

Guidelines for Nominating a Site as a Wetland of International Importance in the United States

Kim Diana Connolly
and Valerie Cochran



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1. Introduction

This document provides basic information for those considering nominating a particular United States wetland for designation as a “Wetland of International Importance” under *The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat* (often referred to as the “Ramsar Convention”). A nomination can be made by anyone (even a private landowner) and does not require large sums of money or organizational support. This overview is intended to provide very basic information – please look to the appendix for references to more detailed guidance documents.

As one can learn by going to www.ramsar.org, as of April 2007 there are 154 Contracting Parties to the Convention, who together have nominated 1,650 wetland sites totaling 149.7 million hectares as internationally important wetlands. The United States became a party to the Convention on April 18, 1987, and as of 2007 there are 22 listed sites nationwide protecting 1,303,519 hectares. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)’s International Affairs office maintains a list of U.S. sites and is the agency that coordinates the process of designating new sites – a helpful FWS website with more information is available at www.fws.gov/international/ramsar/ramsar.htm. The U.S. Ramsar National Committee (USNRC) is the nongovernmental organization that supports the Ramsar convention in the U.S. and coordinates activities with the FWS and various

¹ Associate Professor of Law, University of South Carolina School of Law; Associate Faculty, University of South Carolina School of the Environment. Professor Connolly serves as a member of the United States Ramsar National Committee. The author can be reached at connolly@law.sc.edu.

² J.D. Candidate, University of South Carolina School of Law; Master of Studies in Environmental Law Candidate, Vermont Law School.



international entities – see www.ramsarcommittee.us for their website.

We have organized this guidelines document in a way that we hope will be most helpful to readers seeking quick information on nominating a site. Part 2 contains an overview of Ramsar Convention background. Part 3 is a description of how the nomination process actually works. Part 4 is a discussion of what makes a particular site worthy of Convention designation. Part 5 contains a list of what should be on hand when you undertake to designate a site. Finally, Part 6 has a list of people to contact for further help. Appendices contain ideas for further reading as well as links to some official Ramsar application documents.

2. What is the Ramsar Convention and How Did It Come to Be?

On February 3, 1971 the tiny coastal town of Ramsar, Iran became the site of a groundbreaking international treaty to protect wetlands as waterfowl habitat. Officially titled *The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, the treaty was signed by eighteen nations and is now commonly referred to as the “Ramsar Convention.” The Ramsar Convention lists wetlands that qualify under its criteria as a “Wetland of International Importance.” The List is a means of encouraging national protection of wetlands and international cooperation to protect wetlands crossing national boundaries that provide habitat and protection for migratory waterfowl. Parties to the treaty undertake to designate at least one wetland for the List, complete environmental impact assessments, establish nature reserves, train wetlands managers, inventory wetlands, consult with other Parties, and assist with the Convention’s operations. Parties must also create a list of suitable wetlands within its boundaries for a List of Wetlands of International Importance. The Parties come to together on a triennial basis in a Conference of the Parties.



The Convention has been modified only two times – once to provide an amendment procedure, and once to establish a formal body for the Convention: the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP). At present the Ramsar treaty is implemented by the COP, which meets every three years to adopt rules of procedure, set budgets, and the financial contributions of member states to provide funding for the Convention’s implementation. In between COP meetings the Standing Committee takes care of interim activities; Standing Committee membership is based on geographic distribution.

Criteria and guidelines for designating wetlands originally came from the Scientific and Technical Review Panel. The main office for the Convention (the Secretariat) is now in Switzerland. The Secretariat, serving as the administrative center of the treaty, has many duties including: maintaining the list of wetlands of international importance; implementing the monitoring procedure; developing concepts of wise use, conservation and management; acting as liaison with other agencies, countries, secretariats, and organizations; promoting nature reserves and organizing the Conference of the Parties.

Throughout the treaty’s development several methods of classifying and evaluating wetlands were introduced. The Montreux system is currently used for evaluating wetland sites. This system is named for the town in Switzerland where the Fourth Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties was held in 1990. After a wetland is listed it is to be used/managed wisely and monitored.

Current guidelines for the implementation of wise use, management, and monitoring were developed at the fourth meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties. The five main actions for the implementation of wise use are as follows: (1) improve both institutional and organizational arrangements, (2) address legislation and government policies, (3) increase knowledge and awareness of wetlands, (4) review priorities of wetland sites in a national context and (5) address problems at particular sites. Recommendations concerning



management encourage “management plans based on ecological studies and experience.”

Help is available to a Party if a threat to a listed wetland appears. Parties are expected to monitor their listed wetlands, but the Ramsar Secretariat also receives notifications of any potential or actual adverse effects to a wetland and will try to assist the Party to minimize or avert the threat. The Ramsar Secretariat identifies potential threats to the ecological characteristics of a wetland such as technological development, pollution, and other human interference. If there is a threat the Secretariat can begin by suggesting the Party or Parties apply the Monitoring Procedure. Simultaneously, the Secretariat can request additional information regarding the wetland’s status. If the Secretariat believes a significant change has or is likely to occur the Secretariat can begin a collaborative process to try to find a solution and can provide advice and assistance. If this process will not readily yield a solution, the Secretariat must notify the Standing Committee, which will also attempt to work out an acceptable solution. The Montreux Record is a register of Ramsar sites where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur as a result of technological developments, pollution, or other human interference.

3. How Does A Wetland Get Nominated for Designation?

In order to be listed as a Wetland of International Importance, a wetland must go through a nomination procedure. The procedure largely consists of gathering scientific, historical, and cultural information, completing a form that compiles this information, and gathering letters of support and a map.

Completing the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) requires the most amount of work in these steps, though securing letters, etc. may take an appreciable amount of time and should be started early in the process. The RIS asks for



information regarding endangered, threatened or significant species, the hydrology and geology, any current or past scientific interest in the area, cultural and social values, the management plan, and maps of the area. See the next section regarding designation criteria for more information.

Once the site is listed there is some work that still must be done in order to remain on the Convention list. One important thing is that while the Convention imposes no affirmative, specific requirements on the listed site and does not direct landowners or the natural resources agency as how to manage the wetland, the Convention does ask that updates be sent to the Secretariat every six years. Furthermore, in-between such updates, the

Secretariat expects to be notified if there are any significant threats or changes at any time to the wetland.

The Four Steps In Nominating a Wetland of International Importance:

- a letter addressed to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service describing how the proposed site meets the Ramsar criteria
- a completed Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) which can be downloaded from the Ramsar website (www.ramsar.org)
- a map of its location following set guidelines, including longitude and latitude and clear indication of the area that is being included for designation
- letters of support from the local or state wildlife or natural resources agency, one member of Congress (U.S. House or Senate) for the district or state in which the site is located, and all landowners. In addition, letters of support from local communities, other organizations or government offices, or individuals, greatly contribute to the nomination process

4. What Makes a Site Worthy of Designation?

The Conferences of the Parties have indicated that one or more of nine official criteria make a site worthy of designation (see http://www.ramsar.org/key_criteria.htm).



Group A of the Criteria. Sites containing representative, rare or unique wetland types



- 1: An internationally important wetland may contain a representative, rare, or unique example of a natural or near-natural wetland type found within the appropriate biogeographic region.

Group B of the Criteria. Sites of international importance for conserving biological diversity, *Criteria based on species and ecological communities*



- 2: An internationally important wetland may support vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities.
- 3: An internationally important wetland may support populations of plant and/or animal species important for maintaining the biological diversity of a particular biogeographic region.
- 4: An internationally important wetland may support plant and/or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions.

Specific criteria based on waterbirds

- 5: An internationally important wetland may regularly support 20,000 or more waterbirds.
- 6: An internationally important wetland may regularly support 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of waterbird.

Specific criteria based on fish

- 7: An internationally important wetland may support a significant proportion of indigenous fish subspecies, species or families, life-history stages, species interactions and/or populations that are representative of wetland benefits and/or values and thereby contributes to global biological diversity.
- 8: An internationally important wetland may be an important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery and/or migration path on which fish stocks, either within the wetland or elsewhere, depend.

Specific criteria based on other taxa

- 9: An internationally important wetland may regularly support 1% of the individuals in a population of one species or subspecies of wetland-dependent non-avian animal species.

5. What are the Benefits of Designating a Site?

Until recently there was no information as to the benefits of having a wetland designated a Wetland of International Importance in the United States. In 2005, however, the U.S. National Ramsar Committee developed a survey to gather this information. All 22 sites participated in a survey, and the results were published by Professors Royal C. Gardner of Stetson University College of Law and Kim Diana Connolly of the University of South Carolina School of Law in the February 2007 ENVIRONMENTAL LAW REPORTER, *available at* <http://www.ramsarcommittee.us/ELR%20Ramsar%20article.pdf>. Based on the responses there are numerous benefits to designation.

While it is important to note that designation in the United States does not include any sort of funding or access to funds, eighteen of the 22 sites reported that being a designated wetland did assist with grant applications and other funding requests. Ramsar designation can also generate support for protection of the site itself and the surrounding areas. Designation can lead to zoning protections. It can also generate heightened scientific interest increased tourism. The only valid reported negative effect of the Ramsar designation is associated paperwork.



6. What Do I Need to Have on Hand to Nominate a Site?

The Ramsar Information Sheet (available at http://www.ramsar.org/ris/key_ris.htm) asks for information regarding a number of factors, listed below. Following this brief list is a checklist to help in compiling information for your site.

1. The site's location, name, elevation and area;
2. Which Ramsar criteria the site meets and justification for each criteria;
3. Biogeography of the area;
4. The type of wetland in the site;
5. endangered, threatened or significant species (including both flora and fauna);
6. the site's physical features including geological, hydrological, ecological, soil type, sediment characteristics, origins, water quality and characteristics, any tidal influences, climate;
7. a description of the physical features of the catchment area, including surface area, geology, geomorphological features, soil types, and climate;
8. geographical coordinates of the site's approximate center;
9. any current or past scientific interest in the area and facilities;
10. any past, present or potential negative impacts to the site's ecological character;
11. cultural and social values of the area;
12. who owns the land and how the land and water is currently used;
13. what conservation measures have been taken such as being a national park or forest and any proposed conservation measures;
14. current communications, education and public relations that benefit the site;
15. current recreation and tourism;
16. what jurisdiction and management authority the site is under;
17. the current or proposed management plan, and
18. maps of the area.



1. Site.

Location.

Name of large administrative region (state, province, territory, etc.)

Site's distance from nearest significant administrative center, town, or city

Human population of the listed center

Administrative regions of the listed center if possible

Name.

A paragraph "word picture" of the wetland describing its importance, main physical and ecological characteristics, wetland type, and important values and functions.

Elevation of wetland above sea level in meters

Average and or Minimum and Maximum

Area in hectares

If the wetland is not contiguous list each part separately with the same designation as is used to differentiate them on the map.

Maps.

Hardcopy

Digital

If in GIS form have geo-referenced site boundary vector and attribute tables

A copy in a common file form such as TIFF, BMP, JPG, GIF, etc.

Jurisdiction.

Full name and address of the governmental authority with territorial jurisdiction and the name of the authority with functional jurisdiction for conservation

Management Authority.

Name and address of the local office of the agency or organization directly responsible for the wetland's management

If known, the title and name of the person in these offices with direct responsibility

Details of any special or unique site management arrangements



2. Ramsar Criteria met by the site (more than one can be found to support designation) from Annex II.

3. Justification for the application of each Ramsar Criteria to the site.

4. Biogeography of the area.

If possible, use a continental, regional or supranational

Which scheme was used and detailed information on how someone else can find the information

5. Type of wetland.

The corresponding letter combination to the type of wetland from Annex I

Dominance of each type of wetland in the area

The general geographic location of the site relative to being inland or marine / coastal

Percentage of the total area of any non-wetland habitat

6. Geographic coordinates.

Approximate center of the site expressed in degrees and minutes of latitude and longitude

If separate parcels are 1.6 km or more apart give center coordinates of each separately and label on site map

If site is less than 1,000 hectares only one set of central coordinates are needed

7. General Ecological Features.

Describe the wetland ecosystem including:

- Wetland and vegetation types;
- Zonation;
- Seasonal variations;
- Long-term changes;
- Ecological process maintaining the wetland;
- Ecosystem services and benefits derived;
- If appropriate, habitats and vegetation types of adjacent areas;
- If necessary, specific food chains.



8. Noteworthy flora.

- Plant species or communities making the wetland important without duplicating information found in either the “Justification” or the “General Ecological Features” sections.
- Endemic plant species if not used to justify Ramsar Criteria #3.
- Introduced species (accidental or intentional).
- Invasive species (description of their impact is to be included elsewhere).
- No occurrence lists of general species here but as appendices to the RIS.

9. Noteworthy fauna.

- Additional or supplemental information on animal species or communities the wetland is important to.
- Why each species or community is noteworthy (economically important, keystone, associated with high biodiversity, etc.)
- Any species not already considered toward Criteria.
- Zoogeographical features (relict populations, unusual range expectations, etc.)
- Introduced (accidental or intentional).
- Invasive species (description impacts should be provided elsewhere).
- No occurrence lists of general species here, put in appendices to RIS.
- Do not duplicate information included in the “Justification” or “General Ecological Features” section.

10. Social and cultural values.

Section A.

General account of principle social and economic values and functions

Wise use principles of tourism, outdoor recreation, education and scientific research, agricultural production, grazing, water supply, fisheries production

Cultural values.

- Cultural functions like archeological sites, historical associations, religious significance, and importance to indigenous people.
- Indicate which are consistent with maintaining natural wetland processes and character.

Section B.

- If site is internationally important for significant cultural values, both material and non-material, linked to its origin, conservation or functions.
- Details of values that result in detrimental ecological changes or are non-sustainable exploitation should be described in another section.

11. Site's physical features.

- Geology and geomorphology.
- Soil type and chemistry.
- Sediment characteristics.
- Origins.
- Hydrology and hydrological values.
- Water quality.
- Depth, fluctuations, and permanence of water.
- Tidal range and variations.
- Downstream areas.
- Significant climatic features.

12. Hydrological values.

Description of values, including ecosystems services provided such as flood control, groundwater replenishment, water purification, and water quality maintenance.

13. Catchment area physical features.

- Surface area
- Geology and geomorphological features.
- Soil types.
- Climate.

14. Land tenure / ownership.

- Detail ownership of Ramsar site and surrounding areas and, if possible, express as percentages (i.e. 50 percent state-owned).
- Explanations of complex tenure arrangements or formulas.

15. Current land and water use.

Section A.

- Principal human activities in Ramsar site.
- Human population in the area.
- Principal human uses of land and water at the wetland (i.e. water supplies, irrigation, agriculture, livestock grazing, forestry, fishing, aquaculture, and hunting).
- Activities related to research, education, recreation and tourism (details in another section).
- Relative scale and trend of each use.
- Any activities or uses restricted to distinct portions.

Section B.

- Land and water use in surrounding catchment area that could directly or indirectly affect status
- Downstream uses affected by wetland.

16. Scientific research and facilities.

- Current research programs, including monitoring, and onsite projects.
- Any special facilities for these activities and those mentioned under "Current land and water use."

17. Current communications, education and public awareness activities related to or benefiting the site.

- Existing programs, including training, mentioned in the "Current land and water use" section.
- Educational potential of the wetland.

18. Current recreation and tourism.

- Details of recreation and tourism that uses the wetland and was mentioned in the "Current land and water use" section.
- Existing or planned visitor facilities or recreation and tourism centers.
- Number of annual visitors.
- Type of tourism.
- Is tourism seasonal?

19. Any and all Factors adversely affecting site's ecological character, including changes in land and water use and any development projects.

Include greater catchment area if relevant.

- New or changing activities having or having the possibility of negatively affecting the natural ecological character of the wetland.
- If data exists, include data regarding quantifiable information such as scale, extent, and trend, including impacts.

Specification of the agent of change, resulting change, and impact.

- Differentiate between internal and external factors, and potential and existing adverse factors.
- Toxic chemical pollutants and sources (including industrial and agricultural-based).
- Natural events and succession having, or likely to have, impacts on site's ecological character.
- History of introductions, both intentional and accidental, of invasive or alien species.

20. Conservation measures taken.

Section A.

- Nationally relevant protected area status.
- International conservation designs.

If wetlands is transboundary the bilateral or multilateral measures that apply to all or part of the Ramsar site.

If only a portion of wetland is within the Ramsar site note the area of the protected habitat.

Section B.

If appropriate, list IUCN protected areas management categories that apply to the site.



Section C.

- Management planning process if present.
- Status of management plan (developing, being implemented, etc.)

Has management plan been officially approved?

- Include information regarding the plan in the bibliographic reference section.
- Include copy of management plan with RIS.

Section D.

Other conservation measures such as development or hunting restrictions

Include information on monitoring and survey methods of the site

- Briefly describe and evaluate the success of any integrated management planning involving or affecting the site and any protected area legislation and status of a protected area.
- Describe the involvement of local or indigenous communities in the management.

21. Bibliographic references.

List of key technical references relevant to the wetland.

- Management plans.
- Major scientific reports.
- Functional or active websites dedicated to the site or where the site is prominently featured, including the date the website was most recently updated.
- If the literature is very important to the site include a copy appended to the RIS.

7. Who Can I Contact If I have Questions?

There are a number of individuals and organizations who can help you if you have questions about the nomination process.

(1) Marina Sansostri Ratchford
International Affairs Specialist
Division of International Conservation
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 740d
Arlington, VA 22203
703-358-2480
Fax: 703-358-2115
marina_ratchford@fws.gov

(2) U.S. National Ramsar Committee, www.ramsarcommittee.us

(3) Society of Wetland Scientists, www.sws.org

(4) Another excellent source of information are wetland experts and professors at your local university.



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Appendix A

Bibliography

Agencies and NGOs

- Nat'l Oceanic & Atmospheric Admin., <http://www.noaa.gov>.
- The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, <http://www.ramsar.org>.
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- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, <http://www.fws.gov>.
- U.S. National Ramsar Committee (USNRC), index, *available at* <http://www.ramsarcommittee.us/index.asp>.
- Wetlands International, Ramsar Sites Information Service, <http://www.wetlands.org/RSDB/default.htm>

Technical documents

- Additional guidelines for the provision of maps and other spatial data for Ramsar Sites, *available at* http://ramsar.org/ris/key_ris.htm.
- Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance, *available at* http://ramsar.org/ris/key_ris.htm.
- Explanatory Note and Guidelines for Completing Ramsar Information Sheet on Ramsar Wetlands, *available at* http://ramsar.org/ris/key_ris.htm#note.
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Other Resources

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Appendix B

U.S. Ramsar Sites as of April 2007

Site	Location	Size	Criteria Used in Application, if Available
Izembek Lagoon National Wildlife Refuge	Alaska	168,433 ha	
Forsythe NWR	New Jersey	13,080 ha	
Okefenokee NWR	Georgia, Florida	162,635 ha	1,2,3,6
Ash Meadows	Nevada	9509 ha	3
Everglades Nat'l Park	Florida	610,497 ha	1,2,3,4
Chesapeake Bay Estuarine Complex	Virginia and Maryland	13,425 ha	
Cheyenne Bottoms	Kansas	2942 ha	1,2,5,6
Cache-Lower White Rivers	Arkansas	145,690 ha	
Horicon Marsh	Wisconsin	12,917 ha	
Catahoula Lake	Louisiana	12,150 ha	1,4,5,6,7,8
Delaware Bay Estuary	Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania	58,235 ha	
Pelican Island NWR	Florida	1,908 ha	1,4,6
Caddo Lake	Texas	3,237 ha	1,2,3,4,5,6,7
Connecticut River Estuary	Connecticut	8,325 ha	1,2,4
Cache River-Cypress Creek Wetlands	Illinois	24,281 ha	1,2,3,5,8
Sand Lake NWR	South Dakota	8,700 ha	1,2,3,4,5
Bolinas Lagoon	California	445 ha	2,4,7,8
Quivira NWR	Kansas	8957.7 ha	1
Tomales Bay	California	2,850 ha	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve	California	1,021 ha	1,2,3,6
Grassland Ecological Area	California	65,000 ha	1-6
Kawainui & Hamakua Marsh Complex	Hawaii	405 ha, 9 ha	1,2,3,8



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