

What is Ramsar?

RAMSAR is the name of a town in Iran where, in 1971, the first inter-governmental meeting on "Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat" was convened. Signatories to the resulting convention, known as the Ramsar Convention, the first international conservation convention, now number nearly 70 countries, and more than 550 sites covering more than 35.5 million hectares have been designated as Ramsar sites.

The Ramsar Convention recognises wetlands in their widest possible context, valuing all permanent, temporary, natural or artificial wetlands of any size, including peatlands and bodies of static or flowing water, ranging from salt to fresh, from inland rivers and lakes, to marshes, estuaries and coastal areas, even to coral reefs. The parties to the convention have recognised:

- the ecological importance of wetlands as highly productive environments,
- their value because of their rich faunas and floras,
- the great economic benefits they bring through fishery production, maintenance of water tables, water storage and flood control, shore-line stabilisation, water purification and so on, and
- that wetlands are international, used widely by migratory species, and affected by both water and airborne pollution and development, all of which move across political boundaries.

The purpose of the convention is, having recognised the importance of wetlands, to curb their continued losses, to ensure their current and future conservation, and (with increasing emphasis as time passes) to ensure their "wise use".

Japan became a signatory to the Ramsar Convention in 1980, when it listed Kushiro Marsh in Hokkaido (famous for its cranes). In the subsequent 12 years it has designated three further sites (Izunuma and Uchinuma in 1985, a major wintering ground for geese; Kuccharo-ko in northern Hokkaido, in 1989, a major staging area for migratory swans; and, most recently, Utonai-ko, in south-west Hokkaido, in 1991, a staging and wintering area for large numbers of swans, geese and ducks). The four sites total

10,402 hectares.

But is that good, or bad? Where does Japan stand in the international community of conservers of wetlands? With just four sites, Japan has less than any other advanced industrialised nation. Of Japan's 85 internationally significant wetlands, 24 have been further identified as of the utmost importance (see map). Of these, just four are Ramsar sites, and despite various frameworks within which Japanese wetlands could be protected, only 0.2 percent by area of Japan's internationally important wetlands are currently covered by protective legislation.

By all international comparisons, whether by land area, wetland area, habitat range, species requiring protection and so on, Japan has designated disproportionately few sites and a disproportionately small area. As a result, by 1992, Japan ranked only 31st on number and 54th on area out of 67 signatory countries.

Japan's Ramsar sites fail to span the ecological and geographical range of wetland habitats, let alone protect a significant proportion of them, and fail to protect important aspects of a major flyway and its branches. All four are inland fresh-water sites, and none protect coastal mudflats or estuaries, the habitats most critically lacking in protection, and which are absolutely vital as habitat for the conservation of migratory shorebirds. Furthermore, three of her existing Ramsar sites are currently seriously threatened by both development plans and habitat degradation.

Japan's current stance within the Ramsar community is therefore a particularly weak one, a weakness further highlighted by Japan's position on a major migration route, the species dependent on her, and, of course, Japan's enormous, and enviable, financial resources compared with most other countries.

Towards the other end of the spectrum, for example, is the UK, which joined Ramsar in 1976 with 13 sites and now has 53, covering a wide range of habitats the length and breadth of the country. Japanese wetlands are generally far more important than those of the UK, as Japan spans a wider range of climatic zones and resulting habitats than the UK.

are huge, but unstudied; one of them, Saunders gull, ranks as a world rarity, numbering only about 2,000. We now know it to be especially dependent on the estuaries of northern and western Kyushu, where 25 percent or more gather during winter. Kyushu's wetlands form a crucial part of its range, yet not only are its wintering areas unprotected, they are seriously threatened (see item on Hakata Bay, *Forest & Bird*, November 1992), though they also support other endangered species such as black-faced spoonbill and Chinese egret.

Japan, through ratifying the Ramsar Convention and by establishing a number of bilateral migratory bird treaties in Asia and Australasia, has expressed a commitment to the protection of wetlands and such species as the far eastern curlew, Saunders gull, and others. An expressed commitment unfortunately is not enough. Conservation action is necessary to protect habitats, to fulfil that commitment. Only when Japan has made practical efforts to protect habitats at home will she be able to begin to tackle issues elsewhere along the flyways. Japan is of course implicated further afield, especially now in the Russian Far East, where a massive



Once an abundant and widespread winter visitor throughout much of Japan, the population of white-fronted geese was dramatically reduced by hunting last century and steadily by habitat destruction since then. Now the majority of the 19,000 wintering population is restricted to one plain in northern Honshu.