Sites with overlapping Ramsar and UNESCO designations

Discussion note prepared on behalf of the Ramsar Culture Network
Dave Pritchard, March 2013

1. Introduction: the scope of this note

1.1   The Ramsar Convention and UNESCO have a number of areas of cooperation which include legal Convention Depositary functions, International Hydrological Programme links, and shared interests in wetlands and culture. It is the latter which is the subject of this note. More specifically it concerns the respective networks of sites designated under each organisation (Ramsar Sites, World Heritage Sites and Biosphere Reserves).

1.2   These networks represent a key dimension of the shared interest in wetlands and culture. The principles and processes of cooperation in respect of sites with two or all three of these designations however have relevance to other issues too, and where it is more efficient to do so, and if capacity exists, it will be wise for the Ramsar Culture Network (RCN) to address itself to these principles and processes (at global level) in a more general sense. To that extent, and to that extent only, the scope of this note goes a little wider than strictly cultural matters.

1.3   The RCN envisages action on shared sites under its proposed programme for 2013-16 (subject to funding) in relation to demonstration projects, monitoring, management and other aspects. For the time being the present note focuses primarily on issues of information management.

2. Objectives defined in Ramsar Culture Network programme

2.1   The RCN has defined a (proposed) list of "Ramsar activities on culture and wetlands" for the period 2013-16, which includes a range of cooperation activities between Ramsar and UNESCO. Implementation of most of these is dependent on the success of an external funding proposal, currently under consideration.

2.2   In the meantime however several actions are seen as ongoing, or as able to be progressed in the first half of 2013 with existing resources and input from others. Under "*Expected result D: Enhanced partnerships*" this includes the following:

"Update and maintain lists of wetland sites having overlapping designations as Ramsar Sites, World Heritage Sites and/or Biosphere Reserves, and present on the respective organisations' websites with enhanced supporting

information, e.g. on extent of overlap. Although an on-going programmatic activity, this would begin with:

- an information note on the status of the different website information sources on this, mentioning any obvious new additions from recently-designated sites;

- an expression of intent concerning the way in which this kind of information should be maintained in future;

- some proposals for how case study and experience-exchange material might be piloted with one or two examples that would be relatively well-placed ones to try;

- comments on other useful associated steps, such as ways of identifying and linking more strongly the primary contacts at site level in authorities with responsibility under the respective Conventions for cultural and ecological matters respectively".

3. Other relevant adopted (strategic) objectives

3.1   The Ramsar Strategic Plan 1997-2002 included as its Action 7.2.4: "Develop cooperation with the World Heritage Convention and UNESCO's Programme on Man and the Biosphere (MAB) especially as regards wetlands designated as World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves and/or Ramsar sites". In the current Strategic Plan, for 2009-2015 (Resolution X.1, 2008) there is no specific equivalent of this. There is instead merely Key Result Area 3.1.v: "Harmonized information management and reporting systems available and widely used at national level with the appropriate MEAs".

3.2   In the intervening period, various COP Resolutions and other frameworks have been agreed concerning cooperation between the Convention and other Multilateral Environmental Agreements and related processes. Two of these mention the issue of sites with overlapping designations.

3.3   One is the Memorandum of Understanding between Ramsar and the World Heritage Centre, dating from May 1999. (The question of its potential updating, and potential extension to cover UNESCO more generally, is an on-going discussion covered elsewhere). The stated objective of the MoU is for the Secretariat and the Centre "to cooperate with a view to enabling the Contracting Parties to the Conventions to identify and strengthen conservation of those sites of international importance which are recognized by both Conventions". (Note this formulation should not be mis-read as relating only to designated sites, since it covers the considerably wider matter of all sites which *qualify* for designation).

3.4   The text refers to sharing information on candidate sites and threatened sites, but curiously omits to mention sharing information on designated sites/overlapping designated sites in general. This latter issue could however be implied in the clauses for "exchange of information on a regular basis on specific aspects of the work of the World Heritage and the Ramsar Conventions which are of mutual interest and benefit" and "in cooperation with the Contracting Parties to the Conventions, develop programmes and projects for strengthening conservation of specific sites which are recognized by the two Conventions and identify and mobilize human and financial resources and the knowledge to implement such programmes and projects".

3.5 Ramsar has also agreed a Programme of Joint Work (PJW) with UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB). The latest version of this was agreed by the MAB International Coordinating Council in October 2004 and by the Ramsar Standing Committee (intersessionally) in February 2005. This version has however never been posted on the Ramsar website, which unfortunately still carries the earlier version agreed by Ramsar in December 2001 and by MAB in 2002. In any event the 2004-5 version (= 2nd PJW) had a theoretical end-date of 2010, so the general status of this cooperation (as with UNESCO, mentioned above) would merit review.

3.6 The first PJW included as item 11.1: "Assess the status of those sites wholly or partially designated as Ramsar sites and Biosphere Reserves, and those joint sites also designated as World Heritage Sites (including natural heritage sites and those designated as cultural landscapes), and review their status, boundary relationships, and inclusion of the requirements of both instruments in management planning". "Status" here is assumed to refer to designation status and significance in terms of qualification for designation, rather than conditions and trends in a wider sense. Data on shared sites have been presented (see 4) below, but no systematic examination of "boundary relationships" has been carried out.

3.7 The second PJW includes as item 5.1: "The Ramsar and MAB Secretariats, to the extent possible also in joint arrangements with the World Heritage Centre, will establish and maintain a process for ensuring that the existence on any of their sites of one or both of the other designations is accurately and completely noted, and that this can be updated with information on new designations as and when they occur. They will further establish a simple process for compiling and updating a list of all such 'joint sites', and for reading updates to it across into other relevant lists, databases and publications".

3.8 It further includes as item 5.2: "The Ramsar and MAB Secretariats, to the extent possible also in joint arrangements with the World Heritage Centre, will establish and maintain a simple process for comparison of site boundaries of all their joint sites, and for documenting the nature, degree and location of differences".

3.9 It further includes as item 13.4: "Maintain and update joint MAB/Ramsar web site pages so as to raise awareness amongst those responsible for site designation and management under Ramsar and MAB, and encourage access and consistent use of the available tools and assistance under each instrument". Specific suggestions are included also for various links which should feature, notably including "listing of sites designated under both instruments".

3.10 Other related activities are also mentioned, such as 13.3: "Seek opportunities to establish regional site manager networks for managers of joint Ramsar sites/Biosphere Reserves in order to encourage sharing of information and experience".

4. The status of the different web-based information sources

4.1   A review of Ramsar-UNESCO cooperation in 2004[1] discussed this in some detail, but most of the websites and listing processes described have changed since then. It remains true in general however that overlaps are presented in different ways in different lists, in terms of the organisation of site names, and in terms of whether overlap/coincidence is judged on a basis of point location, boundary maps, coordinates, site names, or national authorities simply reporting that there is an overlap. In one case (a CBD document referring to World Heritage Sites, Ramsar Sites and Biosphere Reserves) the scope also included sites "immediately adjacent" to each other. Errors arise for different reasons in different places too, and for example sites are sometimes missed because even within each site network, designation information is entered in different places on datasheets by different compilers.

4.2   Several locations in the Ramsar website offer a link to the same two lists of sites with overlapping designations. When accessed in March 2013 the list of Ramsar-World Heritage overlaps[2] was dated 15 October 2012 and offered 54 Ramsar Sites corresponding to 45 World Heritage Sites. The list of Ramsar-Biosphere overlaps[3] was dated 30 January 2013 and offered 162 Ramsar Sites corresponding to 142 Biosphere Reserves.

4.3   Using the search facility to query the on-line Ramsar Sites Information Service[4] produced (also in March 2013) very different numbers, *viz* 79 Ramsar Sites overlapping with (an unknown number of) World Heritage Sites, 135 Ramsar Sites overlapping with (an unknown number of) Biosphere Reserves, and 29 Ramsar Sites overlapping with (an unknown number of) both of the other designations. The higher number of Ramsar-WH overlaps here than in the list described in the preceding paragraph might be thought to result from the database being more up to date than the packaged lists; but the discrepancy in relation to Ramsar-BR overlaps goes in the opposite direction (ie is lower in the database), so that is unlikely to be the explanation.

4.4   Using the search facility to query the World Heritage Convention website's list[5] of 962 World Heritage Sites (at March 2013) with the term "Ramsar" brought up only 14 World Heritage Sites, which is even more anomalous. (Using the terms "Biosphere" or "Biosphere Reserve" brought up 37 World Heritage Sites, and combining "Biosphere" and "Ramsar" brought up no sites).

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[1] Pritchard, D E (2004). Review of cooperation between the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). RSPB Sabbatical Report. RSPB, Sandy and UNESCO, Paris. 111pp. Version also presented as an agenda paper for the 18th Session of UNESCO Man & The Biosphere Programme International Coordinating Council, Paris, 25-29 October 2004.

[2] http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-list-ramsar-and-world/main/ramsar/1-31-218%5E21960_4000_0__

[3] http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-documents-list-mab-sites/main/ramsar/1-31-218%5E25272_4000_0__

[4] http://www.ramsar.wetlands.org/Database/Searchforsites/tabid/765/Default.aspx

[5] http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/

4.5   The search facility in the Biosphere Reserve database on the MAB website[6] does not allow queries by designation type. The site provides fixed lists of overlaps in PDF format. When accessed in March 2013 the list of Biosphere-Ramsar overlaps was dated 21 April 2009 and offered 107 Biosphere Reserves corresponding to 122 Ramsar sites. The list of Biosphere-World Heritage overlaps was dated 24 August 2009 and offered 88 Biosphere Reserves corresponding to 91 World Heritage Sites. The site advertises the existence of a third PDF list of three-way overlaps (Ramsar-WH-BR) but when accessed in March 2013 that document was not present.

4.6   The following summary table highlights the scale of discrepancies revealed by these figures.

Source Overlap	Ramsar website - packaged lists	Ramsar Sites Information Service	World Heritage Convention website	MAB website
Ramsar-World Heritage	54 R = 45 WH	79 R	14 WH	N/A
Ramsar-Biosphere	162 R = 142 BR	135 R	N/A	107 BR = 122 R
World Heritage-Biosphere	N/A	N/A	37 WH	88 BR = 91 WH
Ramsar-World Heritage-Biosphere	N/A	29 R	0 WH	N/A

4.7   The discussion above relates to overlaps in the designations as a whole. Within this picture there would be further stratification of the data to be done, for example to distinguish between "natural" and "cultural" World Heritage Sites. The Ramsar Culture Network's interests relate to a sub-set of the data, namely sites with cultural interest. (In the case of World Heritage overlaps this does not necessarily equate to those labelled as "cultural" sites, since the latter signifies cultural interest of Outstanding Universal Value, whereas the RCN is also interested in other levels of cultural value). The RCN's main interest also is in sites where cultural value has a necessary association with the fact of the site's being a wetland and with its ecological functioning (whether arising from it or contributing to it), rather than representing merely an accidental coincidence of location.

5. Maintaining this information in future

5.1   The 2004 review mentioned above recommended that the Ramsar and MAB Secretariats and the World Heritage Centre should each confirm a process within their own site information management systems for ensuring that the existence on any of their sites of one or both of the other designations is accurately and completely noted, and that this can be updated with information on new designations as and when they occur. It was also recommended that all three bodies liaise and agree a simple process for establishing and updating lists of "double-" and "triple-badged" sites, and for ensuring that updates in one information source or data set on this are translated into updates to the other lists and sources carrying data on these shared sites. Recommendations were also made on a process for the comparison of site boundaries.

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[6] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/world-network-wnbr/wnbr/

5.2   The "Indicative World Heritage and Ramsar Secretariats workplan for mutual cooperation" (March 2012) includes as Task 1: "Maintain [an] updated web-based list of overlapping sites". There was a target date of 30 September 2012 for the World Heritage Centre to update its website to match the information on the Ramsar site.

5.3   During 2012 the Centre engaged part of the time of two interns to address the updating of overlap lists, beginning with sites in the Mediterranean region. A dedicated web-page was also to be constructed. Questions concerning the method for spatial identification of overlaps proved to be a challenge in taking this work forward (see also 4.1 above). Any mechanistic method (eg based on reported coordinates) is probably best combined with some general familiarity with the respective site networks and a well-informed ability to "read between the lines" of derived datasets.

5.4   The Ramsar Secretariat is currently (March 2013) recruiting a replacement Documentation Officer, and the updated job description for this post includes a task described as "track the common sites among World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves and Ramsar Sites; and provide webmaster with the information to update web".

5.5   As proposed in the RCN programme, it would be desirable for the three organisations, drawing on the present discussion note, to draft an agreed expression of intent concerning the way in which this kind of information should be maintained in future.

6. Case studies

6.1   (*Note*: where reference is made here to studies of individual cases, it should be understood that this always needs to involve an element of lesson-learning and transfer of experience, rather than simply documenting stories).

6.2   The RCN programme suggests that in the first half of 2013, some proposals might be made "for how case study and experience-exchange material [concerning shared sites] might be piloted with one or two examples that would be relatively well-placed ones to try". Suggestions for this are invited, and it is hoped that progress might be made in the near future, at least in identifying a short list of good candidates. Development of a simple presentation format might also be helpful.

6.3   Bearing in mind the point made in paragraph 6.1 above, some of this might be accomplished relatively readily by adapting any existing relevant "documented stories" by adding the "lessons learned" element. Expert input from practitioners familiar with each case will nevertheless be required. Joint Advisory Mission reports (from which salients could be extracted) might be one possible source (though inclusion of a cultural dimension is to be preferred, and existing mission reports probably lack this).

6.4   The RCN programme then also includes items described as "catalyse the documentation and dissemination of specific case studies of shared values and coordinated management approaches in respect of jointly designated sites" (D9) and "stimulate the development of demonstration initiatives at a

selection of jointly designated sites" (D7). These activities are to be progressed in future if new funding is secured. (NB since strictly speaking sites are not designated "jointly", reference instead to "overlapping" or "shared" sites is probably more appropriate. Some eventual regularisation of this terminology may be useful).

7. Other potentially useful steps

7.1   The "Indicative World Heritage and Ramsar Secretariats workplan for mutual cooperation" (March 2012) includes as Task 10: "Systematically copy each other on all formal correspondence dealing with sites that are both WH and Ramsar". This is self-explanatory, except that it depends on having an agreed and up to date list of such sites, which the foregoing shows is only partially in place. It also depends on awareness of shared designation always being triggered in instances of formal correspondence where it applies; and internal mechanisms for ensuring this may need some thought.

7.2   Task 2 in the same workplan reads: "Maintain [an] information exchange capacity on [the] state of conservation of Ramsar/WH sites. Arrange an annual meeting to go over sites of concern. By March 31 each year WH sends note to Ramsar on all WH sites to be considered by WH Committee in June/July meeting, inviting feedback". This will be valuable. (In 2012 a note as described was sent on 7 June, but a "meeting to go over sites of concern" has not yet taken place).

7.3   In June 2012 the World Heritage Centre was reportedly[7] working on "an informative pamphlet" on the differences between Ramsar Sites, World Heritage Sites and Biosphere Reserves, to provide a way of responding to questions frequently asked about this by various types of stakeholder.

7.4   The RCN programme seeks to develop some thinking on "ways of identifying and linking more strongly the primary contacts at site level in authorities with responsibility under the respective Conventions for cultural and ecological matters respectively". This lies partly beyond the scope of the present note, but lists of shared sites may be the best entry-point, and early progress is expected.

7.5   In the proposed future RCN activities which remain subject to funding, a task is included to "Publish and disseminate a short report on shared values and coordinated management approaches in respect of jointly designated sites" (D8).

7.6   In 2006, UNEP's Division of Environmental Law and Conventions initiated a knowledge management programme for Multilateral Environment Agreements, which mostly comprised various projects focusing on sharing strategic information, harmonization of national reporting, and developing issue-based modules for coherent implementation of MEAs. This has subsequently evolved into the Multilateral Environment Agreement Information and Knowledge Management initiative (MEA IKM), which seeks to develop harmonized and interoperable information systems in support of knowledge management activities among MEAs, including through UN

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[7] M Patry, communication 30 June 2012

system-wide information and communication tools[8]. This has seemingly not yet addressed issues relating to site lists, but the initiative's interest could conceivably be drawn to the subject.

7.7   The Liaison Group of Biodiversity-related Conventions (BLG)[9] may also have an interest, for example in providing a common web entry portal for site list-linking issues.

7.8   Finally, it would seem logical also for the World Database on Protected Areas[10] to offer relevant capabilities, although data reported there will likely lag behind MAB and the Conventions' own listing processes.

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[8] http://www.cbd.int/mea/ikm/default.shtml

[9] http://www.cbd.int/blg

[10]   A joint initiative run by IUCN and UNEP-WCMC - see http://protectedplanet.net/