



‘Flyway conservation in action’

The Hague Action Statement on the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats, land use changes and development cooperation

The Hague Action Statement expresses the outcome of discussions by participants to the symposium celebrating the 15th Anniversary of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA). The symposium took place on 14 and 15 June 2010 in The Hague, the Netherlands and was attended by over 100 participants from 32 countries across the whole AEWA region and beyond.

During the last 15 years, AEWA has achieved much in stimulating international cooperation for the conservation of migratory waterbirds. It has developed action plans, published technical assessments and brought together interested parties across Africa and Eurasia. AEWA continues to promote and support crucial international conservation actions for migratory waterbirds and their wetland habitats.

State of the art and achievements

- Migratory birds are a part of our daily life and in the hearts of all people.
- Migratory waterbirds need special attention due to their particular vulnerability to habitat changes, unsustainable harvesting and disturbance.
- Many measures are in place, and AEWA has already had significant, positive impacts, but the decline of waterbirds and their habitats has not been curbed sufficiently.
- Waterbirds are essential sentinels of ecosystem health.
- Therefore, it is clear that we have to increase our efforts dramatically.

The continuing decline of populations and their habitats as well as the failure to reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity (the 2010 World Summit on Sustainable Development target) are compelling reasons for enhanced action. We recall the Edinburgh Declaration of 2004 and its endorsement by AEWA and the Ramsar Convention and call upon all stakeholders, countries, inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the scientific community to strengthen its implementation.

Participants noted recent publications such as: Global Biodiversity Outlook-3 (May 2010), the Report of the Trondheim Conference on Biodiversity (February 2010), UNESCO Biodiversity Science Policy Conference (January 2010), EU priorities on halting the loss of biodiversity in Europe (January 2010), Arctic Biodiversity Trends (May 2010) as well as the outcome of the CBD-SBSTTA 14 deliberations on protected areas, inland waters and coastal marine areas. These documents contain, *inter alia*, alarming information on the loss of biodiversity and habitats and provide a clear agenda for future AEWA priorities.

Future challenges

- The continuing loss of biodiversity, including waterbirds and their habitats;
- The huge geographic and economic scale of the factors which are driving change in land use and that of wetland habitats, resulting in significant negative effects on migratory waterbirds, and can, for example, lead to the shifting of migratory routes;
- The need to approach biodiversity protection in coherence with other global challenges, such as food and water security and climate change;
- The importance of focusing on transboundary aspects, and the integration of the conservation of migratory birds in other sectors; and
- The need to enhance the extent and focus of future funding from donor agencies in response to the declining status of wetlands and waterbirds and the ever-increasing threats and pressures on them.

Urgent call on AEWA Parties, other Range States, partner organizations¹ and the corporate sector to increase activities and contributions

This Action Statement highlights selected priorities at the flyway level that can both boost the implementation of the AEWA Strategic Plan and address new challenges:

1. Reverse waterbird habitat loss and degradation due to human activities and mainstream actions for waterbirds with those of food security, water security, climate change and sustainable socio-economic development

The continuing loss and degradation of waterbird habitats is alarming, having already caused significant population declines, both regional and global. These losses are related to a growing human population. The only solution is to develop more sustainable approaches to land- and water-use that respect the needs of both people and biodiversity, including migratory birds, and limit further claims on land and water.

Actions:

- Develop and implement approaches that combine conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, including that of migratory birds and their habitats, while promoting livelihoods, poverty alleviation and an increased food security, for example, and, where appropriate, by both efficient food production on some of the existing agricultural area (thereby reducing the need for more habitat to be transformed into agricultural area) as well as integration of biodiversity objectives with agriculture in other areas;
- Introduce national measures to protect shorelines, wetlands and other critical bird habitats;
- Support and implement sustainable practices in agriculture, fisheries, pastoralism, integrated water management and hunting, by promoting and applying biodiversity-inclusive economic development and sectoral policies;
- Make full use of the financial mechanisms, created in the context of climate change policies, to combine avoidance of deforestation, carbon storage and sequestration through wetland restoration, with the protection and management of habitats of migratory birds;

¹ Multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs); international, and national, non-governmental organizations; and governmental agencies and institutions.

- Integrate the conservation and sustainable management of migratory birds and their habitats in programmes and activities of national planning agencies and development cooperation agencies and organizations and promote the use of broad impact assessments and the priority setting of environmental issues by the recipient countries; and
- AEWA should engage with the UN Environment Management Group on the Integration of Biodiversity across the UN System which has been established to enhance collaboration between UN treaties.

2. Further develop and manage site networks

Modern research techniques applied to migratory birds (satellite transmitters, colour marking schemes, stable isotope analysis, *etc.*) have shown that waterbirds have many different migration strategies and that they may shift their migratory routes due to changes in their habitats. Both broad-front migration and a clear connectivity between larger areas via staging sites occur in many species. Many areas used by waterbirds are extensively farmed landscapes, whose management is best influenced by environmentally friendly agricultural policies. Other areas may be subject to legal protection, for example as Ramsar sites, or as Natura 2000 sites in the European Union. The Critical Site Network tool, developed under the UNEP/GEF Wings Over Wetlands Project, is an essential source of information for such actual or potential protected areas.

Actions:

- Conduct research and field surveys to better understand and monitor:
 - movements of birds within and between sites in protected area networks and also at a flyway scale; and
 - the adequacy of current site networks to provide for the requirements of waterbirds;
- Urgently develop a comprehensive and coherent climate resilient flyway network of protected and managed sites and other adequately managed sites, of international and national importance for waterbirds, taking into account existing networks in conformity with Target 1.2 of the AEWA Strategic Plan and the proposed Target 11 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 2020 Strategic Plan;
- Use and regularly update the Critical Site Network tool with information about those important areas that are not necessarily part of formal protected area systems;
- Promote the full involvement of local communities and encourage use of best practice, shared lessons and information exchange between sites and countries, for example through the use of the Critical Site Network tool; and
- Strengthen capacity for flyway conservation through, among other instruments, the Flyway Training Kit.

3. Ensure harvesting practices are sustainable

Sustainable hunting does not occur everywhere throughout the AEWA region even though it is promoted by national and international hunting organizations as well as by the Agreement itself. Some threatened and declining species are still being harvested (for example, Sociable Lapwing). Waterbird hunting in parts of the AEWA-region is sometimes unsustainable. The meeting also noted the alarming situation in parts of Africa as described in *'Living on the Edge'*²: intensive harvesting of waterbirds in Sub-Saharan wetlands (and probably elsewhere in Africa) that is currently unsustainable. Projects are in place to develop alternative sources of income and protein instead of waterbirds.

² *Living on the Edge – Wetlands and Birds in a Changing Sahel*, by Leo Zwarts, Rob Bijlsma, Jan van der Kamp & Eddy Wymenga (2009, ISBN 978 90 5011 280 2).

Actions:

- Intensify and extend current projects of development cooperation agencies aiming at the reduction of harvesting of waterbirds in African non-breeding areas with structural provision of alternative food resources for human communities. In particular, to contribute to that goal by providing support to the African Initiative of AEWA;
- Identify and eliminate any unsustainable harvesting of migratory waterbirds, including unsustainable spring hunting, especially in Eurasia; and
- Promote practices that ensure that existing community-based harvesting practices are sustainable and share lessons learned with respect to these practices.

4. Continue and further improve the monitoring and reporting on the status of migratory waterbirds, their habitats and use at a flyway scale through the (extended) International Waterbird Census (IWC)

Continued and extended data collection is absolutely essential, *e.g.* for Single Species Action Plans (SSAPs) and needs to be widely supported. Within the International Waterbird Census global programme, priority should be given to collecting better quantity and quality of data for Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia as well as other monitoring, for example of Important Bird Areas (IBAs).

Actions:

- Establish a consortium by the end of 2010 involving countries, MEAs and other stakeholders, including local communities, and building upon the WOW Partnership, to secure adequate financial resources for international data collection, analysis and dissemination of updated and topical information necessary for waterbird conservation of the AEWA region, in particular through the extended International Waterbird Census and related products, including *Waterbird Population Estimates* and the Critical Site Network tool;
- Create a structured sustainable source of financing to implement and coordinate Single Species Action Plans and to synergise actions between SSAPs within the AEWA and other flyway initiatives to make more efficient use of resources and expertise; and
- Build capacity for monitoring and reporting of the status of migratory waterbirds in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

5. Protect migratory bird species under pressure

It is also becoming increasingly clear that many other migratory bird species are under pressure. Their international protection is as important as it is for waterbirds. AEWA could in future play a role in this respect. Where species are in need of special conservation actions, all sources of data and information should be used to implement relevant activities.

Actions:

- Apply approaches taken by AEWA (*e.g.* those supported by the WOW project and the recently established WOW partnership), in other flyway systems;
- Secure adequate resources for the implementation of AEWA SSAPs and strengthen linkages and the implementation of actions to benefit multiple SSAPs;
- Promote closer cooperation between Range States of the species covered by SSAPs, such as the Black-tailed Godwit and Lesser White-fronted Goose;

- Share lessons learned and successful tools between flyway agreements and initiatives;
- Promote the use of SSAPs for species that cause damage to agriculture or fisheries, in line with the AEWA Action Plan; extend the recently initiated adaptive management approach for the Svalbard Pink-footed Goose to other relevant species;
- Consider developing an early warning system / mechanism for the risk assessment of invasive species of waterbirds (and other animals and plants that impact on waterbirds), through CMS/AEWA in collaboration with national governments, other MEAs and international organizations, in particular the Global Invasive Species Programme; and
- Strengthen linkages and synergies with other flyway initiatives, and consider the application of the AEWA approach, whether within AEWA or through joint initiatives of AEWA and other relevant CMS instruments (to be developed), to other bird migratory species, including songbirds, raptors, larger forest birds, and steppe species, in situations where these species use the same flyways and largely the same habitats.

6. Promote the development of future international initiatives

The Global Environmental Facility (GEF) has provided substantial and crucial support for the Wings Over Wetlands project – through which an innovative array of tools has been developed to assist in the implementation of AEWA. However, changes to GEF funding criteria mean that in the future such international flyway-scale projects will be difficult to support. Given the demonstrably effective outputs from WOW, the meeting urged that GEF reconsiders these criteria, in line with recommendations of the UNEP publication “*The Experience of UNEP GEF & Partners in Flyway Conservation*”, in order to support new international initiatives.

Actions:

- Increase the effectiveness of protected area networks at the ecosystem scale;
- Develop and support systems for the collection and analysis of relevant data to underpin and adapt the design of protected area networks in response to climate change and land use changes; and
- Support the establishment of financial mechanisms by Parties, other Range States, partner organizations and the corporate sector to enable AEWA, CMS and the Ramsar Convention to implement CBD decisions relevant to migratory species conservation and habitat management at the forthcoming CBD COP³.

³ CBD COP10, 18 - 29 October 2010 - Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, Japan (<http://www.cbd.int>)