

## Culture and wetlands in strategic planning for the Ramsar Convention

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*A contribution from the Ramsar Culture Working Group,  
with support from the MAVA Foundation*

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### 1. Introduction: the purpose of this paper

- 1.1 The text of the Ramsar Convention noted over 40 years ago that “wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value” (preamble paragraph 3). The principle of integrated attention to culture has therefore always been a part of the Convention, and these dimensions of value are all closely intertwined.
- 1.2 In practice, attention to the cultural dimension has lagged behind. Recent years have seen the adoption of two Resolutions by the Conference of Parties and the formation of a Culture Working Group, and the current Strategic Plan for the Convention gives some support for greater recognition of cultural (and spiritual) values in decision-making. These steps have however fallen short of providing the more developed strategic direction on the issue which (for reasons explained further below) is increasingly sought in today’s evolving context of ecosystem services and broader partnership working.
- 1.3 The current Ramsar Strategic Plan (annexed to Resolution X.1, 2008, with some adjustments adopted in Resolution XI.3, 2011) covers the period 2009-2015. The 12th meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP12) is expected to take place in 2015, at which point a new Plan should be adopted. Preparatory work towards this has already begun.
- 1.4 The present paper is provided as a contribution to this process, and draws on stakeholder consultations (on a more extensive original document) undertaken by the Culture Working Group during 2012. It identifies the strategic planning provisions on cultural aspects which exist at present, and presents a vision of the updated thinking which should underpin strategic orientations on this subject for the post-2015 period. This will support the crafting of appropriate provisions in the new Plan. In the main however it will function as a companion volume to assist in interpreting and using the Plan in the most effective way.

### 2. Strategic provisions existing at present

- 2.1 Despite the reference in the original treaty text, efforts to formalise and more explicitly incorporate cultural aspects in the Convention’s work did not begin in earnest until the late 1990s. Formal expressions of consensus thinking on the subject were adopted by the Contracting Parties in Resolutions VIII.19 on

“Guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites” (2002) and IX.21 on “Taking into account the cultural values of wetlands” (2005) (see Annex below).

2.2 The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2009-2015 includes a number of provisions where the relevance of cultural values is more or less visibly identified; notably:

- *Strategy 1.4* on cross-sectoral recognition of wetland services, which seeks to “increase recognition of and attention in decision-making to the significance of wetlands for reasons of ... cultural heritage ..., by developing and disseminating methodologies to achieve wise use of wetlands”;
- *Key Result Area 1.4.iii*, which is for “the socio-economic and cultural heritage value of wetlands [to be] fully taken into account in wetland wise use and management”;
- *Strategy 1.6* on science-based management of wetlands, which seeks to ensure that “...national policies and wetland management plans are based on the best available scientific knowledge, including technical and traditional knowledge”;
- *Strategy 1.7* on Integrated Water Resources Management, which seeks to “ensure that policies and implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), applying an ecosystem-based approach, are included in the planning activities in all Contracting Parties and in their decision-making processes ...” [the reference to an ecosystem-based approach encompasses relevant factors];
- *Key Result Area 3.1.iv*, which is for “additional partnership approaches [to be] initiated with ... UNESCO ...”;
- *Key Result Area 4.1.iii*, which is for “all Parties to have established practices that ensure the participation in the development and implementation of wetland management plans of stakeholder groups with cultural or economic links to wetlands or those communities that depend on the wetlands for their livelihoods”.

2.3 Existing Ramsar obligations for both the wise use of all wetlands and the conservation of listed sites are defined by reference to the “maintenance of the ecological character” of wetlands. Ecological character is in turn defined under the Convention as including “wetland ecosystem services”, and these are defined as including cultural services. More fundamentally, all concern for sustainable development of wetlands begins from a mixture of utilitarian and ethical values that are unavoidably anthropocentric constructs, and thus are firmly situated in a context of human culture.

2.4 In a sense, therefore, the entire Ramsar agenda is one of culture. Hence in addition to whatever explicit references to the word itself may be found in the Strategic Plan, the real issue is one of correctly interpreting the full holistic nature of the “ecosystem approach” and “ecosystem services” thinking that underpins most of the Plan’s other strategies too, from management of wetlands (2,4, 2.7) to communication and education (4.1).

2.5 Resolution XI.3 (2012) appends an analysis of the contribution of the Ramsar Strategic Plan to the “Aichi Biodiversity Targets” in the global Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (Convention on Biological Diversity COP Decision 3

X/2, 2010). Only one of the Aichi Targets refers to culture, namely Target 13 which refers to maintenance of the genetic diversity of plants and animals “including culturally valuable species”. Of the 20 Targets this is one of only two which have no corresponding Ramsar Strategic Plan strategy. The wider ambit of wetland wise use in strategy 1.4 however (which includes cultural value, as quoted above) is listed as contributing to eight of the Targets.

- 2.6 Resolution IX.21 requested the Ramsar Secretariat “to establish a multi-disciplinary working group on the cultural values of wetlands, with a balanced geographic representation, under the supervision of Standing Committee, with appropriate input from the STRP, to coordinate the activities described [in the Resolution]”. The Standing Committee at its 36th meeting in February 2008 adopted decision 36.3 in which it “confirmed that the work of the Culture Working Group should continue in future, after COP10, in order to help inform the operations of the Parties in implementing the Convention and in helping the STRP to focus on issues that require a cultural perspective and understanding.”
- 2.7 The Culture Working Group has been responsible among other things for the publication in 2008 and subsequent wide dissemination of an extensive Ramsar guidance document on culture and wetlands<sup>1</sup>. The guidance is of crucial assistance to the Parties in implementing their obligation to maintain the ecological character of wetlands (including both tangible and intangible cultural services, as mentioned above).

### **3. Enhancing future strategy: the need and the opportunity**

- 3.1 It will be evident from the foregoing that there is some appreciable history of adopted commitments which mandate the integration of cultural aspects in the conservation and wise use of wetlands under the Ramsar Convention. This agenda has been in existence for over 40 years and does not need to be reinvented.
- 3.2 Interest in culture and wetlands (both within and beyond Ramsar) is gathering pace, and the subject is featuring in an increasing number of projects, publications and conferences (including some high-profile events at Convention Conferences of Parties). The development of relevant guidance resources in more recent times under Ramsar provides considerably enhanced support for appropriate action. Certain key partnerships and collaborations are also developing in ways which offer prospects of significantly extending the leverage and relevance of such action, notably those involving UNESCO, the MAVA Foundation and the Mediterranean Institute for Nature and Anthropos (Med-INA).
- 3.3 It remains the case however that reflection of the subject at policy, planning and programme levels is still minimal. Efforts are required to express it more meaningfully in terms of strategy, in order to drive and support results at all levels. The general trend towards ecosystem-based approaches and cross-sectoral partnerships in particular makes it necessary to interpret the strategic thinking more fully in this context.
- 3.4 Moreover, as interest and activity proliferates, there is a greater need for strategic coherence, coordination (including managed links with other policy sec-

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<sup>1</sup> Papayannis, T and Pritchard, DE (2008); “Culture and wetlands – a Ramsar guidance document”: Ramsar Convention Culture Working Group, Gland.

tors and relevant fora), a shared sense of direction, and a common framework against which to evaluate risks and benefits.

- 3.5 If the opportunity is seized to promote a fuller interpretation of existing strategic provisions, and to update the way these issues are addressed in future through the work beginning in 2013 on developing a new Ramsar Strategic Plan for the post-2015 period, this will make a major contribution to a more complete and integrated achievement of the fundamental goals of the Convention.

#### **4. An expression of objectives**

- 4.1 The text below offers an expression of objectives that could be read alongside the existing Strategic Plan 2009-2015, to interpret what is expected under existing provisions; and which then could also be the basis for improved content in the post-2015 Plan itself.

##### ***Goal***

- To strengthen the incorporation of cultural aspects in the management of wetlands, thus contributing to their conservation and wise use.

##### ***Outcomes expected***

- Contracting Parties to the Convention and all those who support them much more readily understand, are motivated towards and are assisted in implementing existing guidance and policy objectives on culture and wetlands, such that the adopted principles become a much more frequent and meaningful reality in everyday practice at national and local level.
- The degree of holistic attention given to human cultural values in tandem with attention to natural (wetland) environment values is significantly scaled-up in all relevant policy and programme implementation areas, including in wider public awareness.

##### ***Key result areas***

- *Strengthened international policy:* Global and regional policymaking reflects where necessary the best current knowledge and thinking on culture and wetlands, including ways of taking account of cultural values in decision-making, and ways of increasing understanding of the cultural ecosystem services of wetlands.
- *Better documented values:* Cultural values associated with wetlands are more completely identified, understood and documented at national and site level.
- *More widely shared and applied good practices:* Good practices, experiences and lessons learned in wetland planning and management that integrates cultural aspects are investigated, shared, promoted and applied more widely and successfully, resulting in better outcomes for wetlands and for people.
- *Enhanced partnerships:* Strategic collaborations and partnerships are enhanced, broadening stakeholder engagement and producing efficient synergies of action.

- *Effective coordination*: Strategic activities on culture and wetlands are efficiently coordinated, resourced (e.g. by external fundraising) in ways which do not dilute any other Ramsar programmes, and the results are promoted to wide audiences, building further support for the long term.

## 5. Implementation

- 5.1 The Ramsar Culture Working Group, initially consisting of formally appointed regional representatives, has reduced to a small core of dedicated experts. A proposal has been developed to re-launch it as a broader and more dynamic Ramsar Culture Network, with new mechanisms for engagement and more active servicing from a central coordination point. This proposal and the associated governance arrangements are due to be considered for endorsement by the Convention's Standing Committee at its 46th meeting in April 2013.
- 5.2 In the meantime, the Working Group is engaged in a programme of practical activities in support of the objectives agreed by Parties to date. This programme, in parallel with the strategic perspectives outlined in the present paper, has also been subject to consultations in 2012. It is now undergoing refinement for the 2013-2015 period, and is documented separately. It is also the subject of approaches for the necessary external funding: offers of financial support are welcome, and may be addressed to the contact points detailed below.

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## Annex

### Resolutions on culture adopted by the Ramsar Parties

#### Resolution VIII.19

*(adopted by the 8th Conference of the Contracting Parties, Valencia, Spain, 2002)*

#### **Guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites**

1. **ACKNOWLEDGING** that the ancient and intimate links of traditional societies to wetlands and water have given rise to important cultural values relevant to wetland conservation and wise use, which have been recognized in the diverse cosmologies of different civilizations and cultures throughout history;
2. **FURTHER ACKNOWLEDGING** that the specific physical features of wetlands have contributed to particular ways of managing traditional activities through structures, procedures, techniques and specially designed artefacts which are of great cultural significance;
3. **RECOGNIZING** that peoples' relations with wetlands have given rise to aspects of non-material culture, through folklore, music, mythology, oral traditions, customs, traditional knowledge and popular wisdom, and that their reflection can be found in social practices and the traditional forms of social organization for managing wetland resources, and especially water;
4. **FURTHER RECOGNIZING** that sustainable traditional uses of wetland resources have frequently created cultural landscapes of significant value to wetland conservation and wise use;
5. **AWARE** that the cultural values of wetlands have been and still are of great importance to societies living in wetlands and their surroundings, and constitute part of their identity; thus their loss may not only contribute to their alienation from wetlands, but also cause significant negative social and ecological impacts;
6. **RECOGNIZING** that cultural knowledge of wetlands constitutes a collective legacy for today's societies;
7. **AWARE** that most of the knowledge about practices, and practices themselves, of traditional wetland management in the diverse cultures have contributed to wetland conservation and wise use over millennia, and continue to contribute to it;
8. **FURTHER AWARE** that in addition to their spiritual dimension of this knowledge and other aspects of past wetland management, such values can be of considerable socio-economic importance, since they can be used as a resource for sustainable tourism and recreational activities and, through them, contribute to an increase of income and quality of life for the inhabitants;
9. **CONSCIOUS** of the fact that the adequate recognition of and support for cultural heritage, both material and non-material, is an indispensable component in any process for the sustainable use of wetland resources;

10. RECOGNIZING that there are important weaknesses and gaps in the procedures and methods for identifying, valuing and protecting the cultural heritage of wetlands, as well as in defining and implementing policies related to them;
11. NOTING that the profound and rapid social and economic transformations that have taken place during recent decades have increasingly threatened the adequate preservation of the cultural heritage that is typical of wetlands in many parts of the world;
12. RECOGNIZING that there are various multilateral agreements and organizations that work to recognize and protect cultural values and relationships with ecosystems including wetlands;
13. ACKNOWLEDGING that the Ramsar Convention needs to work in cooperation with multilateral and regional agreements and other bodies addressing the need for resolute action to preserve the cultural heritage, including among others:
  - the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Paris, 1972);
  - the Call of Granada (1975) of the Council of Europe on Rural architecture and its landscape;
  - Recommendation 881 (1979) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on Rural architecture heritage;
  - UNESCO's activities in the promotion of the conservation of cultural heritage;
  - the general principles for conservation proposed by the Vernacular Built Heritage Charter (Jerusalem, 1996), ratified by the XI General Assembly of the International Council of Monuments and Historical Sites (ICOMOS);
  - the various recommendations of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) for the protection, conservation, legal status, economic exploitation, and international protection of folklore;
  - the Convention on Biological Diversity, in particular concerning its Decision VI/10 of the Conference of the Contracting Parties on the *Outline of the composite report on the status and trends regarding the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity*, and the plan and timetable for its preparation; and on *Recommendations for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessment regarding developments proposed to take place on, or which are likely to impact on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities*;
  - the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000);
  - the Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (International Labour Organisation No. 169, 5 September 1991); and
  - the Permanent Forum of Indigenous People.
14. RECALLING that *inter alia* the text of the Ramsar Convention already recognizes, in the third paragraph of its preamble, "that wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value, the loss of which would be irreparable" and FURTHER RECALLING that COP7 adopted *Guidelines for establishing and strengthening local communities' and indigenous peoples' participation in the management of wetlands* (Resolution VII.8); and

15. NOTING the background documentation and examples on the cultural aspects of wetlands from around the world presented during Technical Session 5 of this meeting of the Conference of the Parties;

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16. TAKES NOTE WITH INTEREST of the list of *Guiding Principles* included in the Annex to this Resolution;
17. REQUESTS that the Ramsar Bureau seek inputs from Contracting Parties, experts and practitioners, and local communities and indigenous peoples from around the world to enhance the information paper on cultural aspects of wetlands (COP8 DOC. 15) and the detailed guidance prepared for consideration by this meeting of the Conference of the Parties, with a view to publishing it as a background document, and to inform COP9 of the progress made;
18. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties to consider using the list of *Guiding principles* included in the Annex to this Resolution, but only in relation the conservation and enhancement of the cultural values of wetlands;
19. FURTHER ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties, within their national and legal frameworks and available resources and capacity:
  - a) to consider the compilation and assessment of both material and non-material cultural elements related to wetlands and water, in particular when preparing the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for the designation of new Wetlands of International Importance or when updating the RIS of existing Ramsar sites, taking into account, as appropriate, intellectual property rights, customary law, and the principle of prior informed consent, in accordance with CBD and WIPO rules;
  - b) to promote the appreciation and revitalization, of these cultural values among populations close to wetlands, and in general among the wider public;
  - c) to include relevant aspects of cultural heritage in both the design and implementation of wetland management plans;
  - d) to make efforts to integrate cultural and social impact criteria into environmental assessments, which could include, *inter alia*, issues of particular cultural concern, such as beliefs and religions, customary practices, forms of social organization, systems of natural resources use, including patterns of land use, places of cultural significance, sacred sites and ritual ceremonies, languages, customary lore/law systems, political structures, roles and customs;
  - e) to carry out such efforts with the active participation of indigenous peoples, local communities and other stakeholders, and to consider using the cultural values of wetlands as a tool to strengthen this involvement, particularly in wetland planning and management;
20. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties to recognize cultural and heritage values relating to wetlands in their existing heritage protection, legal framework and policies;

21. INVITES Contracting Parties to consider conducting appropriate joint educational and training activities with regard to the cultural values of wetlands, as well as to consider developing pilot projects for testing on a local, regional and national scale with a view to further improving the application and/or integration of the *Guiding Principles* in wetland conservation and wise use;
22. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties to establish appropriate consultation mechanisms at regional or national levels, in order to consider how the *Guiding Principles* might be applied in developing and promoting the cultural values of wetlands; and
23. URGES Contracting Parties and the Ramsar Bureau to develop synergies and to avoid duplication of efforts with the relevant multilateral agreements, such as those mentioned in paragraph 13 above.

## Annex

### Guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites

#### General principles

1. This document proposes a number of general principles for identifying, preserving and reinforcing the cultural values of wetlands, which could be supplemented with additional ones at future meetings of the Conference of the Parties as more knowledge and experience are obtained. Some of them may overlap, but this is only natural as cultural values are often related and require an integrative approach.
2. There is a strong link between wetland conservation and benefits to people. In addition, a positive correlation between conservation and the sustainable use of wetlands has been repeatedly demonstrated. Therefore, conservation requires the involvement of indigenous peoples and local communities and cultural values offer excellent opportunities for this.

Guiding principle 1 - To identify the cultural values and relevant associated partners.

Guiding principle 2 - To link the cultural aspects of wetlands with those of water.

Guiding Principle 3 - To safeguard the wetland-related cultural landscapes.

Guiding principle 4 - To learn from traditional approaches.

Guiding principle 5 - To maintain traditional sustainable self-management practices.

Guiding principle 6 - To incorporate cultural aspects in educational and interpretive activities in wetlands.

Guiding principle 7 - To take into account culturally appropriate treatment of gender, age and social role issues.

Guiding principle 8 - To bridge the differences of approach between natural and social sciences.

Guiding principle 9- To mobilise international cooperation in matter of culture issues related to wetlands.

Guiding principle 10 - To encourage research on palaeoenvironmental, palaeontological, anthropological and archaeological aspects of wetlands.

Guiding principle 11 - To safeguard wetland-related traditional production systems.

Guiding principle 12 - To protect historical structures in wetlands or closely associated with them.

Guiding principle 13 - To protect and preserve wetland-related artefacts (mobile material heritage).

Guiding principle 14 - To preserve collective water and land use management systems associated with wetlands.

Guiding principle 15 - To maintain traditional sustainable practices used in and around wetlands, and value the products resulting from these practices.

Guiding principle 16 - To safeguard wetland-related oral traditions.

Guiding principle 17 - To keep traditional knowledge alive.

Guiding principle 18 - To respect wetland-related religious and spiritual beliefs and mythological aspects in the efforts to conserve wetlands.

Guiding principle 19 - To use the arts to promote wetland conservation and interpretation.

Guiding principle 20 - To incorporate cultural aspects, where available, in the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for the description of Wetlands of International Importance, whilst ensuring the protection of traditional rights and interests.

Guiding principle 21 - To incorporate the cultural aspects of wetlands in management planning.

Guiding principle 22 - To include cultural values in wetland monitoring processes.

Guiding principle 23 - To consider the use of institutional and legal instruments for conservation and protection of cultural values in wetlands.

Guiding principle 24 - To integrate cultural and social criteria into environmental impact assessments.

Guiding principle 25 - To improve wetland-related communication, education and public awareness (CEPA) in the matter of the cultural aspects of wetlands.

Guiding principle 26 - To consider the possibility of using quality labeling of sustainable traditional wetland products in a voluntary and non-discriminatory manner.

Guiding principle 27 - To encourage cross-sectoral cooperation.

### **Resolution IX.21**

*(adopted by the 9th Conference of the Contracting Parties, Kampala, Uganda, 2005)*

#### **Taking into account the cultural values of wetlands**

1. AWARE that wetlands and water resources in all parts of the world have been focal points for people and societies, providing vital services and being places

where local communities and indigenous peoples have developed strong cultural connections and sustainable use practices;

2. ALSO AWARE that wetlands are especially important to local communities and indigenous peoples and that these groups must have a decisive voice in matters concerning their cultural heritage;
3. FURTHER AWARE that a great number of Ramsar wetlands hold significant cultural values linked to the ecological functioning of these wetlands.
4. RECALLING that the Ramsar Convention from its beginning has recognized the cultural values of wetlands in its Preamble, as well as recognizing that cultural actions may be determined by ecological processes and *vice versa*;
5. APPRECIATING that the wise use of wetlands, the foundation of the Ramsar Convention, requires taking seriously into account these cultural values as they may assist in strengthening or re-establishing the links between people and wetlands, and giving cultural values greater recognition within the Convention;
6. NOTING Resolution VIII.19 *Guiding principles for taking into account the cultural values of wetlands for the effective management of sites*, adopted by COP8, and the need for its implementation;
7. TAKING ALSO INTO ACCOUNT a) Resolution VII.8 *Guidelines for establishing and strengthening local communities' and indigenous peoples' participation in the management of wetlands*, adopted by COP7, and b) paragraph 30 of Resolution VIII.10 on "additional criteria and guidelines for the identification and designation of Ramsar sites concerning socio-economic and cultural values and functions that are relevant to biological diversity ... which would be applied on each occasion in conjunction with one or more existing criteria for the identification and designation of Ramsar sites";
8. AWARE of the work undertaken by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel during the 2003-2005 triennium concerning the inclusion of the cultural importance of wetlands in Ramsar site designation processes;
9. MINDFUL that the Ramsar Convention needs to work in cooperation with multi-lateral and regional agreements and other international bodies, within their respective mandates, addressing cultural heritage issues as they relate to wetlands, and NOTING the role of the World Heritage Convention in the protection of cultural heritage; and
10. NOTING the presentations and discussions during the COP9 Technical Session 2 on 'Culture and knowledge in wetland management';

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11. ENCOURAGES the Contracting Parties to identify and analyze further case studies of wetlands with significant cultural values and make them widely known, thus increasing the knowledge and understanding of the relationship between cultural processes and wetland conservation and wise use;
12. AGREES that in the application of the existing criteria for identifying Wetlands of International Importance, a wetland may also be considered of international importance when, in addition to relevant ecological values, it holds examples of

significant cultural values, whether material or non-material, linked to its origin, conservation and/or ecological functioning;

13. FURTHER ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties to incorporate cultural values in wetland policies and strategies, as well as in wetland management plans, and to communicate the results, thus contributing to the development of comprehensive and integrated approaches;
14. EMPHASIZES that measures taken with respect to this Resolution in accordance with the Ramsar Convention are consistent with Parties' rights and obligations under other international agreements;
15. IDENTIFIES the following cultural characteristics as relevant in the designation of Ramsar sites:
  - i) sites which provide a model of wetland wise use, demonstrating the application of traditional knowledge and methods of management and use that maintain the ecological character of the wetland;
  - ii) sites which have exceptional cultural traditions or records of former civilizations that have influenced the ecological character of the wetland;
  - iii) sites where the ecological character of the wetland depends on the interaction with local communities or indigenous peoples;
  - iv) sites where relevant non-material values such as sacred sites are present and their existence is strongly linked with the maintenance of the ecological character of the wetland;
16. INSTRUCTS the Ramsar Secretariat to complete, through a broad participatory process, the work prescribed in paragraph 17 of Resolution VIII.19 concerning the guidance to be provided on cultural values;
17. REQUESTS the Ramsar Secretariat to establish a multi-disciplinary working group on the cultural values of wetlands, with a balanced geographic representation, under the supervision of Standing Committee, with appropriate input from the STRP, to coordinate the activities described above; and
18. FURTHER REQUESTS the Ramsar Secretariat to analyse the activities carried out to incorporate cultural values in the work of the Convention during the triennium 2006-2008 and the experience gained, and to report to the Standing Committee and to the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP10).