

CEREMONY FOR THE SIGNING OF THE AQUATIC WARBLER AND BIRDS OF PREY MOUs

BY LUXEMBOURG ON 19 JULY 2010

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Hon. Mr. Marco Schank,

Minister Delegate for Sustainable Development and Infrastructure,

Distinguished Guests who have joined us today, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for us to be here today for a significant event for the CMS Secretariat, that is, the signing by the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg of two Memoranda of Understanding related to the Conservation of migratory birds species. This venue could not be more appropriate for this occasion.

The Convention on Migratory Species (abbreviated as CMS) is a framework convention under whose auspices several specific agreements on individual species, or groups of related species, have been negotiated and being implemented. Currently, 7 legally-binding Agreements and 18 non-legally binding MOUs have so far been concluded under CMS, covering a variety of taxa such as Aquatic and terrestrial mammals, bats, birds, marine turtles and sharks.

The two MoUs to be signed today are similar in terms of format, but quite different under many other respects.

With respect to the Birds of Prey MoU covering Africa and Eurasia, for instance, it is an ambitious instrument covering 130 range states in three continents, and more than 70 species of birds of prey. Growing concerns and evidence of the poor conservation status of many species of raptors in Africa-Eurasia were the main drivers for the conclusion of this instrument. A study undertaken in 2005 showed an alarming rate that 50% of migratory birds of prey in the African-Eurasian region have a poor conservation status and many are showing rapid or long-term population decline.

The MoU is still very young: it was finalized and opened for signature in October 2008, and it has since been signed by 29 countries. A solid membership at the onset is a crucial element for the further development and successful implementation of the MoU. That's why we are particularly pleased and attach great importance to Luxembourg's signature of the MoU. With today's signature, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg will become the 30th signatory to this instrument.

The Interim Coordinating Unit for the BOP MoU became effective only last year in August with the establishment of the new UNEP/CMS Office in Abu Dhabi. Since then, the Unit has focused its attention on supporting Signatory States in their implementation of the MoU and encouraging other range states to sign it. The Unit is currently supporting Signatory States to review and/or develop their national strategies. It is in fact providing funds to some Signatory States to develop national action plans. Furthermore, recently, the Unit has warned its Signatory States on the impact of chemicals on migratory birds of prey particularly, within the southern Sahara region of Africa, with regards to the use of Diclofenac (a veterinary drug which has caused vultures' mass mortalities in Asia for many years, to the point that a ban has been imposed against its use in India and Pakistan). Hope other signatories will do the same.

With regards to Aquatic Warbler MoU, it is a prominent example of an MoU which addresses the conservation of an individual species. Aquatic Warbler is an emblematic species for conservation under several respects.

First, the Aquatic Warbler is the rarest migratory songbird of Europe, and the only globally threatened passerine bird found in mainland Europe. Once widespread throughout Europe, the AW has unfortunately undergone a dramatic decline in the course of the 20th century mainly as a consequence of the drainage of the wetland habitats on which it depends, with the species disappearing from many sites and countries where it previously existed.

Acknowledgment of this dramatic decline, although still not well quantified, led to conservation action focusing mainly on the conservation of the few habitats/sites where the specie was still recorded.

Adoption of the AW MoU in 2003 was one of the responses provided by the international community to the decline of the species. The MoU aims at coordinating conservation and management measures throughout the range

of the species. In particular, it plays a role in linking conservation action in Europe, mainly held in the context of EU legislation and programmes, with action in other parts of the range, notably the migratory and wintering range in Africa.

We can say today that conservation action has been successful in halting the precipitous decline of the species. While some local breeding populations are still declining, and some of them might actually become extinct in the near future, the stronghold of the breeding population in Central Europe (Poland, Belarus, Ukraine) is now more or less stable.

Interestingly, conservation efforts had a series of important spin-offs. For instance, AW functions as an effective flagship species since its conservation has led to the establishment of numerous protected areas and it is currently a major driver of the economy at its main breeding sites. Conservation of its habitat continue to lead to the development of bird-watching tourism while AW habitats such as wet meadows and fen mires continue to act as carbon store, thus easing the greenhouse effect.

Additionally, improved knowledge on the distribution and migration of the species led to a reconsideration of the geographical scope of the MoU. Based on new evidence, the 2nd meeting of the signatories to the MoU held last May in Poland decided to extend the geographic scope of the MOU to include 7 new countries. The Grand Duchy of Luxemburg is one of these 7 new countries. The meeting in Poland also adopted a new action plan for the species, which is actually the same adopted at the level of the EU, what is expected to lead to a further harmonization of conservation policies between EU and non-EU countries.

All this can certainly be seen at this stage as a significant conservation success, and an encouraging example of how loss of biodiversity can be halted or at least significantly reduced in the presence of public and political will. There is however no room for complacency as the situation still remains fragile:

- The world population of the species estimated to be between 20 and 30 thousand birds is confined to fewer than 40 regularly occupied breeding sites in only five countries with four sites supporting over 80% of the global population.

- Very little is known about the wintering areas and possible threats there, however habitat loss as a result of population increase, fresh water reservoirs, hydro-agriculture, desertification and overgrazing is likely to occur. Only one regular wintering site situated in the Senegal delta is known so far. Moreover, traditional habitat management practices are also disappearing, and are currently maintained in AW breeding habitats in central Europe through subsidies. The species is therefore conservation-dependent.
- Last but not least, this species depends on the quality of stop-over sites along the migratory path and Luxembourg, for example, is on the migratory path of the AW.

More important is the fact that unlike BOP MOU, AW MOU still suffers from inadequate resources for its implementation. Gov't of Luxembourg's support to the Secretariat in terms of human & financial resources for implementation of its Action Plan and other activities will be highly appreciated and a welcome move.

I would like to conclude by paying a tribute to the numerous organizations and members of the civil society that has supported the development and implementation of these two instruments. Without their pressure and active role, very little or nothing would have happened. It is not possible, and I would not even be able to mention them all. I would like however to mention at least one, as the champion and leader of all them: BirdLife International and its various partner organizations in the range states. Their input has been, and still is, absolutely invaluable. In the case of the AW MoU, this role goes as far as coordinating the implementation of the MoU and its associated Action Plan through the BirdLife national partner in Belarus.

Thank you, Hon. Minister, for initiating your Government's support and readiness to sign these two MOUs.
