

## **Report at the end of my second term as Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Martha Rojas Urrego - 29 July 2022**

As I end my second term as the Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands on 21 August 2020, I would like to share some reflections about these six years. When I took office on 22 August 2016, I conducted a wide consultation with Contracting Parties, all staff and key partners, and I identified five areas for strengthening the Secretariat's operations:

- Strengthening service to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability;
- Increasing relevance of wetlands and the Convention to global sustainable development policy objectives;
- Strengthening support and enabling implementation;
- Enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention; and
- Strengthening the Secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness.

I focused the Secretariat's work in these improvement areas, which are in line with the mandate from Contracting Parties, and I have reported on them in my annual reports to the Standing Committee, as well as in my reports to COP13 and COP14, which cover the work carried out in the two triennia under my tenure. The full reports provide more detailed analysis including achievements and challenges and are available in the transparency page in the Convention's website at [link](#) and links to SG report to COP13 ([link](#)) and to COP14 ([link](#)). On that basis, I would like to provide some main achievements below, focusing on the work of the Secretariat's team, but noting that this was in support to Contracting Parties, whose role in the achievements listed was of course essential.

### **1. Importance of wetlands elevated on the international stage**

Despite the fact that the Convention is a strong legal instrument, with sound technical guidance and strong commitment from Administrative Authorities, the values and contributions of wetlands have not been sufficiently recognized outside of the wetland community. It was thus strategic to elevate their importance and the crucial role they play as solutions to reversing biodiversity loss, tackling climate change, and achieving the broader 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The Secretariat's capacities and engagement were therefore strengthened to engage in key strategic policy processes, and to increase its outreach, creating enabling conditions to foster further action and support. Main highlights:

- **World Wetlands Day (WWD) recognized as a United Nations (UN) day by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 30 August 2021**

The Secretariat actively engaged in the development and implementation of COP13 Resolution XIII.1, supporting Contracting Parties in the drafting and negotiation of the UNGA resolution, creating awareness through a high-level event, and engaging all Parties. The impact of the adoption of this UN observance was already seen in WWD 2022, with 436 million social media posts, strong engagement of UN agencies (videos and social media by UN Secretary General and heads of major agencies) and enhanced visibility (webpage in UN site). The UNGA resolution also created an important opportunity to report annually to UNGA and to present substantive resolutions on wetlands in the coming sessions.

- **Convention appointed as co-custodian with UNEP of SDG 6.6.1. on changes in extent of water-related ecosystems**

When I joined the Secretariat, an expert group set up by UN DESA was developing the indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including for SDG 6.6.1. on the extent of water-related ecosystems. The Convention had already a mechanism in place to measure changes in wetlands' extent through the Parties' work on national wetlands inventories. It also had a reporting mechanism in place to report on extent since 2018 through national reports. It was thus crucial to position the Convention to provide these nationally validated data. The Secretariat thus worked with the UN expert group and with the Standing Committee to get instructions, and as a result the Convention was appointed as co-custodian for this indicator in 2017. This has elevated the relevance of the Convention to the SDG agenda and of Contracting Parties' work in developing inventories and reporting on extent. It has also contributed to creating synergies among Ramsar and the SDGs process, while efforts are ongoing to have this also as an indicator of the post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

- **Wetlands and Convention positioned in the emerging post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and consolidated collaboration with the CBD**

Building on a long-term collaboration with the CBD, the Secretariat strengthened and focused its work resulting in: freshwater and marine and coastal ecosystems and the use of the Convention's indicators, especially SDG 6.6.1., are included in the current draft of the GBF; the Convention is positioned as a key mechanism to achieve GBF outcomes; priorities of the Convention have been included in CBD guidance to GEF; and joint Ramsar-CBD work programme has been reviewed in the two conventions, with readiness for a renewed joint work programme in the context of the GBF. The Secretariat is also an engaged member of the Biodiversity Liaison Group, fostering joint work and positioning, especially in the context of the GBF.

- **Strengthened contribution of wetlands and the Convention to climate change, oceans, water, biodiversity-related conventions, gender equality and other SDGs**

The Secretariat has stepped up its work in promoting the key role of wetlands to adapt and mitigate climate change, with special focus on peatlands and blue carbon, leveraging evidence from the products of the Scientific, Technical Review Panel (STRP). It has also been deeply engaged in the global ocean agenda, with high level roles in the 2017 and 2022 Ocean Summit, with a clear improvement in the consideration of marine and coastal ecosystems and explicit reference to wetlands in the 2022 Conference. Deliberate attention has also been given to water, with a perceived increase in the consideration of wetlands as being critical for water availability and quality. The Secretariat has also engaged in other key fora and processes, such as UNEA, IPBES, and the IUCN Congress, become a partner in the UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration, and contributed to other processes detailed in my full Secretary General reports. It is worthwhile to mention that during my tenure, the Convention adopted the first resolution on gender and wetlands, thus becoming also more engaged in this important area. The Secretariat also enhanced engagement of Geneva missions to the UN through annual briefings (except during the pandemic), with a session scheduled in September 2022.

- **Increased impact of signature global campaigns and outreach**

Six campaigns for World Wetlands Day were rolled-out during my tenure. As mentioned above, the recognition of WWD as a UN day, significantly increased the impact of this initiative in which all Parties engage, with the Secretariat providing an enabling role. I would like to highlight that the messaging and visuals for WWD (poster, animations, fact sheets) have received very positive compliments as being notable among those of other Multilateral Environmental Agreements

(MEAs). During my tenure, the Secretariat also launched the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary campaign and, although it was impacted by the postponement of COP14, it mobilized considerable interest and action, including through the engagement of youth. The Convention's City Accreditation process also contributed to raising awareness. CEPA was actively engaged in these initiatives.

Various communications efforts also contributed to increasing the visibility of wetlands, including: website (with increased visits across the two triennia and a 45% increase in the last year); social media (76 million impressions in this triennium representing a 74% increase from the last triennium); newsletter; and capacity developed for video filming and editing to respond to higher demands. As Secretary General I delivered numerous statements, videos, and opinion pieces published in major news outlets. As an example, an opinion piece I published with the UNFCCC Executive Secretary on climate change and wetlands was published in over 30 media outlets with potential viewership of 10 million people. Finally, the Secretariat played a key role in helping the STRP products to be communicable and policy relevant, as explained below.

Moving forward, the adoption of WWD by the UN and the appointment as co-custodian of SDG 6.6.1. have long lasting impact. The policy work of the Secretariat during these two triennia has positioned the Convention on a strong footing in the most relevant policy process, creating a place for the Convention in the international scene, including opportunities for high level engagement. In order to deliver on its full potential, the work of the SC Working Group on the Observer Status is very relevant to address the Secretariat's limitations of access to UNGA, ECOSOC, UN Water and other key fora. The communications work has reached a broader audience. And together, this has created enhanced opportunities for getting stronger support and investment on wetlands, as solutions to address the major challenges of the world.

## 2. **Governance and decision-making processes of the Convention effectively and consistently serviced, including during the pandemic**

A major area for improvement identified at the beginning of my tenure was the delivery of the Secretariat's core role of servicing the governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention. Highlights of actions taken and results are the following:

- **Capabilities of the Secretariat strengthened and a whole-of- Secretariat approach in place** to organize all aspects of the meetings. This included revision of job descriptions and recruitment of needed capacities, and allocation and coordination of responsibilities across all staff.
- **New tools and technologies put in place** during these two triennia, most notably:
  - o a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database, which is being used to manage all contacts of Contracting Parties, distribution of formal communications including diplomatic notes, and registration to all meetings of the governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention
  - o technology to hold virtual meetings, which proved particularly important during the pandemic, with support provided to participants and all virtual meetings run successfully, resulting in efficient decision-making and continued operations during the pandemic; and
  - o other technologies to manage workflows in different areas, such as documentations and logistics.
- **Standardized processes and feedback mechanisms in place.** Processes were rolled out with strict applications of the Rules of Procedure and decisions from Parties. On the basis of feedback

and lessons learned, Standard Operating Procedures were developed covering the different aspects of the organization of meetings of the governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention.

The result was the successful organization of **one ordinary meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP13), one extraordinary meeting of the COP held virtually (ExCOP3), seven meetings of the Standing Committee (two virtual) and 4 meeting of the STRP (one virtual); support provided to the numerous working groups, including the Finance Subgroup; intersessional decision making; and 15 pre-COP regional preparatory meetings; and ongoing preparations for COP14.**

Feedback from surveys to participants to different meetings was that the meetings were well organized and that the online meeting technology had worked well. A highlight was ExCOP3, held in October 2021 as a result of the postponement of COP14. The Secretariat organized the virtual COP and supported the complex decision-making process including the management of credentials and quorum of two thirds of all Parties connected, to approve the postponement of COP14 and the 2022 budget. Another highlight was the support provided during the pandemic, with guidance from the Executive Team, that resulted in two virtual meetings of the SC with a short agenda focused on urgent issues, resulting in 31 and 37 decisions taken, as well as intersessional processes for decision making via email and meetings of subgroups.

The strengthening of the Secretariat's work in this area has significantly increased performance, efficiency and accountability in this important area of work of the Secretariat. It has a lasting impact and is contributing to the preparations for COP14, as technologies and SOPs are in place, capacities have been built, and a culture of whole-of-Secretariat work in this area is now established. This will also help to onboard new staff.

### **3. Increased support to Parties to implement the Convention**

Providing support to 172 Contracting Parties with a team of 23 staff is challenging. Efforts were therefore made to maximize the impact of the team and use the limited capacities in the most efficient way. Additionally, considerable work was done to optimize the technical guidance provided to Contracting Parties, especially from the STRP. Main highlights are the following:

- **Standardized processes and collaboration across the different regions**, for work that requires direct support to Parties, especially: designation of Wetlands of International Importance, management of 3.2 cases, and organization of Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMS). Standing Operating Procedures were developed as well as a coordination mechanism to ensure coherence and quality assurance. 356 Wetlands of International Importance were established under my tenure. Although the pandemic limited travel, 13 RAMs were conducted.
- **Strengthened “enabling” role of the Secretariat** vis-à-vis direct support to individual Parties Efforts were made to leverage larger outreach from our small team through enabling approaches, including:
  - o Stepping up capacity building for Contracting Parties with a whole-of-Secretariat approach, a coordinated and prioritized plan, and use of virtual means, resulting in enhanced efficiency, coherence and increased outreach compared with previous regional and face-to-face approaches. 15 webinars were organized during this triennium with a total of 1524 participants from 147 countries.
  - o Working in partnership: collaboration continued with IOPs, with a meeting of all heads in 2017 and a renewed memorandum of cooperation; the agreement with Danone was

renewed including new activities to include sustainable management of wetlands in Danone's business operations and raising awareness activities; new partners were engaged such as collaborating with UNDP to include wetlands in their work to support a large group of countries in the development of their Nationally Determined Contributions.

- Support provided to Parties through Ramsar Regional Initiatives, to promote collaboration and increase outreach, including: a designated focal point for coordination in the Secretariat, cross-regional collaboration to enhance coherence and lessons learned, support for fundraising, and enhanced reporting to the Standing Committee. Strengthened service to enabling Contracting Parties to access funds in line with the resource mobilization strategy approved by the SC, the Secretariat has continued to fundraise for the COP priorities and to help Parties access funds. This includes a data base of funding organizations; webinars and trainings on how to write proposals, access resources from the Green Climate Fund, develop public-private partnerships, and finance freshwater ecosystems; and support to fundraise in line with the Parties' mandate. Comparison on raising non-core funds during this period is challenging as there was a previous practice of the Secretariat to move non-core funds into core-funds (resulting in higher numbers) which I discontinued. However, as an indication there was an increase in between 2020 and 2021 of 462k, in a period affected by the pandemic, for a total restricted budget of 1,991k at the end of 2021. Support for Parties' fundraising efforts increased especially with successful fundraising to support the Regional Initiatives of Indo-Burma and the Mangroves and Coral Reefs.
  
- **Technical guidance developed by STRP experts with enhanced communications, policy relevance and outreach facilitated by the Secretariat.** The Convention has strong technical expertise, especially through the STRP and the technical support provided by the Secretariat. The Secretariat assessed outreach and use of previous products, and developed a deliberate approach to support the STRP by providing advice early in the process on target audience, policy relevance, communication strategy to the public and outreach to users. Key milestones from the STRP and the support provided by the Secretariat are the following:
  - First ever *Global Wetlands Outlook: State of the World's Wetland and their Services to People*, released on 27 September 2018 in advance of COP13. In addition to the Secretariat support to authors, it hired a professional editor, developed a summary web feature, and developed professional media outreach, which resulted in 700 online articles, including in major newspapers around the world, 13 interviews with major international outlets, and a potential readership of 684 million.
  - STRP delivered other important high-priority tasks for a total of 17 outputs, including a Special Edition of the Global Wetlands Outlook, 6 policy briefs, 6 briefing notes, 2 Ramsar Technical Reports, and 1 Factsheet on key issues such as disaster risk reduction, multiple values, RAMs, peatlands, blue carbon and agriculture, and an online Ramsar Sites Management Toolkit, with support from the Secretariat on the above aspects.
  - In the present year, the Secretariat has developed a new approach to increase the outreach of these critical products, moving from low downloading rates from the website, to organizing webinars using virtual technology: two webinars were conducted to roll out the STRP guidance on blue carbon and on agriculture with a total of 722 participants.

- The Secretariat also developed technical guidance and training, for example on how to carry out inventories and report on the Convention and SDG 6.6.1., and on mainstreaming gender in wetlands.

Efforts to increase the “enabler” role of the Secretariat, to have more standardized and whole-of-Secretariat approaches for its core work areas, have resulted in supporting a larger number of Parties and to providing more coherent support across regions. This has required a change in ways of working and culture that has also potential for further improvements in the work of the Secretariat. The support provided to the outstanding work of the STRP has shown increased impact in making this knowledge used by Contracting Parties and to support policy change and enhance communication. This is imbedded in the work of the Secretariat with potential for continued use during the next triennium.

#### **4. Strengthened Secretariat’s efficiency and effectiveness and its accountability to Contracting Parties**

Throughout my tenure, the guiding objective has been to “organize to deliver” on the Strategic Plan of the Convention and on the mandate of the Contracting Parties, and to use in the most efficient way the limited resources of the Convention and the capacities of the Secretariat. This period was also marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Secretariat had to adapt its way of delivering its work in this context. Some highlights:

##### **- Strengthened financial management validated by external auditors and governing bodies of the Convention**

This was one of my first priorities working closely with the Finance Subgroup of the SC and the external auditors, Financial management was significantly strengthened during the last two triennia. The five issues that had been raised by the auditors in 2015 and the one I raised in 2016 regarding management of non-core funds were all resolved and closed in the audit of 2019 accounts in April 2020, and no new issues have been identified by the auditors. Improvements in the financial management of the Secretariat have been validated by the external auditors and the Subgroup on Finance. Some highlights:

- An internal financial review was conducted in 2017 and an external review of non-core funds commissioned in 2018 that validated the measures being put in place and provided recommendations that have been implemented.

- Internal responsibilities and allocation of controls between IUCN and the Secretariat were clarified and are regularly updated, in compliance with IUCN policies and procedures. Furthermore, the internal controls between IUCN finance and the Secretariat are regularly validated by the auditors, and collaboration with IUCN is very efficient.

The Secretariat’s capacities were strengthened and Financial Operational Guidelines for all processes were developed as part of the Secretariat Operational Procedures. New staff have been regularly trained and supported on financial processes, such as expense claims or procurement.

- Use of technology increased including two audits conducted remotely, online signatures and electronic submission of documents and contracts.

At the end of 2021 the financial health of the Secretariat is considered to be improved both by the auditors and by the Subgroup on finance. The good cash position has been maintained as the result of the stable income of assessed contributions, even during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Furthermore, the decrease in total outstanding contributions dues of 8% compared to 2020 has been recognized by the Subgroup on Finance as an exceptional outcome among comparable organizations and the Secretariat's actions to this end were acknowledged by the Subgroup. The regular payment of the Parties is also an evidence of increased trust of the Parties in the Secretariat.

- **Strengthened coherence and whole -of-Secretariat approaches put in place. Highlights:**
  - o Streamlined workplan with accountability to COP and SC. Through an all-staff process, the Secretariat developed a single integrated triennial workplan to replace the previous three separate workplans. The triennial plan contains the annual plans, and is structured around the core functions of the Secretariat, with explicit reference to the requests and mandates of Parties, triennial and annual indicators, and Secretariat leads. It has contributed to increased ownership, more coherence, team building, clarity of direction, and of roles and responsibilities, and a culture of assessing progress and lessons learning through annual professionally facilitated all-staff workshops. It has also contributed to enhanced accountability through annual submissions to the SC and is also used to define individual performance objectives.
  - o Whole-of-secretariat approaches in critical core areas of the Secretariat's work have been put in place as described above, and global leadership has also been assigned to Secretariat managers for particular responsibilities (thematic and functional) to enhance coordination and coherence, while keeping a regional liaison function.
  
- **Technology leveraged to increase efficiencies of Secretariat business processes.** As mentioned above a main development was the CRM database, which has centralized in one system, the information previously contained in three databases that needed to be updated manually. It also complies with data privacy laws. In addition to its use in the Secretariat's role in servicing meetings of the governing and subsidiary meetings, it is also being used, together with technology for remote meetings, in the organization of webinars and trainings. Other technologies adopted include higher utilization and sharing of digital documents, and coordination of work flows. This has resulted in significant reduction of time spent by staff in administrative tasks.
  
- **Staff capabilities strengthened and aligned with the requirements to deliver on the mandate and workplan of the Secretariat, in line with IUCN policies and procedures**
  - o Capacity gaps were identified early in my tenure, especially for servicing the governing bodies and for engaging in policy processes. Competitive recruitments processes were carried out reinforcing areas that required specific skills and experience, with efforts made to ensure that regional and gender diversity was achieved to the extent possible. Currently, fifty percent of Secretariat staff are women. It is worth mentioning that I have the honour of being the first female Secretary General.
  - o Policies and procedures of IUCN were implemented, including on talent management, appraisals, promotions, and flexible work arrangements. Work was also conducted with IUCN to enhance alignment of competencies, functional requirements and equity within the Secretariat, with IUCN and the market.
  - o Capacity building of staff was conducted throughout the two triennia on the basis of a needs assessment, including training on: executive communications skills for the Senior Management Team and open communications skills for all staff, and finance training in 2018; gender equality and mainstreaming for all staff in 2019; Myers & Briggs

- methodology to identify personality, communication and work styles, focusing on individual strengths and team collaboration in 2020.
- Since the first signs of the pandemic, actions were taken to enable staff to quickly and effectively work from home. The Secretariat embraced new technologies and managed to deliver on its workplan to support Contracting Parties including for their decision-making processes. Well-being was identified as a priority and, in response, a survey was conducted, staff were offered webinars developed by IUCN and subsequently the Secretariat organized an all-staff training workshop on improving resilience and wellbeing in January 2022. Attention was also paid to the challenges and opportunities resulting from working from home. Regular staff meetings were held while working in these conditions to maintain internal communication and foster a sense of team and connectedness.

The strengthening of the Secretariat during these two triennia has made possible the achievements listed before. The team has worked hard and adapted to the challenges related to the pandemic, and stepped in when needed to deliver on the Secretariat mandate. Moving forward, the processes and tools put in place such as the integrated workplan, Standard Operating Procedures, and the leveraging of technologies will have a lasting impact and help newcomers. Strengthened financial management processes in place and the healthy financial situation provide stability and a trust environment for the next triennium with opportunities to attract donors. The capabilities of the Secretariat have been strengthened resulting in the ability to deliver on different areas of its mandate as shown in this report, and further work is needed with regard to its legal status, competitiveness in talent acquisition and retention, and further development of capacities, with a continued focus on wellbeing. The new whole-of-Secretariat approaches put in place during the two triennia provide a useful basis for further efficiencies and collaborative work in the future, and to balance enhanced accountability for implementation of the decisions taken by the COP and SC with the service provided to Contracting Parties in each region.

## **5. Final remarks**

The achievements listed above result from the contributions of many parts of the organization. I am grateful to Contracting Parties for their commitment in implementing the Convention. Throughout my journey I have benefited from the guidance and support provided by the governing bodies of the Convention, confirming the directions I was taking and expressing their trust in Resolutions of COP13 and subsequent decisions of the Standing Committee. I am particularly thankful to the Chairs of the Standing Committee, Mr Jorge Rucks and Mr Mohamed Al Afkham for their guidance, support and availability during my tenure. I would like to also thank the STRP and its Chairs, for the high-quality technical outcomes delivered during these two triennia. And special thanks go to the wonderful Secretariat team, for their professionalism, commitment and readiness to step up whatever the challenges before us to deliver on our mandate. This journey has also contributed to further strengthening my commitment to conservation and sustainable development and to re-discovering the wonders of wetlands across the world. It has also strengthened my conviction that the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is more important today than ever, and I am trustful that it will continue to grow in influence and impact, to save the world's wetlands for nature and people.