (conserving sites, developing policies and regulations), is done by governments, the Bureau supports and encourages them to fulfill their obligations under the Convention.

– ***How do you see the evolution of Mediterranean wetlands in the last 15 years? Have their natural values really improved and have they been given greater consideration at political level, or do they continue to be threatened by economic pressures?***

– Despite all the efforts of the Ramsar Convention and others, it is clear that wetlands are still being lost in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. At the Brisbane

Conference, the French delegation made a fascinating presentation on an exercise carried out in France at official level, which showed that, in spite of the work of the Environment Ministry, public policies were still destroying wetlands in France; at a slower rate than before perhaps, but nevertheless there was still loss through official government policies. And I have no doubt that the same is true all over the Mediterranean. There are enormous efforts made, there are successes in individual sites, more and more money is being devoted by governments and private bodies to wetlands; yet there remains a great deal to do.

The French example is particularly significant, because it lays the emphasis on policy work: wetlands are being destroyed not by the administrations responsible for environmental matters, but by transport, infrastructure, housing, industry, agriculture. This is why policies are necessary, at Mediterranean or national level; these must deal not only with nature conservation, but with every aspect of national policy that affects wetlands, and must be accepted by all the ministries concerned. This is the essence of the Ramsar concept of “wise use of wetlands”, a difficult concept because it requires a complete rethink by a large number of administrations of how they work.

A specific problem in the Mediterranean is the link between water and wetlands. Many countries have a national water supply policy. How many of these take account of the wetlands where much of the water comes from? Water will be a world priority in the next century, the Mediterranean will be one of the first areas to experience it, and so can offer solutions to other regions.

Another problem in the Mediterranean is the lack of management measures at wetlands. Many sites have been designated as Ramsar sites, but most lack an

overall management plan, which takes account of all the site's functions and values (ie. not only nature conservation) and implicates all the administrations and actors which impact the site. Management plans are too often concerned with only one sector.

– Wat is your evaluation of the results of the MedWet project?

– The MedWet project is having the same effects on a Mediterranean regional basis; furthermore it is a very broad partnership which rings together all the different players in the wetland story: governments, nongovernmental bodies and specialized technical institutions. It should be emphasized that MedWet is not simply a project, but a broader long term initiative. There was a first MedWet project, funded by the European Commission (75 %), by EU member states and NGOs, which lasted from 1992-1996; this project provided Mediterranean wetland methodologies in a number of fields (inventory, management, training, public awareness, use of research results), and developed a Mediterranean Wetland Strategy, approved at methodologies in Albania, Algeria, Croatia, Morocco and Tunisia: and there is work for at least 20 years ahead in implementing the Strategy. The Ramsar Standing Committee has agreed to the establishment of a Mediterranean Wetland Committee under the aegis of Ramsar, with a MedWet coordinator and coordination units in Greece and France; the Committee will maintain the mixture of governmental and no-governmental involvement, with the aim of putting the Strategy into action.

Mediterranean Wetlands require immediate action for their conservation and wise use, because of the pressure –human, tourist, meteorological, developmental– to which they are subjected. The MedWet initiative is an essential long term instrument, both at site level and in terms of policies, to respond to the threats to which they are exposed.