U.S. Wetlands Need a Strategic Approach for Ramsar Nominations

The United States remains far behind many other countries in the number of wetlands designated by the Ramsar Convention as Wetlands of International Importance. The author argues that a strategic approach to nominating Ramsar sites will be essential to helping U.S. wetlands realize the many benefits that a Ramsar designation provides.

By Katie Beilfuss

In February 2012, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands added four new wetlands in the United States to the official list of Wetlands of International Importance: the Congaree National Park (South Carolina), the Emiquon Complex (Illinois), the Kakagon and Bad River Sloughs (Wisconsin), and the Sue and Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes (Illinois). (See the sidebar at the end of this article for more background on the Ramsar Convention and Wetlands of International Importance.) Despite these new additions, the United States remains behind many of our neighbors and partners in the number of designated sites within our borders. We are missing an important and underutilized opportunity to conserve wetlands in this country by failing to designate more Wetlands of International Importance. However, more important than merely increasing the number of sites is ensuring that we nominate those sites that most merit the designation. A strategic approach will be essential to taking advantage of the meaning and prestige of the Ramsar designation, including the benefits it brings for wetland protection, management, and public education.

This year, the Standing Committee of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands selected the Wisconsin Wetlands Association (WWA) to receive the 2012 Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award for Education for “outstanding achievements in the area of wetland education” and in particular for our work to promote and increase the number of designated Wetlands of International Importance in Wisconsin and throughout the United States. WWA is the first-ever U.S.-based recipient of this award. Our approach to identify and prioritize wetland sites in Wisconsin for Ramsar nomination, launched in 2009, is recognized by the Ramsar Secretariat as the first of its kind anywhere in the world, and is one they are eager to see replicated in other regions. The Ramsar award also honors WWA’s work to promote the ideals of the Ramsar Convention, including communication and awareness programs focused on engaging participation of local communities in wetland protection, restoration, and enjoyment in order to build long-term support for wetland conservation.

WWA’s outreach focuses on promoting wetlands as valuable resources, both to the general public and to target audiences, including policymakers, local land use officials, and watershed advocates. In our experience, the public still holds a negative stereotype of wetlands. They are “wastelands.” They breed mosquitoes and other pests. They stand in the way of development. Even in daily conversation, this important natural resource is beleaguered: people complain about “bogged down” processes or “swamped” workloads.

To counteract these negative stereotypes, WWA works to inspire a perception of wetlands as treasures and important tools for communities, rather than as obstacles. In 2009, WWA announced the Wetland Gems™ program, which designated 100 high-quality habitats that collectively represent the wetland riches that historically made up nearly one-quarter of Wisconsin’s landscape. The process by which we identified and selected these sites is described in the November-December 2009 issue of the National Wetlands Newsletter. Essentially, we drew upon data-driven conservation planning work completed by our conservation partners to select high-quality wetland sites across the state that represented all Wisconsin wetland types.

The Wetland Gems™ program has been an effective tool for promoting the value of wetlands through events, media work, and general outreach. The designations have proven to be useful to the designated sites in fundraising: we have heard from Wetland Gems™ landowners that a site’s status as a Wetland Gem™ has boosted their ranking in funding proposals for protection and management resources. We also sold out of the first printing of our Wetland Gems™ book in less than four months.

In some respects, WWA’s Wetland Gems™ program is a statewide version of the Ramsar Convention’s designation of Wetlands of International Importance, which recognizes important wetlands globally. WWA has integrated the two programs by using the Wetland Gems™ list and selection process as the basis for identifying and prioritizing Wisconsin sites for desig-
nation as *Wetlands of International Importance*. While any wetland that satisfies one or more of nine criteria spelled out by the Ramsar Convention can qualify for nomination, the intention of the Convention is to recognize the most important wetlands, and our strategy reflects this for Wisconsin wetlands.

Our approach involved convening the Wisconsin Ramsar Committee, a group of wetland experts with statewide experience representing both public agencies and nonprofit conservation organizations, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and The Nature Conservancy. This committee used the *Wetland Gems™* list as a starting point for identifying possible candidates for nomination under the Ramsar Convention and applied Ramsar’s nine eligibility criteria to evaluate these potential priority sites. Ultimately, the committee selected 11 sites as priority candidates for nomination (see the May-June 2010 issue of the *Newsletter* for details). WWA’s role has been to encourage the owners and managers of these priority sites to pursue the nomination, to assist local nominating committees with problem solving during the nomination process, and to troubleshoot by consulting with national and international contacts with Ramsar expertise and experience. We have also helped obtain the required letters of support from the members of the U.S. Congress and local and state natural resources agencies.

The first site to be nominated as a result of our strategic process, the Kakagon and Bad River Sloughs complex on the shores of Lake Superior in northern Wisconsin, was officially added to the list of *Wetlands of International Importance* on World Wetlands Day, February 2, 2012. This site, which is owned and managed by the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians, and is of great cultural importance to these people, was featured as one of four examples of the importance of the program when the Ramsar Convention celebrated reaching 2,000 designated sites worldwide (tinyurl.com/2000RamsarSites). The Kakagon and Bad River Sloughs complex is the first tribally owned *Wetland of International Importance* in the United States. WWA is currently working with two other local committees to complete nomination packages for the Door Peninsula Coastal Wetlands in northeast Wisconsin and Crex Meadows in northwest Wisconsin.

Though the Kakagon designation is one of an increasing number of designations in the United States, Ramsar is still an underutilized tool in this country. In our efforts to promote the nomination process, we have spent much time contemplating why more communities do not pursue Ramsar nominations for local wetland treasures. In other parts of the globe, Ramsar is a critical tool used to spur conservation and wise use of wetlands in areas where environmental regulations are lacking and where government or private protection programs are limited or absent. In Mozambique, for example, little if any systemic conservation work was happening in one of Africa’s most important deltas, the Zambezi River Delta, until a small group of scientists worked to nominate this site for Ramsar designation. As a result of being engaged in the nomination process (governmental buy-in is necessary for any nomination), the government began to take seriously the ecological importance of these wetlands, and also the critical role the delta played in social stability and economic growth for the region. In 2003, the government of Mozambique joined the Ramsar Convention and nominated the Zambezi Delta as the country’s first *Wetland of International Importance*. A management plan was developed involving a four-way partnership between government agencies, private industry, local universities, and international conservation nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Several years later, the status of the delta as a Ramsar site helped prevent the dredging of the Zambezi Delta for coal barging, encouraging the Mozambican government to look at alternative development scenarios.
In contrast, in the United States, many of our largest and most important wetlands are already protected by federal or state agencies as parks, refuges, or wildlife areas, or by conservation NGOs, such as land trusts, so these resources do not need the “jump start” that Ramsar provides elsewhere. We also have various environmental regulations at the federal and state level that are intended to limit the destruction of wetlands and water resources. But these two reasons alone do not explain the different stature of Ramsar here in the United States; several other barriers keep Ramsar from being used as an important tool for wetlands conservation in the United States.

First, the Ramsar Convention is not widely known in the United States. By and large, only wetland professionals and those involved with international conservation are familiar with the Ramsar Convention, and involvement in the Convention’s initiatives is limited even within this community. We have explained the role of the Ramsar Convention to many Wisconsin, and even friends in the conservation community, since WWA was selected for this award.

Second, people are fearful of regulations or programs that take away local control of land and natural resources. Though Ramsar does neither—in fact the goals of the Ramsar Convention include improving local involvement in wetland decision-making and management—there may be a perception that it does or could reduce local control.

Third, the benefits that come from a Ramsar designation are not widely known, and thus not fully embraced. A survey of designated Ramsar sites in the United States, 22 at the time, was conducted in 2005-2006 by Royal C. Gardner and Kim Di-ana Connolly (see the Newsletter’s March-April 2007 issue). The study documented that Ramsar designation resulted in three tangible benefits for these sites:

- **Increased funding opportunities**: Ramsar designation helped, or was perceived to help, raise both public and private monies for site protection and management. One survey respondent even characterized improved fundraising potential as “perhaps the biggest benefit.”

- **Support for protection of the site and surrounding areas**: while Ramsar designation does not provide any regulatory protection, it can provide powerful “social protection” that helps abate off-site threats, including making acquisition of buffer areas easier, encouraging watershed conservation partnerships, or influencing proposed projects that threaten a Ramsar site’s ecological integrity. For example, the timing of the designation of the Kakagon and Bad River Sloughs as a Wetland of International Importance coincided with a corporate proposal for a large open-pit mining project upstream in the sloughs’ watershed. The project posed a devastating threat to this site. The tribe and many other Wisconsin conservation organizations, including WWA, contributed to the defeat of a bill in the state legislature that would have facilitated this mining, but the threat remains. The tribe has indicated its intention to use the Ramsar designation as one tool to protect the sloughs from reintroduction of this legislation and other future development threats.

- **Increased attention**: Ramsar designation can raise the profile of a site, making it attractive to scientific research projects and tourism alike—the latter particularly when the site and its neighboring communities and businesses do a good job of publicly promoting this international recognition.

The wetlands community in the United States could, and should, take better advantage of these benefits and seek designation for more U.S. wetlands. Nominations have been on the rise in recent years: the United States now has 34 Wetlands of International Importance, including the four sites designated so far in 2012. This occurred in part because of increased attention and effort on the part of the U.S. National Ramsar Committee (USNRC) and its members, as well as a 2007 FWS grant program to encourage identification and evaluation of potential Ramsar sites and to promote Ramsar messages. In spite of this, we are still way behind many of our neighbors and partner countries: Mexico boasts 138 sites; the United Kingdom has 169; and Australia has 64. We have no Ramsar sites in the Pacific Northwest or in most of the intermountain west, only one in the prairie pothole region, and none in the Mississippi River Delta.

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This is not a call to merely increase the number of designated sites in the United States. It is a call to taking a strategic approach to these designations to ensure that we have designated those of our wetlands that are truly globally significant. Prior to WWA’s initiative, nomination of sites for designation as Wetlands of International Importance in the United States had been an ad hoc, rather than a strategic, process with little, if any, national coordination and planning. Those sites at which a person or group was aware of the Ramsar Convention and was willing to undertake the rigorous nomination process were the sites that got designated. This does not imply that these sites were not deserving of designation: they satisfied the criteria and the nomination reviewers’ scrutiny and received strong public support.

A strategic approach to identifying and prioritizing these nominations is needed so that the United States’ most important wetlands are nominated for this designation. The Education and Outreach Committee of the Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS) recently announced that it will soon be unveiling a new Wetland Gems™ of America program to “uncover and endorse...
high-quality wetlands throughout the nation and highlight their ecology, biology, and geography using an online registry” (Robert P. Brooks & Abbey Tyrna, May-June 2012 National Wetlands Newsletter). It is too soon to tell if the SWS program will be successful, but this program could be the national approach that the United States needs in order to strategically identify and prioritize wetlands for Ramsar nomination.

This is also a call to all of us in the wetlands community to increase awareness of the Ramsar Convention beyond the wetland professional community. We need to promote the benefits that it brings to our Wetlands of International Importance and, more broadly, to our work to protect and promote wetlands. We need to do more to promote the Ramsar Convention and its ideals to the broader general public because it is a high-profile and effective way to share why wetlands matter and to create the political will to ensure that these resources are adequately protected and managed.

With so few state and national organizations dedicated to wetland education and outreach, Ramsar helps fill the gap by providing messages and materials that groups can adapt to fit their local needs, particularly in celebration of World Wetlands Day on February 2 each year. World Wetlands Day marks the date of the adoption of the Ramsar Convention in the Iranian city of Ramsar. At this convention, which was held in 1971, terms of an agreement were ratified that obligated Parties to the Convention, i.e., member nations, to: designate sites as Wetlands of International Importance (“Ramsar sites”); apply a “wise use” (sustainable) concept to all wetlands within a Party’s territory; and engage in international cooperation on wetland conservation.

The Convention uses a broad definition of the types of wetlands covered in its mission, including lakes and rivers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands and peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, near-shore marine areas, mangroves and coral reefs, and human-made sites, such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs, and salt pans. The Ramsar Convention celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2011.

Worldwide, more than 160 countries, including the United States, are Parties to the Ramsar Convention. To date, more than 2,040 sites comprising nearly 480 million acres have been designated as Wetlands of International Importance worldwide, including the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the Everglades in Florida, Tram Chim National Park in Viet Nam, and the Pantanal in Brazil. To date, the United States has designated 34 sites totaling more than four million acres.

More information about the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands can be found at www.ramsar.org.

Celebrate World Wetlands Day
Do you take advantage of World Wetlands Day to promote your wetlands work? February may not be the best time of year for promoting wetlands in much of the United States, but World Wetlands Day provides an excellent hook for getting the media to cover your work and issues. If you have not made time to help your community celebrate World Wetlands Day, make that time this year. Another option is to get involved with the USNRC, which was formed to support the goals and objectives of the Ramsar Convention within the United States and internationally. The group provides support and advice to initiatives that promote the conservation and wise, sustainable use of domestic and international wetlands, and has worked hard in recent years to increase the number of U.S. Ramsar nominations and promote the Ramsar Convention.