

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS OF INTERNATIONAL
IMPORTANCE ESPECIALLY AS WATERFOWL
HABITAT (RAMSAR, 1971)

CONVENTION RELATIVE AUX ZONES HUMIDES
D'IMPORTANCE INTERNATIONALE
PARTICULIÈREMENT COMME HABITATS
DES OISEAUX D'EAU (RAMSAR, 1971)

COPY FOR

PROF. V. A. KRASSILOV

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Prof. Anatoliy M. Dubitskyi
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30 September 1991

Dear Prof. Dubitskyi,

Re: My recent visit to Kazakhstan

May I first of all thank you for making it possible for representatives of the Bureau of the Ramsar Convention and of the International Wetlands and Waterfowl Research Bureau to visit Kazakhstan in August 1991, to carry out an application of the Ramsar Monitoring Procedure at the Lakes of the lower Turgay and Irgiz (a wetland designated by the USSR for the Ramsar List of wetlands of international importance), and to address the meeting of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR on the ecology and sustainable use of natural resources in Kazakhstan.

I should like, in the present letter, to summarize the content of our discussions, and to present some suggestions and recommendations.

1. Background to the Ramsar Convention

The "Convention on wetlands of international importance especially as waterfowl habitat, Ramsar 1971" (the "Ramsar" Convention) is a worldwide environmental treaty on the conservation and wise use of wetlands. It is the principal instrument for cooperation between governments on wetland conservation. The main obligations accepted by governments which become Contracting Parties to the Convention are:

- to designate at least one wetland within their territory for the List of wetlands of international importance (Article 2.1)
- to make "wise use" of all wetlands, whether or not they are included in the List (Article 3.1); and
- to consult with one another about implementing obligations under the Convention, notably as regards cross-frontier wetlands, shared species and development aid (Article 5).

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At present, 64 countries have joined the Convention and have designated 536 wetlands, covering more than 32 million hectares, for the List (see attached summary). The USSR became a Contracting Party in 1976, when it designated 12 wetlands covering nearly three million hectares for the List, two of them in Kazakhstan - Lakes of the lower Turgay and Irgiz; and Kourgaldzhin and Tengiz Lakes.

The USSR has regularly attended meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, the most recent of which was held in June/July 1990 at Montreux in Switzerland, where the Soviet delegates were Dr. A.A. Vinokurov and Dr. S.G. Priklonski of the All-Union Institute for Nature Conservation. At that conference, the Soviet delegation indicated that it was intended to designate another 16 wetlands in the USSR for the Ramsar List, including the "Turgay depression lakes". I enclose for your information a copy of the Convention in Russian, and of the USSR national report to the Montreux Conference.

2. Visit to the Turgay/Irgiz Ramsar site

One of the principal reasons for my visit was to apply the Ramsar Monitoring Procedure at the Turgay/Irgiz Ramsar site. (I attach for your information a copy of the text of the Monitoring Procedure, as approved at the Montreux Conference). A detailed Monitoring Report will be sent to you in due course, but I summarize in the following paragraphs the principal conclusions of the mission.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank the competent authorities in the Aktyubinsk Oblast, and in particular Almas Abdibaevich Imanbekov, Head of the State Inspectorate for Wildlife Conservation, for their support in organizing the visit. I was much impressed by the professional competence and commitment of Mr. Imanbekov and his team of regional inspectors.

I am also grateful to Nikolai Yemelianovich Doulia, Deputy Chairman of the Regional Executive Committee of Aktyubinsk, and to Mr. Kouanishbey Ahmedkerreyev, Chairman of the Irgiz Regional Council, for receiving the mission and for their helpful explanation and presentation of the situation and of local problems.

Principal conclusions of the mission:

- (i) There is no doubt whatsoever of the international importance of the Lakes of the lower Turgay and Irgiz. They fulfil several of the Ramsar criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance, notably as an example of a wetland on the edge of an arid zone (Criterion 1b) and as a wetland important for waterfowl at a critical stage of their biological cycle - the moulting period (Criterion 2c). Despite the decrease in numbers of moulting waterfowl recorded in recent years, in particular during our visit in August 1991, the site no doubt also fulfils Criterion 3a on sites regularly supporting 20,000 waterfowl.

- (ii) The Turgay/Irgiz Ramsar site is clearly suffering from a reduction in water supplies. This reduction affects not only the wildlife (especially waterfowl) and flora, but human populations and their traditional fisheries and cattle-rearing. While long-term

natural factors may be affecting the water supply (eg. decrease in rainfall, change in groundwater conditions affecting a broad region comprising the Caspian and Aral Seas and Lake Balkhash), it is certain that anthropogenic factors have played a major role in reducing inflow of water. The most important of these anthropogenic factors is the construction of barrages across the River Turgay and its tributaries, which cut off the water supply to the Ramsar site. In order for the USSR to meet its international obligations under the Ramsar Convention, it will be essential for water to be released through these barrages, or for the barrages to be removed, so as to maintain the ecological character of the Ramsar site.

- (iii) While the Ramsar site is located in the Aktyubinsk Oblast, most of the barrages are situated in the territory of the Turgayski Oblast, upstream of the Ramsar site. I hope that it will be possible to achieve an appropriate sharing of water resources between the two oblasts, so that the ecological character of the Ramsar site may be maintained.

- (iv) The Turgay/Irgiz Ramsar site at present has the status of a zakaznik, where hunting and fishing is controlled, and where a huge collective farm promotes raising of cattle and sheep. The grazing of large numbers of domestic animals in a fragile area on the edge of steppe and desert clearly exerts heavy pressure on the vegetation and ecological balance of the area. As a result, there is probably over-exploitation of the delicate natural balance of the area's resources. It has been proposed to create a zapovednik in place of the zakaznik, and thereby to reduce pressure on the natural resources. The Ramsar Bureau welcomes this proposal, but nevertheless emphasizes the need for sensitive handling of the problems of resettling the human population who have until recently been living in the area. The establishment of a Turgay/Irgiz Zapovednik would also make it possible to overcome the problems of reed-cutting and over-exploitation of Artemia vegetation for hay.

3. The Kourgaldzhin and Tengiz Lakes Ramsar site

The Kourgaldzhin/Tengiz Lakes make up the second Ramsar site in Kazakhstan. While there was no time to visit this area during our brief stay in Kazakhstan, we had the opportunity to discuss conditions at the site with officials and scientists of the Kazakh SSR. The comments in the following paragraphs are the fruit of these discussions.

- (i) As with the Turgay/Irgiz Ramsar site, there appears to be no doubt of the international importance of the Kourgaldzhin/Tengiz Ramsar site. It is probably the world's most northerly site for nesting flamingos, and is an extremely important stopover site for migratory waterfowl.

- (ii) I understand that the site has been declared a zapovednik, and that this situation has now been accepted by local people. There remain however a number of problems, notably pollution of inflow water from the city of Timirtau and the management of water control structures (dams, sluices) built some years ago, which occasionally overflow or fail to operate correctly.

- (iii) I was informed that the Kazakh Academy of Sciences has been contracted to produce recommendations on the management of the Ramsar site and of its water control structures. I warmly applaud this decision and would be happy to receive a copy of their report, when it is ready. I would emphasize the need to provide the funding necessary to carry out the recommendations made by the Academy of Sciences; I believe that the government of Kazakhstan proposes to make resources available for this purpose, and I greatly commend this proposal.

- (iv) It was suggested to me that representatives of the Ramsar Bureau and international flamingo experts might visit the Kourgaldzhin/Tengiz Ramsar site during the flamingo breeding season in 1992. I would be extremely happy if this proposal could be carried out.

4. The new law on Nature Conservation in Kazakhstan

I was most interested to learn, during our discussions on 21 August and next day at the Conference of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR on ecology and natural resources, that a new law on Nature Conservation in Kazakhstan is currently under discussion. The Ramsar Bureau would be happy - if you feel it appropriate - to arrange for a legal expert with experience of international conservation matters, to provide advice on the formulation of the new law.

It would be highly appropriate for the new law to make specific reference to international conservation matters, such as the status of sites in Kazakhstan designated for the Ramsar List.

5. Designation of new Ramsar sites

It was most encouraging to note the reaction of the delegates at the Conference of the Supreme Soviet to my intervention on 22 August. There seemed to be general agreement that new protected areas should be created, so that the total area protected in Kazakhstan would rise from the present figure of 0.3% to something in the region of 5.0% of the republic's territory.

As noted in section 1 above, the Soviet delegation to the Montreux Conference referred to a proposal to designate a new Ramsar site in the Turgay depression. The wetlands to be designated would include two sectors to the south of the current Turgay/Irgiz Ramsar site and two to the north as follows:

- an area south of the existing site, to the south of Taup including Chilkar-Tenghiz
- Lake Sarikapa, already a zakaznik, south of Taup
- the Naourzoum Lake System, already a zapovednik, in the Turgay depression
- the valley of the River Oubagan, which flows towards the Rivers Ob and Irtysh.

These sites might be designated as an extension of the current site, or as separate new sites. From the Ramsar Bureau's point of view, either solution would be entirely acceptable. I understand that a detailed proposal along these lines was forwarded last year by the All-Union Institute for Conservation of Nature to the USSR Ministry of Nature Management.

In addition to this existing proposal, it is very clear that other sites in Kazakhstan merit designation for the Ramsar List. During discussions with experts from the Kazakh Academy of Sciences, and with officials of your Department, I became convinced that the following sites should be given high priority for listing under Ramsar. (I have no doubt that there are, in addition, many other wetlands in Kazakhstan which meet the Ramsar criteria):

- Lake Ala-Gol (I understand that the inhabitants of the area would welcome establishment of a zapovednik)
- Delta of the River Illi in Lake Balkhash
- Kazakh shores of the Northern Caspian
- Serbolak lakes. I had the opportunity to visit these sewage ponds north of Alma-Ata which, although artificial, clearly offer a major stopover and refuelling site for migratory waterfowl in an arid area, and could become a major area for educational activities for schoolchildren and students from Alma-Ata.

6. Water resources in Central Asia

At our meeting on 21 August, you spoke eloquently of links between the major wetland areas of Central Asia - the Caspian (where water levels are rising), the Aral Sea (where a catastrophic drop in water levels has been recorded), Lake Balkhash, Lake Ala-Gol and Lob-Nor, the latter just across the border in China. You suggested that there might be a connection between the variations in water levels between these major water bodies (perhaps through groundwater) and you indicated that a Commission had been established to investigate the matter. You told me that the Commission was made up of representatives of the republics of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and RSFSR and that Iran was to be invited to take part as an observer. You suggested that international bodies such as the Ramsar Bureau might be associated with the work of this Commission.

The Ramsar Bureau would greatly welcome the opportunity to take part in the work of this Commission - the more so in view of its close contacts with the Iranian authorities. The Bureau would be very happy to receive invitations to meetings of this Commission.

Nevertheless, while the Bureau remains very interested in the long-term natural tendencies affecting the region, and would follow with interest any discussions on the possibility of creating a link between the Gulf of Karabogaz and the Aral Sea, it emphasizes that immediate action is required to counter the anthropogenic factors affecting Ramsar sites mentioned in sections 2 and 3 above.

7. Participation by Kazakh officials and experts in regional wetland meetings

As I mentioned during our discussions, a number of major meetings on wetlands in Central and Southwest Asia are to be held in the next few months. I am sure that participation by officials and experts from Kazakhstan would enable a fuller understanding of the issues. In early October, an international workshop on the Volga Delta is to be held in Astrakhan, with participation by experts of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and International Wetlands and Waterfowl Research Bureau

(IWRB), as well of course as Soviet experts. In view of your comments on the possible links between the Caspian and other water bodies of the region, I am sure that participation by specialists from Kazakhstan would be appreciated.

Another extremely important regional meeting on wetlands is to be held in Karachi, Pakistan, from 14 - 20 December 1991. The title is "Wetland and waterfowl conservation in south and west Asia", and the organizers are IWRB, the National Council for the Conservation of Wildlife in Pakistan, and the Asian Wetland Bureau. The Ramsar Bureau will be represented at this meeting. I understand that Dr. Ernar Auezov is to take part, and his contribution is eagerly awaited (I should like to take this opportunity to record my thanks to Dr. Auezov for all his help and kindness during my visit to Kazakhstan). I have suggested to the Director of IWRB, Dr. Michael Moser, that he should send to you directly a personal invitation to take part in the Karachi meeting. I very much hope that you will be able to attend; your participation would be greatly valued.

9. Conservation of the Saiga Antelope in Kazakhstan

During my visit to the Turgay/Irgiz lakes, I had the good fortune to see large numbers of Saiga Antelopes. I also had an opportunity to talk with Mr. Imanbekov and his colleagues about the problems of conserving this fascinating species. In recent years, more and more saiga have been illegally hunted for their horns, which are exported to the Far East where the horn, like rhinoceros horn, is believed to have medicinal and aphrodisiac properties. I understand that specialists like Mr. Imanbekov and his colleagues are seriously concerned at the increase in illegal hunting, and that Soviet customs officers have discovered large illegal stocks of saiga horns, intended for export, in Moldavia and in the Soviet Far East.

On my return to Switzerland, I have discussed the matter with colleagues from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Both bodies would be extremely interested in developing cooperation with the Kazakh SSR State Committee for Ecology & Environment. IUCN would be happy to cooperate in organizing aerial surveys, in order to obtain better estimates of the population size. CITES would be interested in the possibility of including the saiga on one of the CITES appendices. The officials concerned, to whom I am copying this letter, are:

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10. Information about the Ramsar Convention

Although the USSR has for long been a member of the Ramsar Convention, there is a distinct shortage of information about the Convention and its work in the Soviet Union. This is true throughout the USSR, and I raised the question in my discussions in Moscow with officials of the USSR Ministry of Nature Management and Environment and of the All-Union Institute for Nature Conservation. Both bodies hope to produce translations into Russian of essential documents about the Convention, and will, I am sure, make these documents available to the authorities in the Kazakh SSR and other Republics. I hope you will be able to use these documents in Kazakhstan, and that they will prove to be of use in conserving Kazakhstan's extremely rich wetlands.

I will also arrange for replacement copies of Ramsar diplomas to be sent to you, attesting that the Lower Turgay and Irgiz Lakes and the Kourgaldzhin and Tenghiz Lakes are Wetlands of international importance, included on the Ramsar List.

Please forgive me for writing such a long letter. A large number of topics of great interest were raised during my visit to Kazakhstan, however, and I wanted to do justice to them. Since my return, many of my colleagues have expressed interest in the visit; I am therefore sending copies of this letter for information to the many people who have expressed such interest, and who are anxious to develop relations with you and your administration.

Looking forward to continuing cooperation with you and your colleagues in Kazakhstan.

Yours sincerely,



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