30 July 2004

The Utrecht Declaration on Wetlands

Final Resolution Adopted at the 7th INTECOL International Wetlands Conference

Utrecht, the Netherlands 25-30 July, 2004

Preserving vulnerable and characteristic wetlands of international importance, such as the Pantanal, the Everglades, the Danube delta or the Wadden Sea and implementation of the ecosystem approach and precautionary principle were among the most critical issues that the participants at the 7th International INTECOL conference on Wetlands regarded important. Wise use, conservation and restoration of wetlands worldwide were discussed in the context of global climate change, human population pressure and expected economic developments.

The more than 900 INTECOL Conference participants coming from universities and research institutions as well as wetland, and/or nature management programmes, from over eighty countries and representing a wide range of expertise in wetland science, natural resource management, water and wetland policies and nature conservation;

Discussed a large amount of new scientific information on wetland functioning, wetland biodiversity, hydrology, food chain support (e.g. fish production), wetland restoration, in relation to integrated water resources management, past and future climate change and expected impacts of economic development in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Came to agreement on the following issues:

(1) Major human reclamation of very large wetland areas, as perhaps best exemplified by the historic development of the Western part of The Netherlands, may have brought great economic success and social welfare, but at the same time has led to the major disruption of large-scale wetland functioning, causing serious problems such as land subsidence, oxidation of peat, destruction of natural water purification potential, and increasing risks of major floods which can only be prevented by very costly artificial flood control structures in combination with continuous pumping. It is evident that natural ecosystems and their services have been very seriously damaged and altered throughout the history of reclamation.

(2) Future plans for reclamation of large wetland areas or drastic hydraulic measures in rivers (e.g. dams) should never be allowed without a very critical and thorough assessment of the ecological consequences and trade-offs. In fact, so much ecological information on past projects with environmental disasters is already available that future large-scale projects of reclamation or major hydraulic alteration should generally be replaced with multiple smaller projects that support ecological and social benefits.

(3) Instead, the principle of 'wise use' should be the cornerstone of any land use planning in major wetland areas around the world. This principle implies that wetlands are not drained but rather developed in intact form, with a sustainable use of economically important ecosystem services such as fish and shellfish production, water quality improvement, floodwater detention, carbon storage, wood production and ecotourism.

(4) The vast peatlands in the Northern hemisphere, as well as the tropical peatlands in Asia, are of paramount importance for global carbon storage. Further peat mining for fuel or horticultural purposes will lead to an even further loss of carbon storage capacity, and at the same time to rapid oxidation of the extracted peat into carbon dioxide.

(5) Fisheries and hunting in wetlands have become so intense that they are destructive in many wetland areas.

(6) Too often, losses of wetlands are compensated for by construction of a different kind of wetland, lacking key characteristics of the original system and therefore of much less value. The number of different wetland types that can be successfully restored within a short time frame is limited. Conservation of existing, intact wetlands, should therefore remain the highest priority.

(7) Management objectives for restoring biodiversity should be considered at the regional

scale, rather than setting objectives for small areas. Wetland ecosystems are a critical component of the hydrological cycle. They need to be considered and managed in the context of their catchment areas in order to maintain multiple services to benefit people and maintain biodiversity.

(8) A thorough ecological understanding of wetlands is key to preserving them. It is fundamental that universities and governments world-wide establish centres of excellence and ensure significant expansion and implementation of wetland preservation. Management needs to be adaptive and decisions need to be based on the precaution principle and on ongoing scientific research, inventory and assessment.

(9) Tidal freshwater wetlands constitute an important wetland type, which has been strongly disturbed by man and is threatened by further destruction in many parts of the world. These wetlands should be protected with high priority.

Acknowledged the paramount importance of wetlands for biodiversity, water storage, floodwater mitigation, water quality improvement, migrating birds, nursing grounds, food chain support and carbon storage;

Are deeply concerned about the threats for the future existence of wetlands as a result of climate change, economic development and related human activities, such as overfishing, infrastructures, flood defence works, pollution and mining activities;

Especially acknowledged the commitments made by the contracting parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and other international conventions, and noted the opportunities for wetland conservation and protection provided by a wide range of other international treaties and programmes;

Acknowledged with great appreciation the good record of the government of The Netherlands in supporting wetlands protection and wise use in the country itself as well as in many regions of the world through major contributions to international NGO's as well as contributions through funding of research and management.

Reminded the 138 contracting parties to the Ramsar convention of their obligation to identify all sites within their territories that can be classified as wetlands of international importance and ensure the conservation and wise use of these sites;

Particularly reminded the Netherlands government of its responsibility within the EU and further International context in relation to assigning areas requiring special protection, and reassuring the wise use of such areas; in particular, the recently increased mining of peat in the vast peatland complexes in Eastern Europe, and the use of non-sustainable fishing methods for shellfish in the Wadden Sea should be followed very critically

Welcomed scientific leadership towards global conservation of wetlands as displayed by the Netherlands, Utrecht University and INTECOL in hosting and supporting the Seventh International Wetlands Conference;

Appreciated with great interest the large number of wetland restoration projects carried out in the riverine and polder landscape of the Netherlands and neighbouring countries, and the major scientific research efforts to assess the causes of success and failure of restoration.

Recommend that;

the Netherlands government ensures its international credibility, particularly in relation to its present EU presidency by applying the ecosystem approach, incorporating the principles of and wise use to manage wetlands of international importance and ensuring the precaution;

the Netherlands uses its EU presidency during the following months for facilitating and

benchmarking wetland conservation policy and management within international, European and national context, through its numerous highly qualified international wetland and ecology research institutes and universities.

the Netherlands cooperates with partner agencies, organisations and contracting parties to the Ramsar, Biodiversity conventions to ensure timely and effective implementation of relevant policy frameworks and principles, and uses the opportunity to address wetland issues within the EU water framework directive (WFD) as well as the EU Marine strategy;

new scientific insights and development for preserving wetlands as presented during this conference will be considered at all relevant forthcoming meetings of the contracting parties of international agreements, to allow for adaptive management and adequately respond over time to the resilience of wetland systems.

wetland restoration projects will be stimulated and accompanied by good monitoring and scientific research.

Encourage;

the Netherlands government to conscientious use of wetlands of international importance particularly in relation to all activities, including gas extraction, in the Wadden Sea. Furthermore, the government should initiate progressive policy and management to conserve and protect the natural resilience of the Wadden ecosystem by implementing the ban on shell fishing and allowing for sustainable development.

Engagement of the international wetlands science community to assist the people and institutions of Iraq and neighbouring countries to restore the ecological character and social and economic values of Mesopotamian wetlands

Stronger ties between the range of expertise and experience represented by INTECOL wetland scientists, policy makers and environmental managers and the implementation of national and regional wetland policies and wise use initiatives.

Thanked the Government of the Netherlands and Utrecht University for hosting, sponsoring and contributing to the 7th INTECOL Conference.

Signed on behalf of the participants in Utrecht, the Netherlands July 30, 2004, by R. Eugene Turner and Jos T.A. Verhoeven.