

## **Resource Conservation**

### **Ramsar in Action: National Wetland Conservation Policy Implementation in Nepal and its regional implications for the conservation of migratory birds**

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The 1971 Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially for Waterfowl Conservation (hereafter referred to as Ramsar) is historically and currently important from several standpoints. It came into force in 1975 and is the oldest of the international conservation conventions and the only one that protects one general ecosystem type. Through the main text and various policy documents published over the past 30 years, Ramsar provides signatory nations with many general and specific guidelines for conserving and managing wetlands resources and their associated wildlife. Here we consider the implementation of Ramsar within Nepal, a Party since 1987, based on the country's national policy that came into force in 2003. The most important (and oldest) Ramsar site in Nepal is Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve. It is important biologically as 1) the habitat for the last Nepalese population of wild Asiatic buffalo, 2) an overwintering site for several dozen species of ducks and geese and, 3) a stopover site for dozens of species of shorebirds that overwinter along the coasts of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Thus, in spite of its inland location, Koshi Tappu is significant for the conservation of species that use marine resources throughout their life cycle. Koshi Tappu is also under increased threats of encroachment and resources (e.g. fish, grasses) are harvested regularly by local residents.

Since then (in 2003), three additional but rather small sites were added within Nepal. One is within the buffer zone of Chitwan National Park and the other two are in areas outside of the national system of protected areas. As such they receive less protection and amendments may be needed to national conservation law to secure their status. Because the Central to South Asian migratory flyway is transected by the major mountain ranges across Asia, all four sites within Nepal are very important resting places for migratory birds, both before (in the Spring) and after (in the Fall) they cross the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. There has been a fair amount of research and several active programs to

foster community based wetland management in Nepal, especially in and around Koshi Tappu and Ghodaghodi Lake, one of the sites added in 2003, which is in keeping with major mandates of Ramsar. Nepal issued a draft policy on participatory wetland management in 2000. Another main intent of Ramsar is to foster bilateral conservation of wetlands and migratory birds. Nepal and India began bilateral conservation meetings in the late 1990s to address this and other issues, and held two meetings in total. These were stopped due to the Maoist insurgency.

We conclude that the policy, as written, is well drafted based on the legal requirements of Ramsar and several significant policy directives that the Ramsar Convention Bureau (based in Switzerland) has published over the years through its biennial Conferences of Parties. The likely gaps in implementation are more local and include: 1) jurisdictional issues among agencies, 2) less protection from the late 1990s until the very recent ceasefire and peace agreement due to the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, 3) weak structures in place for fostering participatory management regimes for wetland resources (a major focus of both Ramsar and the new Nepalese policy), 4) the fact that the most significant wetlands for migratory birds are not within Koshi Tappu itself, but south of its boundary along the Indo-Nepalese border and 5) the fact that Nepal has no current bilateral conservation treaties with India. Presumably, bilateral conservation talks will resume with the recent peace agreement.

We discuss these issues with particular focus on migratory bird conservation and the implications that these gaps may have on important populations of many species of waterfowl and waders. Effective management in the wetland complex around Koshi Tappu and the 3 newer sites has regional and global implications for the conservation of both predominantly freshwater and predominantly brackish/marine species in the region. In particular, stronger directives are needed to monitor both waterfowl and wetland resources and more enforcement efforts are needed if participatory management is to be effective. Some efforts to this effect were made within Koshi Tappu and Ghodaghodi Lake by IUCN – Nepal, but more remains to be done. Furthermore, one agency should be given the primary mandate for managing wetlands and waterfowl, and a national task force, with representatives from concerned agencies and non-governmental organizations should be established to monitor and provide oversight for this important endeavor at the national level, and as more Nepalese sites are listed under Ramsar. Due to the many issues involved, the task force should have representatives from several departments within the Ministry of Forests and Soils Conservation, the Ministry of

Agriculture, agencies involved with hydroelectric and local development, and natural resource NGOs such as WWF – Nepal, IUCN – Nepal and ICIMOD.

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