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New spin on old concepts: ecosystem services and the Ramsar Convention

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The concept of ecosystem services – the benefits provided by wetlands both to mankind and to the wider functioning of ecological systems – has been at the heart of the ‘Ramsar’ Convention on wetlands since 1971. The very first paragraphs of the Convention’s Preamble recognize both ‘*the interdependence of man and his environment*’ and ‘*the fundamental ecological functions of wetlands as regulators of water regimes*’. Indeed, the ability of wetlands to continue to provide and support ecosystem services is central to Ramsar’s ‘wise-use’ concept – which preceded, and is regarded as synonymous with, the ‘sustainable use’ concept defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992.

Thus, for those using the Ramsar Convention to promote wetland conservation around the world for the past 40 years, the concept of ‘ecosystem services’ just provides new language to (re-)express basic and long-established wetland conservation imperatives. If that provides a more effective means of communicating with governmental and other decision-makers it will be useful; but as with all new forms of expression of established concepts, there is also a risk of imprecision in thinking and of communication of needs. There is a high risk of losing focus on the individual requirements of threatened species by the adoption of new ways of describing the drivers of conservation based solely on ‘ecosystem services’.

In some countries, the idea of the creation of markets for ecosystem services such as water is highly politically contentious. In this context, the implications of the word ‘service’ is especially controversial, and this has led to long negotiations at Conferences of the Parties (COPs) over the use of the term ‘ecosystem services’. Indeed, these words have not been formally adopted by Ramsar Parties.

One of the three pillars of the Convention is the establishment of a global network of wetlands of international importance, formally protected by Contracting Parties. There are currently 1997 Ramsar Sites covering 192 099 123 ha – a unique global estate of protected wetlands of huge significance for birds and other conservation interests. Contracting Parties have obligations to regularly report on these sites via a Ramsar Information Sheet, and this process provides a means to gather and make available descriptive information. In October 2012, COP 11 will be considering a proposal for a significant overhaul of information to be reported from Ramsar Sites. This will include, for the first time, systematic information on the importance of the ecosystem services at each Ramsar Site. Over time this will provide a unique source of information on the wider benefits and services provided. Also proposed is a mechanism for reporting on the presence and status of individual species at Ramsar sites – potentially a major step forward for bird and other species conservation and monitoring if approved.