

The Ramsar/DANONE partnership
*How can private sector help to implement an international
convention to conserve wetlands?*

Sebastià Semene Gultart
Convention Development Officer
The Ramsar Convention
Rue Mauverney, 28
1196 Gland, Switzerland
ssg@ramsar.org

The Ramsar Convention is the oldest environmental agreement, signed in 1971 in Iran, before the Stockholm meeting that gave birth to the other MEA's. Ramsars role was to protect and wisely use wetlands as an important habitat for water birds. After almost 35 years of existence, the Ramsar Convention has evolved into one of the main international tools to deal with water resources and their management, both for people and for nature. The wise use principle, backbone of the Convention and precursor of the modern concept of sustainability, advocates a wise use of water and wetland resources that allows and promotes human development while maintaining the integrity of ecosystems and the services they provide.

According to the Convention's definition, wetlands include not only swamps and peatlands, but many ecosystems, from ice and snow fields in high mountains, lakes, dams, irrigated fields for agriculture, to sea shores, mangroves and coral reefs. The administrative authority of the Ramsar Convention is limited only by the figure of 6m depth at low tide in sea water, excluding basically only deep oceans from the range of ecosystems the Convention has a role to play in.

With this definition as a background, water has become the central element of the Ramsar Convention to work on, expanding its scope from strictly conserving an habitat for bird populations to integrated river basin or coastline management, international cooperation regarding shared rivers and river basins, integration of human development and cultural values or practices into management plans, and increasingly actions based on water and water resources management to assist with poverty alleviation.

In 1998, the DANONE Group, through its flag water brand, Evian, and the French Global Fund for the Environment agreed on the creation of a fund, financed by Group DANONE and in favour of the Ramsar Convention, with the main objective to "take action from the mountains to the sea for water resources and their quality". The DANONE/Evian Fund for water was created as an action plan to promote education, training and communication for the implementation of Ramsar's Strategic Plan. The Fund would include 4 areas of action:

- information (for the different stakeholders)
- communication and public awareness

- training and technology transfers
- courses and seminars

Since its inception, the DANONE/Evian Fund was the main source of funding for producing communication material for World Wetlands Day (WWD, 2nd February each year). With the help of the Fund, the Ramsar Secretariat has been able to produce thematic material to be distributed around the world for WWD.

But the Fund was also used for more specific issues like direct public awareness through information and interpretation centres. Through the Ramsar/DANONE partnership, the “Maison Ramsar de la Baie de Somme”, in partnership with Conservatoire du Littoral, and the “Pré-Curieux” site, in Evian, were created in France. These two interpretation centres have a common aim: informing about and promoting the Ramsar Convention and its actions with local/regional specific examples and raising awareness on the importance and usefulness of wetlands locally and globally.

Besides this, the Fund has also allowed the Secretariat to produce specific material (publications and exhibitions) to raise awareness on Ramsar’s mission and philosophy, such as the latest “what’s in water?” leaflet.

Finally, the DANONE/Evian Fund also supported the wish of the Secretariat to recognize and honour “wetland conservation excellence” around the world. The Ramsar Award, consisting of a \$US10.000 prize in three categories (education, science and management) is given, every 3 years, to any individual, group or organisation particularly involved, though their work or actions in conserving wetlands with a long-term view.

But communication is not limited to the general public and often, with many international agreements, there is a gap between the technical guidelines produced and their on ground implementation. To reduce this gap the DANONE/Evian Fund also includes a programme of actions aimed at stakeholders and high-level decision makers. The “Evian Encounters” were conceived to be a gathering of high-level decision makers in order to discuss problems and give basic guidance to implement the Ramsar Convention from a regional or sub-regional approach. Five meetings have already been organised between 1998 and 2004, and the last one of them is planned for 2006 for the European region.

At the level of sites managers, the Ramsar/DANONE partnership also promotes transboundary technical and scientific cooperation through the creation of thematic networks of Ramsar sites and Ramsar sites managers. Three networks are currently in place

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- *East Atlantic Network*, including sites in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Spain, Morocco, Mauritania and Senegal.
- *Closed Seas Network*, including the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, with Ramsar sites in Spain, Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and Romania.

- *North East Asia Network*, including sites from Russia, China, Korea and Japan.

Training of sites managers is also a vital piece of the process and the Ramsar/DANONE partnership has, since 1998, organised several training courses and workshops aimed at selected groups of managers. These courses can be specific to an issue, like the “training course on inventory techniques in freshwater”, organised in Papua-New Guinea in 1998, or more generic to a broader Ramsar issue, such as transboundary cooperation with a training course organised in 1998 in Dauria, an international protected area shared by China, Mongolia and Russia. Another example is a training course for Ramsar sites managers in francophone African countries organised in Cameroon in 2000. Courses can also be focussed on a specific category of site managers, such as the one organised in Lelystad (the Netherlands), in 1998, for managers of remote and isolated sites in Armenia, Kenya and Pakistan.

The Ramsar/DANONE partnership also explores new developments and tests the principles advocated through the Convention on the ground. In 2000, the Ramsar Convention and IUCN-France started a pilot project in Cambodia, with funding from the DANONE/Evian Fund, to test water management on the field with local communities. The project was aimed to sustainably manage water resources to improve people’s health and community development. After 4 years, this project has proved to be one of the best examples of on-ground achievement through the Ramsar/DANONE partnership, with a considerable improvement of people’s health in one of the most remote provinces of northern Cambodia, dramatic development of the local economy and reduction of pressures on wetlands and the environment more generally, including through a reduction in deforestation.

The issue on which Ramsar and DANONE’s interest came closest has been the protection of mountain wetlands and areas for the protection of internationally important water sources. With this objective, the Ramsar Convention organised the symposium on “high altitude wetlands” in Evian, in 2001, to discuss the issue of high mountain wetlands and their conservation. This symposium gave rise to a specific Resolution on high mountain wetlands at the last Conference of the Contracting Parties of the Convention, in Valencia, Spain, in 2002. Parallel with this symposium, the DANONE Group has started discussions with the French Ministry of the Environment to designate the Evian impluvium as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar site).

Finally, the Ramsar/DANONE partnership also enables the Ramsar Secretariat to work in conjunction with its four International Organisation Partners (IOP) to conserve specific ecosystems. This is particularly the case with WWF and its Global Freshwater programme. The DANONE/Evian Fund allows the two organisation to work actively on the protection of sensitive areas through the designation of new Ramsar sites in four main areas:

- South America: cooperation within the Paramos region, in Northern Andes, for Ramsar sites in Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

- **Western Africa:** cooperation with the Niger River basin for Ramsar sites in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon.
- **Central Asia:** cooperation in the Himalayas for sites in India, China, Bhutan, Pakistan and Nepal.
- **South East Asia:** cooperation within the Mekong River basin between China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Cambodia.

The Ramsar/DANONE partnership represents a worldwide network and programme. Around the globe, 60 national representatives participated in the Evian Encounters, and 40 Ramsar sites managers are part of one of the networks created through the DANONE/Evian Fund. At the same time, the Ramsar Secretariat bases its funded communication activities on the DANONE/Evian Fund, as the current core budget has no allocation for these purposes.

In conclusion, the Ramsar/DANONE partnership is an important tool for developing the Secretariat activities to take action, from the mountains to the sea for water resources and their quality.