



## HARMONIZATION OF SPECIES NOMENCLATURE AND TAXONOMY WITH OTHER MULTILATERAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENTS

### ISSUES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

1. Prepared by David Stroud (Ramsar STRP) and Simon Delaney (Wetlands International) at the request of the Chair of STRP.

#### **BACKGROUND**

2. Although the Convention's Secretariat collects information on species at listed Ramsar Sites, it has hitherto had no universally adopted taxonomic standards. The exception has been for waterbirds, where it urges Parties to use Wetlands International's publication *Waterbird Population Estimates* (WPE). That publication has developed, with four editions published since 1993, and provides a global listing of the status of 2,305 populations of 878 species of waterbirds.
3. Ramsar CoP has urged that Contracting Parties use WPE as the definitive source of contextual information for the selection of Ramsar Sites for waterbirds (notably the use of 1% thresholds in the application of Criteria 6. The taxonomy adopted by WPE is outlined in the Annex below.
4. The reason why the lack of a definitive taxonomy (other than for waterbirds) has not been an issue for the Convention to date is that the Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS - the data system that maintains information on listed Ramsar Sites) has limited functionality. At the time of designation, Contracting Parties (CPs) provide a hard-copy Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) describing the site. The current RIS format is largely unstructured and largely seeks text-based information on the site. Secretariat staff then assess these RIS and enter categorical information into the RSIS. This results in the 'degrading' of information from the species level (e.g. 'site X is important for Red Knot *Calidris canutus*') to higher taxonomic levels (e.g. 'site X is important for waterbirds'). This means it is currently impossible to ask species-related questions of the RSIS (e.g. how many Ramsar Sites have been designated for European Sturgeon *Acipenser sturio*?)
5. Ramsar STRP has recognised the inadequacies of the current system in that it fails to capture significant amounts of important data and information already being submitted by the Contracting Parties.

#### **CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE NEEDS**

6. Ramsar CoP11 requested STRP, following consultation, to undertake a major overhaul of the RIS and the accompanying guidance to Parties on the description of Ramsar Sites at designation (and subsequently). A radically revised RIS has been developed over the last year and will be considered by STRP16 next week.
7. The relevant elements of this are:

- a move to submission of categorical information by the Contracting Party itself (e.g. presence/absence; yes/no types of information rather than lengthy textual description);
  - in the context of species, more precise information on those species supporting the designation of the site (the application of the Criteria) as 'qualifying species', with
  - precise fields in the RIS to capture contextual information related to species (population size, period of assessment etc.).
8. The RIS format revision is envisaged as a first step to a fully on-line system to allow CPs to submit information about Ramsar Sites directly into the RSIS. This will obviously necessitate the adoption of a standardised taxonomy by the Convention to enable the extraction of species-level information in due course.
  9. Ramsar is perhaps in an enviable position of not needing to move '*from*' any existing taxonomy (other than perhaps for waterbirds), but is seeking to adopt one for its universal application.
  10. We can anticipate that this will be a discussion issue for CPs at CoP11, but initial thinking within STRP is that, given all, or nearly all, Ramsar CPs are also parties to CITES, adoption of established CITES taxonomic standards might be a pragmatic way forward.
  11. However, Ramsar has no fixed positions on this issue and we would value the opportunity to help the MEA community move towards a more universally adopted (and maintained) reference system.

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## Annex: Taxonomy adopted by Waterbird Population Estimates (fourth edition)

### “Scientific names

The sequence of families and the treatment at species level follow the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992, 1996) except for two families. Treatment of the grebes follows the sequence preferred by the Grebe Specialist Group (O'Donnell & Fjelds  1995). Nomenclature and population analysis of the herons follow the approaches of the Heron Specialist Group developed during preparation of the *Action Plan for Herons of the World* (Hafner *et al.* 2003) which incorporated advances in heron taxonomy and phylogeny, especially molecular studies (McCracken & Sheldon, 2002). This approach was made generally available in a new monograph of the heron family in 2005 (Kushlan & Hancock 2005). This treatment of taxonomy and nomenclature is very similar to that adopted by BirdLife International, and a number of small changes were made to this edition of Waterbird Population Estimates to bring it even more closely into line with BirdLife's World Birds Database, which is kept under review by the BirdLife Taxonomic Working Group.

### Subspecies and population

The subspecies and population column contains the name of the subspecies concerned and/or a brief geographical description to separate the population from other populations of the same subspecies (or other populations of a monotypic species). The primary source for treatment of species at subspecific level has been the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992, 1996). However, the treatment of the grebes follows O'Donnell & Fjelds  1995, and the herons follow Hafner *et al.* 2003 (see above). Some additional subspecies that are recognised by other sources but not listed in the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* have been included in brackets, as have newly recognised subspecies. Subspecies that are considered by most modern authorities to be invalid are omitted. Populations that have been identified primarily on the basis of their breeding ranges have been identified with the suffix (br); those identified primarily on the basis of their non-breeding ('wintering') ranges with the suffix (non-br).”

### References

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