

*What's New @ Ramsar*

## Business opportunities and constraints for sustainable use of wetlands



### What business opportunities hold wetlands, their products and biodiversity, for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)?



This was the theme of a workshop funded by the European Commission in the framework of its Strategy for Sustainable Development, in particular the commitment to protect and restore habitats and natural systems and halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010. The workshop took place in **Austria on 9-10 June 2006**, in the National Park centre of Illmitz, in the transboundary National Park and Ramsar Site Neusiedlersee-Sewinkel (Austria) & Fertő-Hanság (Hungary). It was organized by the EU project partners **Fauna & Flora International**, the **European Bureau for Conservation & Development** and the **European Foundation for Management Development**. Their objectives are to identify specific business opportunities and constraints for sustainable use of wetlands, their products and biodiversity by SMEs, especially in ecologically sensitive areas, and to propose a research programme on opportunities and constraints for sustainable use of biodiversity by SMEs through a platform of practitioners and researchers (more on the project cf. [here](#)).

The workshop brought together about 50 persons presenting and debating a number of varied and interesting case studies. **Reed management**, cutting and the production of reed products to be used for thatching, isolation mats, building material and combustion (domestic fuel) were presented by companies in the Neusiedl lake area (Austria) and the Narew river National Park area in Poland (another Ramsar Site). The Hungarian Aranyponyó Fisheries Inc. presented their multi-functional use of fish-ponds for **fish farming** (including organically reared fish), sport angling, biodiversity and leisure (tourist accommodation, restaurant) in the Rétság Fishponds Nature Reserve and Ramsar Site (more information [here](#)). The Ipol'Union presented their preparatory activities towards similar sustainable business opportunities in the Ipoly Valley, a transboundary Ramsar Site shared by Hungary and Slovakia (called Poiplye here).

**Nature tourism** in wetland areas as an obvious business opportunity was presented by the Polish Biebrza Eco-Travel family company working in the Biebrza National Park and Ramsar Site ([www.biebrza.com](http://www.biebrza.com)). Similar activities, but in a political still very difficult environment, were reported by the **Ikoperiigitis company** working at the Greek Kerkini lake Ramsar Site, combining the discovery of the natural heritage with the experience of cultural heritage too. Also modern, industrialized farms can diversify their business to accommodate wetland habitats and their biodiversity and its discovery for paying guests. The owners of the **Dutch Boerinn estate** explained their way of ongoing conversion to a multifunctional enterprise. This private project is set in the context of the ongoing conversion of the De Venen area, situated in between the largest cities of the country, and now planned to become the Green Heart of the Netherlands. A large-scale publicly-funded programme for the conversion of a substantial part of the agricultural polders into nature and

recreation areas is carried out until 2020 (more information [here](#)).

Another focus was on the Lower Green Danube wetlands. Here, the British public limited company **Fieldfare** stands out, intending to utilize the resources of the ethical investment movement for promoting ecologically sustainable development and wise use of natural resources, especially in Eastern Europe, where it has a subsidiary in Ukraine. The company has environmental and ethical objectives in its statutes, endorsed by the UK Ethical Investors Group: to promote ecologically sustainable development and the maintenance of ecological processes through wise use of natural resources, restoration of damaged ecosystems, conservation of genetic diversity, and increasing human understanding of and capabilities to protect global biodiversity, and to adhere to an ethic of environmental care which strives to ensure that the operations of the company shall not result in unsustainable use of natural resources, emission of environmental pollutants, wastage of materials, or lead to the destruction of the social fabric of local communities. The basic business concept for Fieldfare focuses on three main areas of **investment activity**: management of land retired from agricultural or other uses aimed at restoring or creating biodiversity value combined with sustainable use of the resources so developed (e.g. grazing by local breeds of livestock, fuelwood lots, harvesting reeds, wild fish angling), reducing the impact of intensive arable crop production by encouraging organic farming, and introducing alternative low-input crops (e.g. hemp and flax), and establishing centres for retailing ecologically friendly products and renting offices to local environmental NGOs (which will also help to identify investment opportunities).

These and other examples provided much material for constructive debate and the preparation of forward-looking conclusions. And, yet another example, not presented at the workshop, but concerning the **Lafnitztal Ramsar Site** in Austria, not far from the workshop venue: to combine the restoration and conservation of the Lafnitz river and its floodplain with sustainable economic activities, within the legal constraints of the European Union's Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directives, an innovative project of livestock rearing and grassland management was prepared by the chair of the Austrian National Ramsar Committee, **Wolfgang Pelikan**, and colleagues.

**On the evening of the 9th June, the workshop participants profited from the nice spring weather to have a brief look at the waterbirds using Zicklacke shallow lake in the Neusiedlersee-Seewinkel National Park and Ramsar Site next to Illmitz village**





For further information about the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, please contact the **Ramsar Convention Secretariat**, Rue Mauverney 28, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland (tel +41 22 999 0170, fax +41 22 999 0169, e-mail [ramsar@ramsar.org](mailto:ramsar@ramsar.org)). Posted 19 June 2006, Sandra Hails, Ramsar.

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