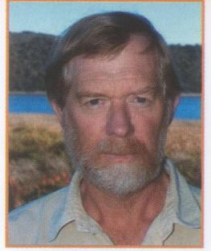


What is a RAMSAR site?

by Rod Randall



Malachite bird hide in Langvlei

The Ramsar Convention, also known as the 'Convention on Wetlands' or more correctly as the 'Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat', is an intergovernmental treaty which provides the framework for international cooperation for the conservation of wetland habitats and their wise use.

The correct official name is seldom used these days, largely because it no longer reflects the emphasis of the treaty, which has shifted from a narrow focus on wetlands for waterfowl to a broader focus on all aspects of wetland conservation and the wise use thereof. Ramsar was the first of the modern global conservation conventions and set the tone for later treaties (e.g. Bonn Convention). Many people mistakenly think that Ramsar is an acronym, such as NATO or SANCCOB, but this is incorrect because the name is derived from the city in Iran where the convention was adopted in 1971. South Africa attended the first meeting in Ramsar and was one of the founding states of the Ramsar Convention, which has grown steadily to its present size of 154 member states.

The Ramsar Convention, as an intergovernmental treaty, requires that a national governmental agency should act as the administrative authority in each member state. In South Africa this function is performed by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism in Pretoria. At the international level, the administration of the convention is handled by a secretariat known as the 'Ramsar Bureau' based in Gland in Switzerland. Broadly, the objectives of the Ramsar Convention are to stem the loss of wetlands and to ensure their conservation.

Contracting Parties (i.e. states that sign the Convention) take on general obligations relating to the conservation of wetlands throughout their territory and special obligations relating to those wetlands designated in a 'List of Wetlands of International Importance'. This list is often referred to as the 'Ramsar List' and wetlands appearing in this list are called 'Ramsar sites'.

Contracting Parties are obliged to name at least one wetland for inclusion in the Ramsar List. The selection criteria for Ramsar sites are specified and relate to their significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology. One of the aims of the Ramsar List is to have the best wetlands in each country featured on the list. South Africa currently has 17 Ramsar sites of which two occur in national parks, viz. Langebaan Lagoon (West Coast National Park) and Wilderness Lakes (Wilderness National Park).

The boundaries of Ramsar sites have to be carefully described and mapped, while written descriptions of the site must be supplied so as to be incorporated in the Ramsar database. Any changes in the ecological character of the site must be reported to the Ramsar Bureau, and interestingly, private individuals and NGOs can report states that fail to report threats or detrimental changes at listed sites, which certainly serve to keep states and managing authorities on their toes. States are required to submit reports on their listed sites and information is derived from the managing authorities.