

# CANADA'S COMMITMENT TO THE "RAMSAR" CONVENTION

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Since references to "Ramsar" wetlands are encountered periodically, an explanation of the term is needed. Ramsar is the city in Iran in which in 1971 the "Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat" (also known as the Ramsar Convention) was first drafted by 18 countries. By creating an international mechanism for the protection of wetlands, these countries demonstrated their commitment to the conservation, management and wise use of these environments, their fauna and flora.

Since 1971 there have been three conferences of the "Parties to the Ramsar Convention" - in Cagliari, Italy (1980), in Groningen, the Netherlands (1984) and in Regina, Canada from 27 May to 5 June 1987. These meetings are held for the purpose of discussing the implementation of the Convention and exchanging worldwide information on wetland conservation issues. Currently, 45 countries have acceded to the Convention (Table 1) and the List of Wetlands of International Importance (referred to as "The List") now includes 381 sites.

Two international organizations which have been instrumental in supporting the development and implementation of the Ramsar Convention are the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB). At the Regina Conference these organizations were asked to provide a permanent secretariat for the Convention, the "Convention

Bureau," consisting of an administrative unit based at IUCN Headquarters in Gland, Switzerland, and a unit to provide technical and scientific advisory services based at IWRB Headquarters in Slimbridge, England. The Bureau carries out the work of the Parties, such as keeping track of The List of wetlands and changes to it, encouraging countries to join the Convention, arranging for studies to be done on important wetland issues, and arranging for meetings of the Parties.

Canada acceded to the Ramsar Convention in 1981 and designated Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area, Quebec, as Canada's first Ramsar wetland. Fourteen more wetlands were added in 1982, 2 in 1985, and 11 new sites were announced at the 1987 conference for a total of 28 (Table 2, Fig. 1). The area of Canada's Ramsar sites is about 50% of the total area world-wide, including the two largest sites — Whooping Crane Summer Range (1,689,500 ha) in Alberta and Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) and Queen Maud Gulf Migratory Bird Sanctuary in N.W.T. (6,200,000 ha).

Canada has designated most of its largest sites in the north; for example, above the Arctic Circle Canada's four Ramsar sites comprise 85% of the total area of Ramsar wetlands listed north of 66°N latitude. The remaining 15% is in Sweden, Finland and Norway. Some of Canada's northern sites are large areas with low overall biological productivity and density of birds, whereas others, such as Polar Bear Pass, N.W.T., are recognized as unique biological oases.

Table 1. PARTIES TO THE RAMSAR CONVENTION AS OF JUNE 1987

<i>Country</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of Sites</i>	<i>Area (ha)</i>
Algeria	Nov. 83	2	8,400
Australia	May 74	27	1,294,090
Austria	Dec. 82	5	102,369
Belgium	Mar. 86	6	7,635
Bulgaria	Sep. 75	4	2,097
Canada	Jan. 81	28	12,886,336
Chile	Jul. 81	1	4,877
Denmark	Sep. 77	27	734,202
Finland	May 74	11	101,343
France	Oct. 86	1	85,000
Gabon	Dec. 86	3	1,080,000
German Democratic Republic	Jul. 78	8	46,787
Germany, Federal Republic of	Feb. 76	20	313,600
Greece	Aug. 75	11	80,500
Hungary	Apr. 79	8	29,450
Iceland	Dec. 77	1	20,000
India	Oct. 81	2	119,373
Iran	Jun. 75	18	1,297,550
Ireland	Nov. 84	8	6,516
Italy	Dec. 76	40	51,476
Japan	Jun. 80	2	5,571
Jordan	Jan. 77	1	7,372
Mali	May 87	3	?
Mauritania	Oct. 82	1	1,173,000
Mexico	Jul. 86	1	47,480
Morocco	Jun. 80	4	10,580
Netherlands	May 80	14	301,185
New Zealand	Aug. 76	2	14,944
Niger	Apr. 87	1	220,000
Norway	Jul. 74	14	16,256
Pakistan	Jul. 76	9	20,990
Poland	Nov. 77	5	7,090
Portugal	Nov. 80	2	30,563
Senegal	Jul. 77	4	99,750
South Africa	Mar. 75	6	202,044
Spain	May 82	3	52,392
Suriname	May 85	1	12,000
Sweden	Dec. 74	20	271,075
Switzerland	Jan. 76	2	1,816
Tunisia	Nov. 80	1	12,600
United Kingdom	Jan. 76	31	91,202
U.S.A.	Dec. 86	8	945,142
U.S.S.R. (Russia)	Oct. 76	12	2,987,185
Uruguay	May 84	1	200,000
Yugoslavia	Mar. 77	2	18,094
45 Parties		381	25,019,932 +





*Muskox bull at Polar Bear Pass National Wildlife Area - Ramsar site P.S. Taylor*



Table 2.

## RAMSAR SITES IN CANADA, 1987

Year	Site	Area (ha)	Status*	Owner**
1981	Cap Tourmente, PQ	2,200	NWA	F
1982	Mary's Point Unit, Shepody NWA, NB	1,200	NWA	F Pr nd
1982	Long Point, ON	13,730	NWA	F P Pr
1982	Delta Marsh, MA	23,000	-	P
1982	Last Mountain Lake, SK	15,600	MBS,NWA	F P
1982	Peace-Athabasca Delta, AB	321,300	NP	F
1982	Hay-Zama Lakes, AB	50,000	-	P
1982	Alaksen, BC	520	MBS,NWA	F
1982	Old Crow Flats, YT	617,000	-	F
1982	Whooping Crane Summer Range, AB-NWT	1,689,500	NP	F
1982	McConnell River, NWT	32,800	MBS	F
1982	Queen Maud Gulf, NWT	6,200,000	MBS	F
1982	Rasmussen Lowlands, NWT	300,000	-	F
1982	Dewey Soper, NWT	815,900	MBS	F
1982	Polar Bear Pass, NWT	262,400	NWA	F
1985	Chignecto, NS	1,020	NWA	F
1985	St. Clair, ON	240	NWA	F
1987	Grand Codroy Estuary, NF	925	-	P
1987	Musquodoboit Harbour Outer Estuary, NS	1,925	-	P
1987	Shepody Bay, NB	12,000	-	P
1987	Baie de l'Isle Verte, PQ	1,930	NWA	F P
1987	Lac Saint-Francois, PQ	2,210	NWA	F nd
1987	Polar Bear Provincial Park, ON	2,408,700	-	P
1987	Southern James Bay, ON	25,290	MBS	P
1987	Point Pelee, ON		1,560	NP F
1987	Oak-Hammock Marsh Wildlife Area, MA	3,600	-	P
1987	Quill Lakes, SK	63,500	-	P
1987	Beaverhill Lake, AB	18,050	-	P
	TOTAL 28 sites	12,886,100		

\* Federal Legal Status: NWA - National Wildlife Area, MBS - Migratory Bird Sanctuary, NP - National Park

\*\* Land Owner: F - Federal, P- Provincial, Pr - Private, nd - not deeded

- 1 Mary's Point NWA (N.B.)
- 2 Chignecto NWA (N.S.)
- 3 Cap Tourmente NWA (Que.)
- 4 Long Point NWA (Ont.)
- 5 St. Clair NWA (Ont.)
- 6 Delta Marsh (Man.)
- 7 Last Mountain Lake MBS, NWA (Sask.)
- 8 Peace-Athabasca Delta NP (Alta.)
- 9 Hay-Zama Lakes (Alta.)
- 10 Alaksen MBS, NWA (B.C.)
- 11 Old Crow Flats (Yukon)
- 12 Whooping Crane Summer Range NP (Alta.-N.W.T.)
- 13 Queen Maude Gulf MBS (N.W.T.)
- 14 Rasmussen Lowlands (N.W.T.)
- 15 Polar Bear Pass NWA (N.W.T.)
- 16 Dewey Soper MBS (N.W.T.)
- 17 McConnell River MBS (N.W.T.)
- 18 Grand Codroy Estuary (Nfld.)
- 19 Musquodoboit Harbour Outer Estuary (N.S.)
- 20 Shepody Bay (N.B.)
- 21 Baie de l'Isle Verte NWA (Que.)
- 22 Lac Saint-Francois NWA (Que.)
- 23 Point Pelee NP (Ont.)
- 24 Southern James Bay MBS (Ont.)
- 25 Polar Bear Provincial Park (Ont.)
- 26 Oak-Hammock Marsh Wildlife Area (Man.)
- 27 Quill Lakes (Sask.)
- 28 Beaverhill Lake (Alta.)

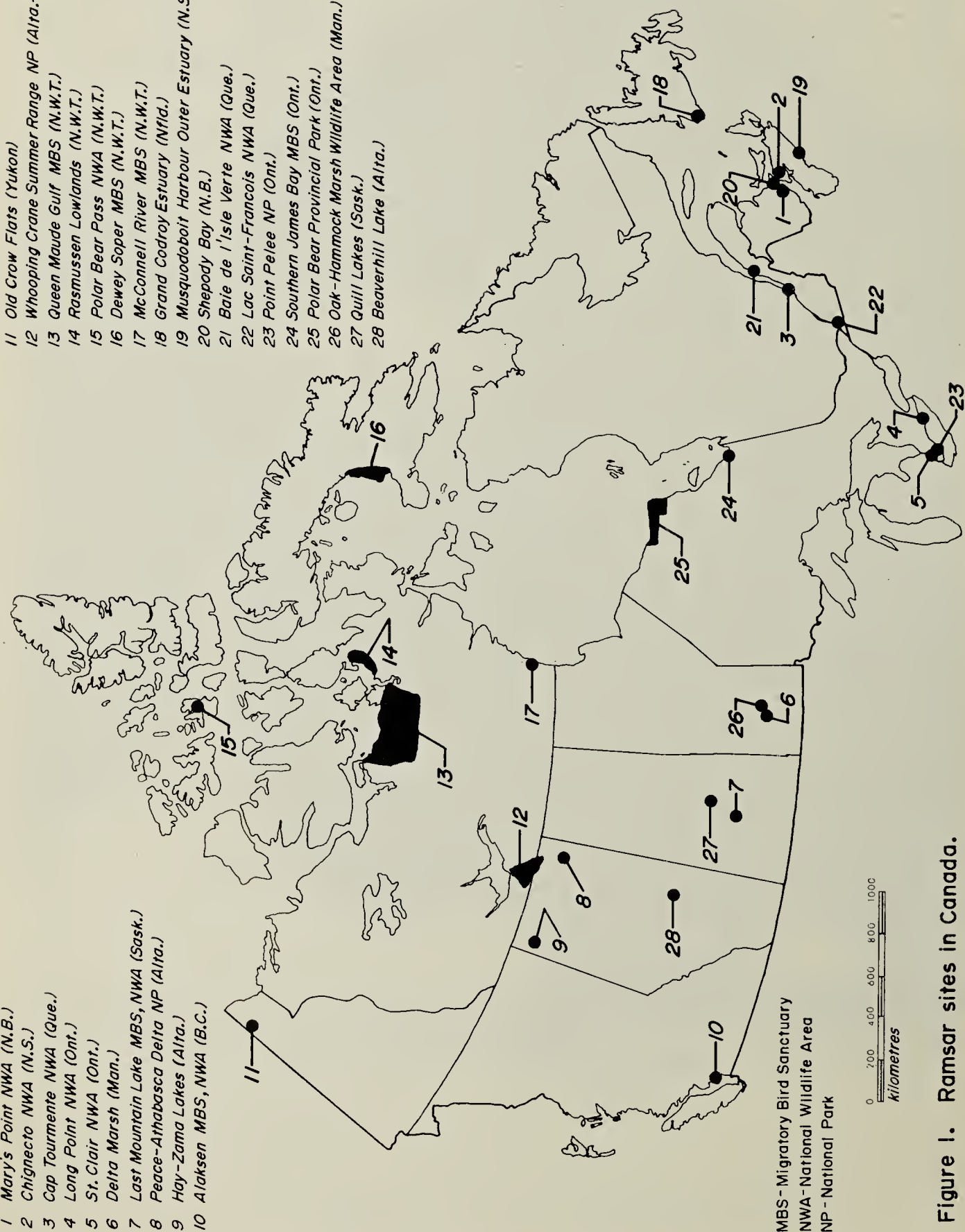


Figure 1. Ramsar sites in Canada.



The Canadian Wildlife Service (C.W.S.) is the federal agency responsible for implementation of the Convention in Canada and cooperates with other federal agencies and the provincial and territorial governments to identify, list and ensure the adequate protection of important wetlands. Although virtually all lands included to date are crown-owned, unless additional measures for protection are entrenched, the politics of the day could influence their ultimate disposition or use. Fortunately, Ramsar wetlands in Canada may receive additional protection under some of the following legislation: the Migratory Birds Convention Act and Migratory Bird Sanctuary Regulations; the Canada Wildlife Act and Wildlife Area Regulations; the National Parks Act and Regulations; and, where appropriate, provincial and territorial acts and regulations.

Countries joining the Ramsar Convention have an obligation to designate at

least one wetland to be included in The List. To date, a wide range of freshwater and marine habitats have been selected, including estuaries, salt marshes, mangrove swamps and coral reefs. Several examples include: the Netherlands Wadden Sea; Suriname's Coppename Rivermouth Nature Reserve; and Australia's East Coast Cape Barren Island Lagoons. Sites are selected because of their significance to waterfowl (birds ecologically dependent on wetlands) and because of their international importance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology.

The 1987 Conference recommended that one or more of the following criteria be used in identifying sites to be added to The List:

- 1) The wetland is a particularly good example of a specific type of wetland characteristic of its region, be it a rare



*Long Point National Wildlife Area - Ramsar site*

*P.S. Taylor*



or common type (e.g. Long Point, Ontario)

- 2) The wetland supports plants or animals that are rare, vulnerable or endangered; is important in maintaining the genetic and ecological diversity of a region; is a habitat important to species at a critical stage of their life cycle; or is of special value to endemic species or communities (e.g. Whooping Crane Breeding Area, Alberta-N.W.T.)
- 3) The wetland regularly supports 20 thousand waterfowl (e.g. loons, grebes, pelicans, storks, ibises, spoonbills, herons, flamingoes, swans, geese, ducks, cranes, rails, coots, shorebirds, gulls, terns); regularly supports 1% of a waterfowl population; or supports substantial numbers of waterfowl indicative of wetland values, productivity or diversity (e.g. Last Mountain Lake, Saskatchewan)

These criteria will be reviewed before the next Ramsar Conference, to be held in Switzerland in 1990, to examine ways in which they might be expanded to make the Convention more relevant to the concerns of developing countries. These countries need to emphasize the importance of wetlands in economic, social and cultural terms — as well as for the conservation of nature — in order to develop both public and government support for wetland protection.

Notwithstanding Canada's historical interest in wetland conservation, the commitment to Ramsar was a major step forward. Wetlands designated under the Convention gain international recognition which strengthens the case for their protection. Parties to the Convention are also committed to the wise use of all wetlands in their territory. Canada, with the longest coastline of any country and 15% of the world's fresh water, has an immense natural heritage to conserve.

In designated areas change is not prevented, but potential hazards and developments are examined thoroughly and possible remedies are fully explored and properly designed before, rather than after a change. One notable Canadian example is Mary's Point, a Ramsar site at the upper end of the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick. This area is potentially liable to massive change by a projected tidal power scheme. It is managed under the Canada Wildlife Act as part of a National Wildlife Area. Its designation as a Ramsar Wetland means that Canada has an international commitment to ensure that plans are formulated and implemented to promote its conservation. Although including a wetland on The List does not give it additional legal protection, it exerts a strong moral influence on Parties to comply with the spirit of the Convention.

At the 1987 conference in Regina the following definition of "wise use" was put forward:

"The wise use of wetlands is their sustainable utilization for the benefit of humankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem."

The "wise use" provision of the Convention recognizes that wetlands are valuable for socio-economic and cultural reasons as well as for the conservation of nature. It commits Parties to make use of their wetland resources in ways that maintain their potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations in all respects.

Canada also has an interest in the wetland habitats used by its populations of migratory waterfowl outside of the breeding season. Many of Canada's waterbirds winter in the southern U.S.A. or in Latin America. Accordingly, Canada is eager to promote adherence to the Convention among these countries. The U.S.A., Mexico, Suriname, Uruguay and





*Tundra Swans at St. Clair National Wildlife Area - Ramsar Wetland* P.S. Taylor

Chile have joined the convention; Bolivia is in the process of joining, and several other countries in the Western Hemisphere have indicated their interest. The C.W.S. Latin American Program provides funds for researchers from Canada and Latin American countries to undertake surveys and studies in order to promote the conservation of migratory birds and their habitats in Latin America.

Although parties to the Ramsar Convention are able to delete wetlands from The List for reasons of urgent national interest, no country has yet done so. However, there have been deletions of parts of sites and there are indications that a number may sustain considerable change in their ecological character in the near future. When parts of sites are deleted parties have a commitment to compensate for the loss as far as possible and to create additional reserves to protect an adequate portion of the original habitat. The most

significant threats to Ramsar sites in developed countries are industrial development projects; in developing countries they are projects affecting the water supply.

Anyone wishing further information on Canada's involvement with the Ramsar Convention should contact the Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada, Ottawa. K1A 0E7

- <sup>1</sup> Canadian Wildlife Service. 1982. Canadian sites dedicated as wetlands of international importance. Unpubl. report, Ottawa.
- <sup>2</sup> Canadian Wildlife Service. 1987. Canada and the Ramsar Convention. Ottawa.
- <sup>3</sup> Directory of Wetlands of International Importance. 1987. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Slimbridge, UK.
- <sup>4</sup> IUCN Bulletin. April/June 1984. Vol.15 No. 4-6.