

ENTREVISTA / INTERVIEW

Michael Moser, Director Wetlands International

*“Support of local communities is a pre-requisite
for wetland conservation”*

*El apoyo de las comunidades locales es un requisito indispensable
para el éxito en la conservación de humedales*

– ¿What are the objectives of Wetlands International?

– Wetlands International (recently formed from an integration of the IWRB, Asian Wetland Bureau and Wetlands for the Americas) is an international NGO whose efforts focus solely on the conservation of wetlands. We are working in more than 100 countries worldwide. Early in our development, we worked to gain governmental commitment to wetland conservation through the development of the Ramsar Convention. Our priority has now shifted to supporting countries throughout the world to implement the objectives of this and other treaties related to wetlands. For this, we have decentralised our programme implementation through three regional headquarters (in Malaysia, the Netherlands and Canada) and a number of sub-regional offices, which provide support to our extensive network of collaborators.

– Which solutions could be developed to save coastal wetlands subject to great demographic and socio-economic pressures, as in the case of Mediterranean wetlands?

– The Mediterranean coastal zone is one of the most complex places to conserve wetlands, due to the intense pressures from population growth, agriculture, tourism and industrial development. While protected areas are a useful tool to conserve some of the most important sites, the future of Mediterranean wetlands will only be safeguarded by a raised awareness at all levels of the valuable services and functions provided by wetlands, and

by an improved land-use planning. Enormous losses of wetlands have already occurred, and the challenge is not only to stop, but to reverse this process through restoration and rehabilitation measures.

– What role do NGOs play in wetland conservation?

– NGOs have a vital role to play, because they are independent, flexible and often close to the ground. Critically important is the role of NGOs in raising public awareness, and thereby in influencing policy through national and local government. As government budgets for wetland conservation diminish, the role of NGOs in providing information, expertise, and even in safeguarding important sites is rising.

– What role do local communities play in wetland conservation? Why do local communities not want legal protection of the wetlands?

– Support of local communities is a pre-requisite for successful wetland conservation. That support is only going to be gained if the local communities can see benefits from conserving a wetland, rather than converting it to other uses. Such benefits might include flood protection, improvements in water supply and quality, recreation and tourism values, cultural and landscape values, wetland products. Of particular importance is to examine how farmers can obtain economic benefits from conserving wetlands through incentives, creative income schemes (eg. tourism, sustainable hunting) and other measures. Without a clear understanding

of these benefits, local communities and particularly landowners will always be sceptical to legal protection for their wetlands.

– How do you see the future of Mediterranean wetlands after the last meetings, reports, international projects (MedWet) and strategies?

- The Medwet initiative has already made a significant contribution to wetland conservation; it has established networks and partnerships, developed methodologies, and demonstrated the application of these methodologies in many sites and countries. Awareness of wetland conservation has also risen throughout the region as a result. Although it will take longer than most of us would wish, the momentum continues to build - and the recent allocation of 15 million US dollars to the programme by the Global Environment Facility indicates that the issue is being taken seriously. A raised awareness, and a better coordination at all levels provides great hope for the future.

– Do you think the Natura 2000 network will be the key to protection of European Wetlands?

- The development of the Natura 2000 network of sites of importance for nature conservation across the European Union is certainly a vital step for wetland conservation. Such an approach is particularly valuable for providing protection, backed by strong legislation, for the most important sites containing critical habitats or species; and of course the concept works well for maintaining the network of sites that form the flyways used by migratory waterbirds.

However, the Natura 2000 network has a particular weakness for wetland conservation, in that wetlands can only be conserved through an ecosystem-based approach to their management. Simply protecting a wetland site will be ineffective if there are not also measures to ensure that water quality and quantity are maintained elsewhere in the catchment. Thus, Natura 2000 will only work for wetlands if there are additional measures to ensure sustainable development at catchment (or ecosystem) level.