



The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: challenges in operationalising wise use and the ecosystem approach

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3 **The Ramsar Convention and ecosystem-based approaches to the wise**
4 **use and sustainable development of wetlands**

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9 **Summary**

10 This paper describes the development and implementation of the Ramsar Convention on
11 Wetlands' "wise use" approach, adopted in 1971 and the longest-standing example amongst
12 intergovernmental agreements of an ecosystem-based approach to the conservation and
13 sustainable development of natural resources. We further describe how wise use relates to
14 the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) more recently adopted guidance on the
15 ecosystem approach and sustainable use of biodiversity. Despite worldwide governmental

Context: Ramsar and wise use as an ecosystem-based approach



- The Ramsar Convention this year celebrates its 40th anniversary of signing in February 1971:
 - the first of the modern global intergovernmental environmental agreements
- It addresses the “*conservation and wise use*” of wetlands (i.e. water-related ecosystems)
- Convention text was inspirational and far-sighted



USSR A. FIROUZ (chair) S-AFRICA M.F.MÖRZER BRUIJNS G.MATTHEWS E. CARP

Context: Ramsar and wise use as an ecosystem-based approach

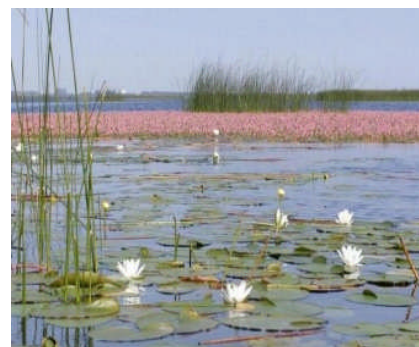
- First major intergovernmental agreement to combine **conservation** and **sustainable use** of resources
- Scope: *wetlands & water; ecosystems & people*
- Text recognised:
 - *the “interdependence of man and his environment”*
 - *that “wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value, the loss of which would be irreparable”; and*
 - *“the fundamental ecological functions of wetlands as regulators of water regimes”*



Photos E. Kuijken

Context: Ramsar and wise use as an ecosystem-based approach

- So to deliver “wise use” the Convention expects landscape and waterscape-scale, ecosystem-based, approaches to decision-making and management
 - Ramsar’s wetland coverage: all types of wetland from the mountains to the sea (excluding deep oceans)
 - Managing wetlands to support basin-scale water management and delivery is essential
 - “**wise use**” is the longest-standing example amongst global intergovernmental agreements of **an ecosystem-based approach**



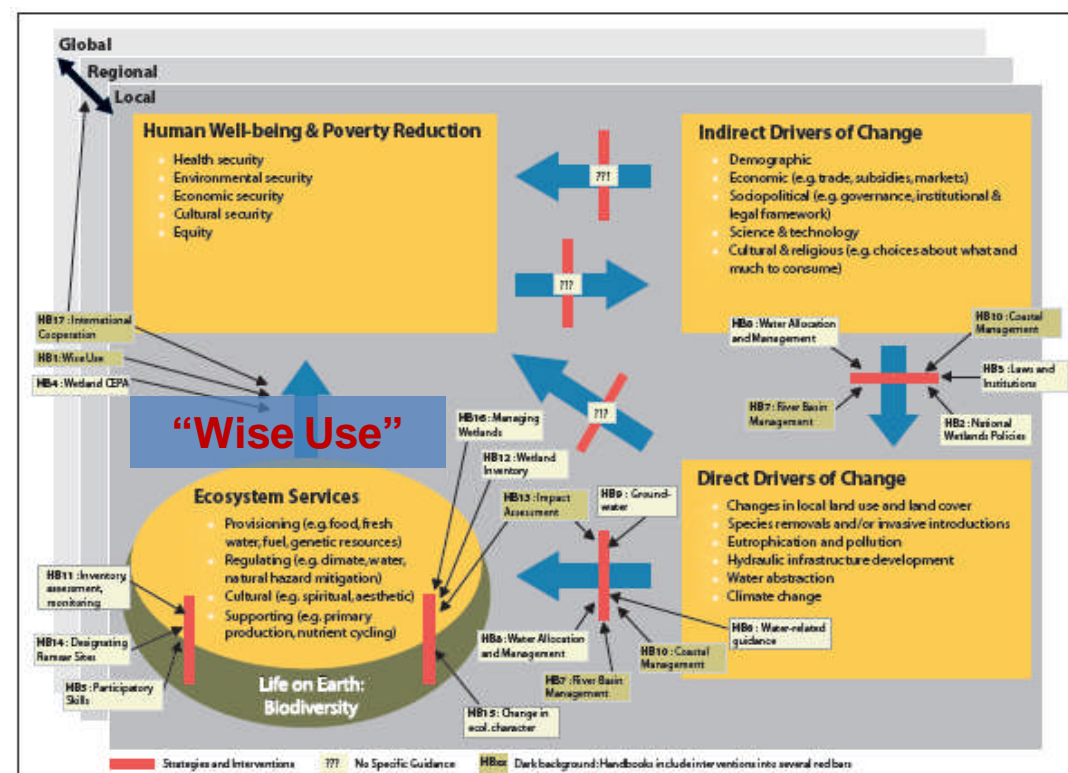
Context: Ramsar and wise use as an ecosystem-based approach

- Although the initial focus of implementation was on designation of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) ...
 - i.e. the **conservation of wetland biodiversity** component of the Convention
 - and this attention continues (now >1900 Sites; >185 million ha)
- Focus has progressively shifted to attention to the full original scope of the Convention text:
 - i.e. the **wise use of all wetlands**, as the overarching principle of the Convention
 - not just “**no water – no wetlands**” but strongly “**no wetlands – no water**”
 - recognizing the key role wetlands play as “**natural infrastructure**” in the global water cycle
 - delivery of “**ecosystem services**” to people – and at the same time maintaining wetland biodiversity



A Conceptual Framework for “Wise Use”

- At COP9 (2005) adopted the MA’s Conceptual Framework as “*Ramsar Framework for Wise Use*”
 - Equates Wise Use as delivery of ecosystem services for human well-being and poverty reduction
 - Shows where, and how applying Ramsar’s suite of “*Wise Use Guidelines*” (Ramsar Handbooks) contributes to Wise Use delivery



Redefining “Wise Use” and “Ecological Character”

Original definition (COP3, 1987):

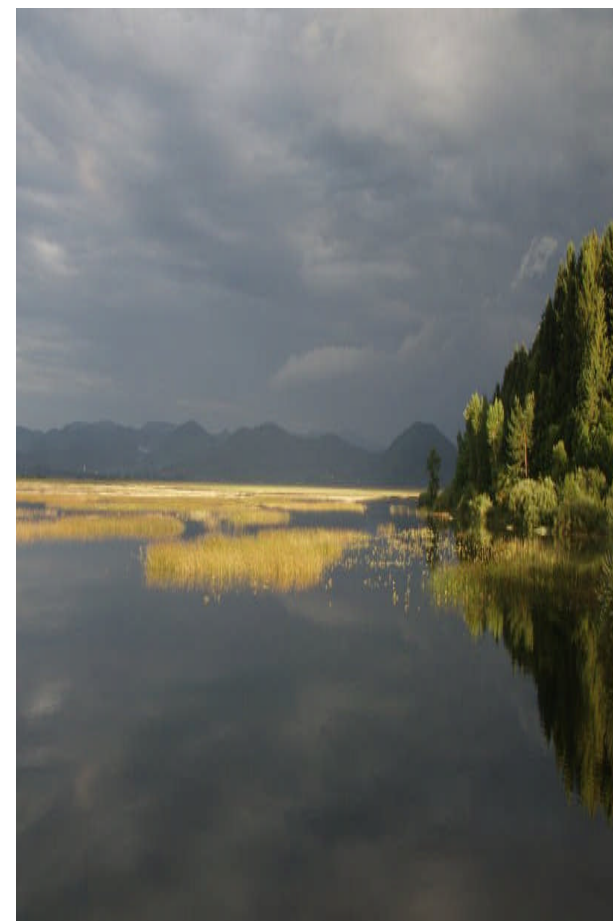
- *“their sustainable utilization for the benefit of humankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem”*

Updated (COP9, 2005):

- *“the maintenance of their ecological character, **achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches**, within the context of sustainable development”*
 - So explicitly linking (after almost 35 years!) the key Ramsar concepts of “wise use” and “ecological character” and with “ecosystem approaches”.

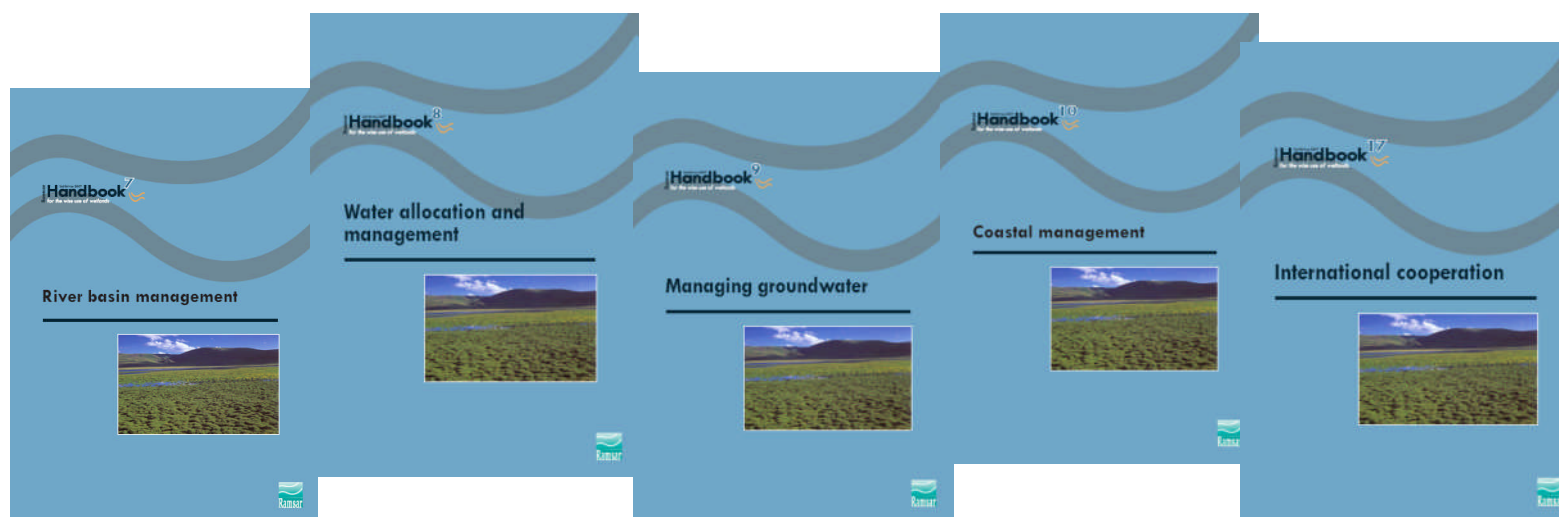
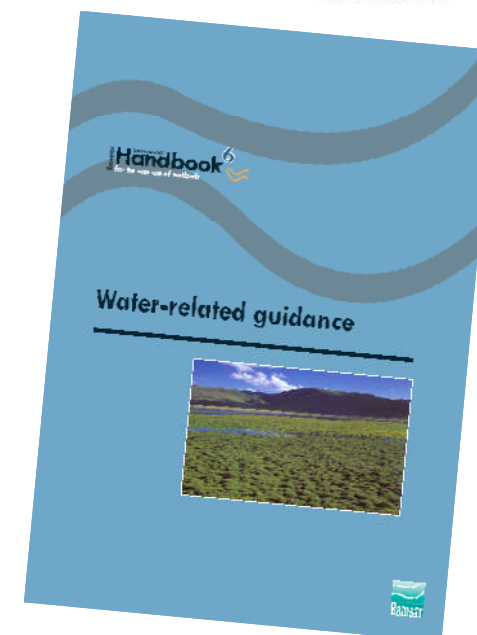
Redefining “Wise Use” and “Ecological Character”

- Redefined “ecological character” (COP9):
- *“the combination of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services that characterize the wetland at a given point in time”*
 - Incorporation of “ecosystem services” rather than services being derived product of components and processes
 - Equally applicable to all other ecosystems as well as wetlands



Ramsar wise use/ecosystem approach guidance

- Much of Ramsar's Wise Use guidance, although not always explicitly, concerns mechanisms to apply for delivering an ecosystem-based approach to wetland wise use:
 - IWRM, IRBM, ICZM etc.
 - Suite of water-related guidance
 - First operational tools for water and ecosystems adopted by governments globally



Uncertainties and Challenges #1

Understanding relationships between “*ecosystem approach*” and “*sustainable use*”

- Which overarches what??? Which are delivery components of what??? Not very clear...
- ?main goal of “ecosystem approach” implicitly Principle 5: “*conservation of ecosystem structure and functioning, in order to maintain ecosystem services*”?
 - in Ramsar language = “*maintaining ecological character*”
- ?main goal of Addis Ababa sustainable use principles: Section 2: “...*sustainable use of biodiversity components*” – “*set within the context of the ecosystem approach*”?
 - i.e. *sustainable use* as a component delivery tool for *ecosystem approach*? But, since
- CBD defines biodiversity as three levels: ecosystems, species and genetic,
 - is the *ecosystem approach* the component delivery tool for *sustainable use at the ecosystem level*? **or**
 - does *sustainable use* as tool under *ecosystem approach* only work for species & genetic levels of biodiversity – but not at ecosystem level?

Uncertainties and Challenges #2

How does “conservation” fit with “sustainable use/wise use”?

- **Conservation:**
 - World Conservation Strategy: *conservation* = management of natural resource utilization for sustainability i.e. = sustainable use
 - Ramsar COP1: management as basis for both *conservation* and sustainable development; **Mission:** “*Conservation & wise use*”
 - CBD: *conservation*, sustainable use, and fair and equitable benefit sharing.
- **So, for implementing an overarching ecosystem approach, should *conservation* be seen as:**
 - a separate mechanism to sustainable/wise use? or
 - one of the suite of mechanisms for achieving sustainable/wise use? or
 - equating to sustainable/wise use?
- If we (biodiversity sector) have trouble understanding what our language means – what chance have other sectors we need to work with??

Uncertainties and Challenges #3

Ramsar & CBD

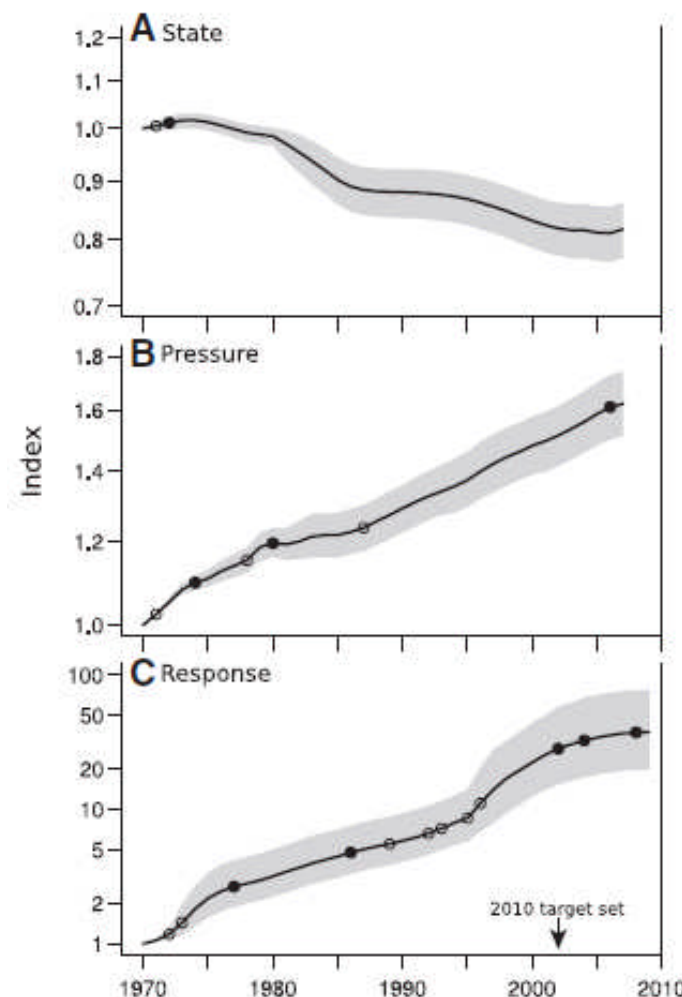
- Since CBD COP3 Ramsar recognized as CBD lead implementation partner for wetlands (inland and coastal/marine) – Joint Work Plans etc
- So Ramsar wise use implementation = CBD ecosystem approach implementation
 - But does CBD structure facilitate this?
 - Do CBD biome-based Programmes of Work help or complicate/hinder ecosystem approach implementation?
 - How well are biome-focussed PoWs designed for landscape-scale ecosystem approaches to sustainable use?
 - Particularly as their construct remains ‘silo-ed’ with little linkage between the PoWs
 - E.g. lack of upstream-downstream connectivity between inland waters and marine/coastal PoWs



Uncertainties and Challenges #4

Has wise use/ecosystem approach delivered *sustainable* development for wetlands (or other ecosystems)?

-) **Not (yet)**... although evidence that situation would have been even worse if not for Ramsar etc implementation
- **MA** told us that coastal and inland wetlands continuing to decline even faster than other systems
- **2010 BIP** assessment:
 - state of biodiversity continuing to decline;
 - pressures continuing to increase since 1970s;
 - society's responses, whilst increasing, have slowed since 2002
 - clearly responses not yet anywhere near adequate



Source: Butchart *et al. Science*. May 2010

Uncertainties and Challenges #5

What's the persistent problem???

- Same as in 1960s, leading to Ramsar and other MEA's creation:
- Same major drivers of continuing loss of wetlands and their services:
 - imperatives for economic growth and development, eradicating poverty and supplying the increasing needs of an ever growing human population for food, water and energy security
 - continue to over-ride the maintenance of naturally-functioning ecosystems



Uncertainties and Challenges #5

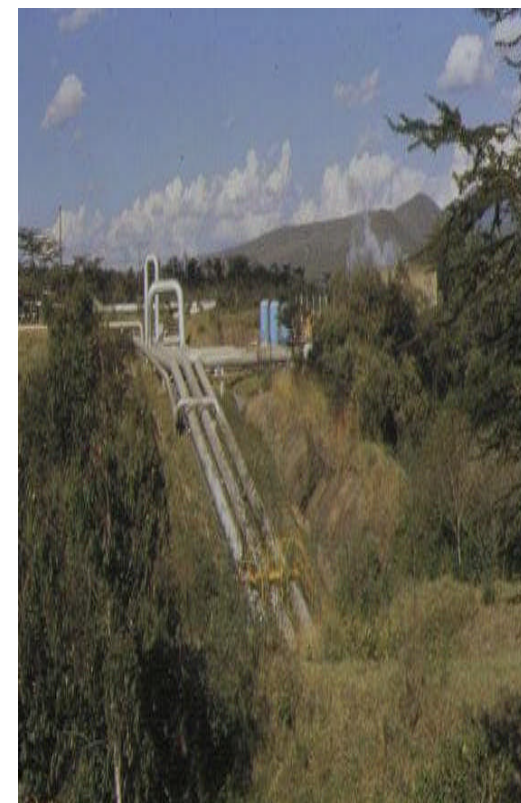
The paradox:

- it is these functioning ecosystems which, largely for free, deliver to people a huge worth of ecosystem services
- For the businesses of agriculture, water, food, health, energy security etc.
- But permitting their continuing loss will increase future risk that the gap will continue to widen between:
 - available services even at current levels of exploitation, and
 - rising different sectoral demands and needs of a growing human population
 - Increasing risk of collapse of “the hand that feeds us” ... ecosystems
- Long-embedded governance and decision-making structures and systems too often still sectoral – lack of political will to, and hard and lengthy to, change such structures

Uncertainties and Challenges #6

Why is integrated landscape-scale management so hard to achieve? An example:

- ***Ramsar STRP recent review of case studies on integrating wetlands into IRBM found:***
 - progress has generally been slow
 - successes being hard-won
 - over long periods of time
 - mostly achieved only in smaller basins
 - has often needed the threat of ecosystem collapse or imminent collapse to generate collaborative planning and management responses
 - suite of commonly experienced obstacles and challenges, but also
 - numerous creative solutions to respond to particular local situations



A way forwards? #1

Get out of our traditional silos

- forget promoting biodiversity or wetland conservation (at least in most of the world) – it's not worked well
- work cross-sectorally, speaking of “**natural or green infrastructure**”, “**natural capital**”, “**values and benefits** (services) **of nature**” etc. with societal sectors depending on these systems
- Provide decision-makers with clear information on **value** of maintaining and restoring the systems they depend on to their future business success/viability (e.g. TEEB)

A way forwards? #2

The cross-sectoral challenge:

- Often lack of capacity and/or the cross-sectoral political will to ensure such landscape-scale collaborative implementation is undertaken
- Enhancing understanding of the value of naturally functioning systems – and the capacity to maintain them
 - in governments and all sectors of society
 - must be the key priority for now and the future



A way forwards? #3

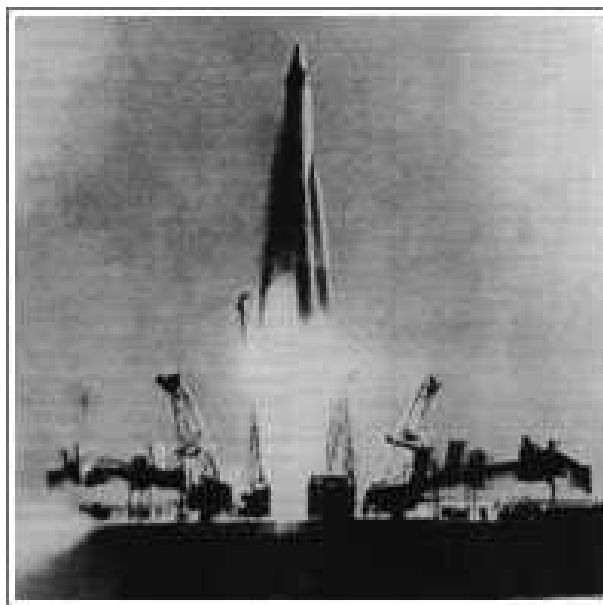


“Changwon Declaration on human well-being and wetlands” (Ramsar COP10, 2008)

- Key messages for decision-makers in other sectors
- Use landscape-scale integrated management and decision making to close the widening demand/supply gap
- Demand side will continue to increase
- Focus on restoring the supply side through ecosystem service maintenance and restoration to reduce the gap
- ***“Business as usual is not an option”***



And finally ...”What’s the connection?”



1962



1962

First call for an intergovernmental convention on wetlands

“Project MAR” final conference

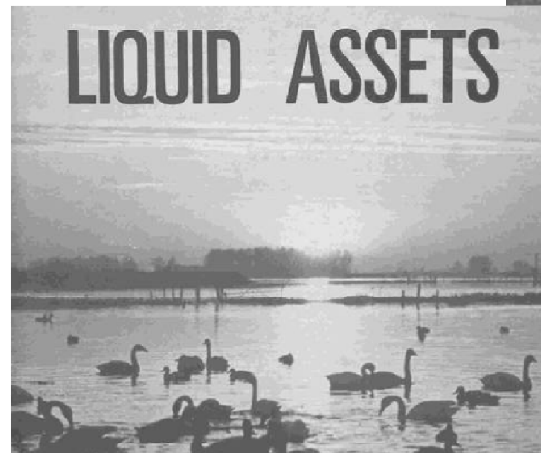
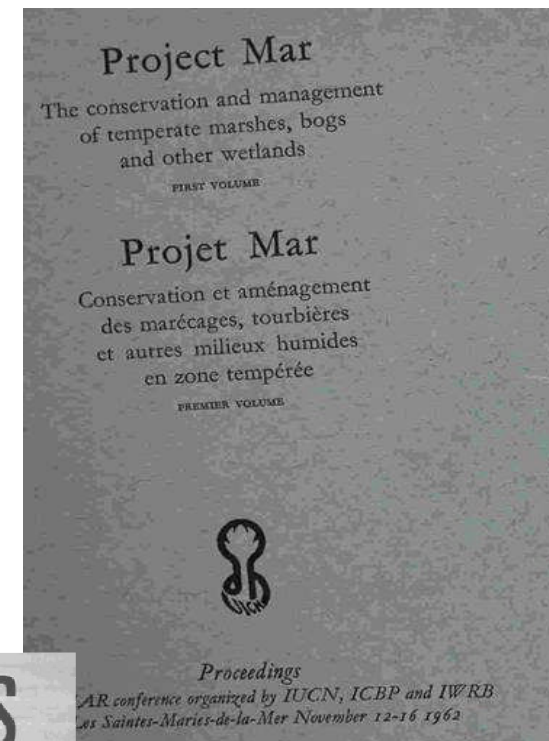
1964

‘*Liquid Assets*’ IUCN, with UNESCO support

✓ key messages to other sectors – especially agriculture

1971

Ramsar Convention agreed



Join in the Ramsar 40th Anniversary celebrations



www.ramsar.org

