

Speech by IUCN Director General Inger Andersen at the Opening Ceremony of the 12th Conference of the Parties of the Ramsar Convention

June 2, 2015, Punta del Este, Uruguay

Honourable Ministers, Secretary General, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first to express my sincere thanks to the Government of Uruguay for the warm and gracious welcome I have received in Punta del Este. The tremendous efforts put into the organisation and preparation of this conference are clear and appreciated by all. I have every confidence that these will ensure that this 12th Conference of the Ramsar Convention Parties will mark another significant and successful milestone in the cause – that which has brought all of us to this opening plenary today – of advancing wetland conservation worldwide.

I want also to congratulate Secretary General Christopher Briggs and his team for their very hard work over many months in preparing the CoP. We see every day in Gland the dedication of the Ramsar Secretariat staff to the Convention and to serving the needs of the Parties. I am certain that you will witness this same dedication in the early mornings, late nights and throughout the coming seven days

Delegates –

The most recent estimates of wetland loss should shock us all. Data published in 2014 showed that as much as 87% of natural wetland area has been lost since 1700 and 64% since 1900. Fully 80% of rivers in Asia were rated by the Asian Development Bank in 2013 as having poor health because of pollution and the damming of rivers. In the United States, some 750,000 km of river is classed as degraded.

And the pressure we put on wetlands is almost relentless. Rates of natural wetland loss were almost 4 times higher in last 100 years than in the preceding centuries – exceeding 1.5% per year for much of that time in Europe, the Neotropics and Asia.

We have drained, bulldozed, built on and polluted wetlands on a simply massive scale.

Our trashing of the world's wetlands has been going on for so long and is so extensive that we have become inured to it – almost blind to its severity and cost.

Shareholders would never stand by and let the capital base of a business be destroyed like this. They would demand change. Yet, despite all being shareholders in the natural capital of the world's wetlands, we let this happen.

Those of us gathered at this Conference know that this must stop – and as we get better at counting the costs of wetland loss, I want us to build an agenda for change that leads to action on a scale large enough to end this crisis of wetland destruction.

The costs to biodiversity have been huge. Of more than 25,000 freshwater species assessed for the IUCN Red List, one-third are threatened – and according to WWF's Living Planet Index, freshwater species populations have declined by an astounding 76% since 1970, double the rate of decline in terrestrial or marine biomes.

But the costs to human well-being are also extreme – because wetland ecosystems provide so many benefits that are needed by people and by the economy, such as water storage and filtration, flood regulation and food production. Over the period 1997-2011, estimated losses in the value of benefits because of loss of ecosystem area were \$2.7 trillion per year for swamps and floodplains and \$7.2 trillion per year for tidal marshes and

mangroves. The Asian Development Bank's study of poor river health said that \$1.75 trillion in ecosystem services were at risk annually.

Much more locally and tangibly, failure to conserve the Muthurajawela Wetlands in Sri Lanka for example would put benefits valued at over \$8 million at risk for 30,000 people and local businesses, related to flood control, wastewater treatment and fisheries.

It is clear that the world's natural capital balance sheet on water is in the red and that this has to change – or else Aichi Target 14 on safeguarding and restoring ecosystem services will be but a pipedream; the draft Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water security for all will not succeed; and 'water crisis' will remain at the top of the World Economic Forum's list of global risks with highest potential impacts, as it was in 2015.

In this hall today we have representatives of governments who have shown their commitment to wetland conservation and the Ramsar Convention. We have partner organisations like mine – IUCN – the International Organisation Partners and others, who have worked with the Parties over decades to implement the Convention. Among us are passionate advocates for wetlands. We strive together for an agenda, a plan that will stop and reverse the worldwide destruction of wetlands.

We have to make sure that this CoP counts. Negotiating and passing new Resolutions will not be enough. We have to make the Ramsar Convention a catalyst for change – and change on a scale massive enough to stop and reverse a terrible history of wetland loss and destruction.

This is a big goal that demands we look beyond business as usual. We must raise our ambition.

This year, 2015, is meant to launch the world on a new path – with the agreement of Sustainable Development Goals and a new settlement on tackling climate change. I believe that the Ramsar Convention has a strong role to play.

I say this not just because you, the Parties, have put in place through Resolutions passed in previous CoPs a strong framework for action on wetland conservation for water security, climate change mitigation and adaptation, poverty reduction and sustainable development. I say it also because the Ramsar Convention was the first Multilateral Environmental Agreement. It is the big sister of the MEAs. Like all big sisters, Ramsar should show the way.

My personal conviction is that the conservation movement worldwide must aim to inspire and lead transformational impacts. Just like shareholders jolted into action by a crash in the capital value of a business, we must galvanise our countries and communities to take large-scale action to stop the loss of ecological character from wetlands, stop their destruction, and begin restoring what's already gone.

But how can the Ramsar Convention and its Parties become the architects of this change?

IUCN has led the Water and Nature Initiative since 2001, working in some 30 countries worldwide to implement sustainable basin management. Of many lessons from this work, the most valuable have been on how to catalyse and manage change.

Deep change does not emerge from passing Resolutions or making Strategic Plans. These play an important role, helping to gather the momentum behind consensus that leads to action. We learned in for example Guatemala, Mexico, Burkina Faso, Tanzania and Cambodia that change takes hold –

- when coalitions of national and local government, NGOs, academia and citizens come together to champion change;
- when the urgency of change is communicated widely and often;
- where a sound economic case for investment is made;
- where there are results on the ground that motivate and inspire;
- where there are forums for people to debate and negotiate;
- where learning is used constantly to improve and adapt;
- and where there is very proactive facilitation and brokering of dialogue and relationships.

During this CoP, Ramsar Parties will finalise a set of new Resolutions and the Convention's 4th Strategic Plan. What should happen next to end the century-long crisis of wetland loss?

I believe we need to build and commit to strategies for change, beginning at national level. This is Ramsar implementation; this is how we will meet the Strategic Plan's targets. We should use lessons on how to catalyse change; let's:

- build national coalitions for wetland conservation and restoration – so that the environment's voice is amplified by others;
- convene national dialogues and joint learning with water and finance Ministries, engineers, bankers and climate change advocates – so they start implementing the Convention for us;
- communicate how wetlands are critical national infrastructure – so that new investment in wetlands as natural infrastructure is demanded by citizens and leaders alike; and let's
- create networks of joint action projects on wetland management and restoration – so that there are results on the ground that provide the evidence for large-scale implementation.

There are days of hard work ahead of us, to complete the Convention's business at this CoP. But when we are done, let's leave Punta del Este with the conviction to return home to make Ramsar a catalyst for change, to show the way in the post-2015 era.

The urgency and scale of change needed is daunting. An assessment published in 2010 showed that ecosystem degradation poses a threat to water security for 80% of the world's population. We just cannot afford to keep putting off the changes needed. But, if we work together, country by country, we can build and implement a change agenda that can rise to the challenge and arrest the crisis in wetland loss.

Let's make this CoP count.

Thank you.