



## 5<sup>th</sup> SESSION OF THE MEETING OF THE PARTIES

14 – 18 May 2012, La Rochelle, France

“Migratory waterbirds and people - sharing wetlands”

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### THE WINGS OVER WETLANDS (WOW) UNEP-GEF AFRICAN-EURASIAN FLYWAYS PROJECT AND POST-WOW PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES<sup>1</sup>

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At the first Session of the Meeting of the Parties to AEWA (MOP1), in November 1999, in Cape Town, South Africa, the Dutch Government, the AEWA Interim Secretariat and Wetlands International (WI) continued the discussions, which had started in 1998, with stakeholders such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), on the subject of a possible large-scale Global Environmental Facility (GEF) project to support AEWA activities. These discussions were based on the results of a GEF/PDF-A phase funded by The Netherlands, which were presented to MOP1, and which ultimately led to the development of the widely-known Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) project ([www.wingsoverwetlands.org](http://www.wingsoverwetlands.org)). The WOW project became a reality through a GEF contribution and substantial co-funding from the German Government (as pledged at MOP2), as well as from a number of other governments and organizations (see the draft Resolution AEWA/MOP5 DR4 *Implementation of the Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) UNEP-GEF African-Eurasian Flyways Project and Post-WOW Prospects* and the WOW website for more details).

During the period between the first discussions on the project in 1998, the final approval by GEF in 2004, the launch in 2006 and the formal closure of the project at the end of 2010, the WOW project has contributed significantly to establishing the **flyway approach** on the political and conservation agenda of the African-Eurasian region; not only for migratory waterbirds, but for migratory birds in general.

The project has turned a vision into reality, a vision, which primarily focused on firmly implanting the flyway conservation approach into the thinking and practice of all those involved: governments, NGO's, local stakeholders etc., and on developing tools that would stimulate flyway conservation in the long term. Thus the comprehensive *Flyway Training Kit* (FTK) was developed under WOW and launched in 2010. English, French, Russian and Arabic language versions of the FTK now are available<sup>2</sup>.

The FTK serves as a resource for both site managers and policy makers alike. The WOW Team has received positive reactions from all over the world on this project output and plans are being developed to produce similar manuals for other flyway regions. Regional training of trainers (ToT) courses were organised for the Middle East region in Jordan, for West Africa in Cameroon and Central Asia in Kazakhstan between 2009 and 2010. Use of the FTK at national level has taken place through the organization of a training course in Mozambique and incorporation in university course work in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately the necessary resources are lacking to roll out a full and long-term training programme for East and Southern Africa and other regions; however some projects have started or are under development (see below) and any further support in this respect would be highly welcomed by the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat.

In 2010, WOW also launched a pioneering and interactive online portal: the *Critical Site Network Tool* (CSN) – to support better flyway planning and management for waterbirds in the AEWA region. An up-to-date manual on the CSN tool was published at the end of 2011 ([www.wingsoverwetlands.org/csntool](http://www.wingsoverwetlands.org/csntool)).

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<sup>1</sup> See also draft Resolution AEWA/MOP5 DR 4; Agenda item 16

<sup>2</sup> [www.wingsoverwetlands.org/flywaytrainingkit](http://www.wingsoverwetlands.org/flywaytrainingkit)

This has been, and still is, a major undertaking by bringing together through one portal, the information from the extensive databases of BirdLife International (World Bird Database), Wetlands International (International Waterbird Census Database and flyway boundary maps of waterbird populations), the Ramsar Convention (Ramsar Sites Information Service [RSIS]) and the UNEP World Conservation and Monitoring Centre (World Database on Protected Areas [WDBPA]), which collectively cover both species and sites. The tool has served as the basis for the latest *Site Protection Report* and further functionalities were recently added to display the designation of Critical Sites and assess the coherence of the network.

For future maintenance and further development of this innovative tool, funds are sought by the *WOW Partnership*, which was created by the four main partners in the WOW project after the closure of the project. Without such funds, the information might quickly become outdated; that is in particular a concern in the case of the CSN tool, the effective functioning of which relies very much on the regular updating of the data-bases mentioned above.

Through the WOW project, practical conservation projects were implemented in 11 countries. However, perhaps WOW's greatest success has been the high level of cooperation and partnership in its multi-institutional and international team working at all levels of the project and across Africa and Eurasia. Throughout the African-Eurasian region, national governments have highlighted the importance of flyway-scale conservation as the most effective way to protect waterbirds across their diverse habitats. WOW's success has set the wheel in motion for flyway collaboration within the AEWA region, stimulating flyway-scale activities across the globe (see also the UNEP publication from 2009: "*The experience of UNEP GEF and partners in flyway conservation*" (Biodiversity issue paper BD/001 [[www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org)])).

In 2010 an independent expert undertook a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of the project and concluded that it has achieved almost all its original aims and goals, albeit several lessons are to be learned; lessons on the practical conservation of sites and, among other issues, the critical aspect of ensuring sufficient funding to coordinate and manage such a large scale project involving several hundred volunteers and professional staff.

The four main partners in the WOW project have provided the outside world with a strong signal that this successful partnership is to be continued, by signing a formal Memorandum of Cooperation on 14 June 2010 in The Hague, the Netherlands, on the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of AEWA (*Partnership for the Conservation of Migratory Waterbirds and their Habitats [Wings over Wetlands]*)<sup>3</sup>.

A first meeting of the partners took place in February 2011 in Edinburgh and the Partnership is presently operating under the Chairmanship of Dr. Richard Grimmett (BirdLife International), with the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat providing secretarial support. The aim of this first meeting was to support and enhance future coordination between the partners and to showcase ongoing WOW-related flyway activities, particularly those activities which will start to use WOW project outputs such as the FTK. The UNEP/AEWA Secretariat has received a voluntary contribution from the Government of Germany in March 2012 for the development of a designated Flyway Partnership website. The website will feature the main project outputs, flyway news from across the partnership as well as showcasing ongoing and future related projects.

In the meantime, new promising flyway activities are underway for the AEWA region. For instance, BirdLife International and Wetlands International have initiated a West African Flyway Programme funded by the MAVA foundation; the project has started and is being integrated with other regional projects, however some further co-funding may be needed.

Activities received a significant boost as a result of the decision of UNESCO in 2009 to designate the Dutch and German part of the international Wadden Sea as a World Heritage Site, thereby recognizing the crucial importance of the site for the survival of migratory birds on a global scale; a well deserved status for one of the largest and most critical waterbird sites within the AEWA region.

In this context, UNESCO also requested the Governments of both countries to increase their activities on flyway conservation. The Dutch and German Governments have addressed this challenge and have taken

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<sup>3</sup> [http://wow.wetlands.org/Portals/1/documents/communication/final\\_signed\\_wow\\_moc.pdf](http://wow.wetlands.org/Portals/1/documents/communication/final_signed_wow_moc.pdf)

concrete steps to support the coming years' activities in the East Atlantic Flyway making use of the arrangements in this renewed partnership and using and promoting the 'products' of the WOW project.

This new UNESCO Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative (coordinated by the *Common Wadden Sea Secretariat* and including AEWA as one of the project partners) includes, *inter alia*, the following elements:

- A German-funded flyway project focussing on training and education, using the WOW/Flyway Training Kit materials; and
- A Dutch-funded flyway project focussing on monitoring in the East-Atlantic Flyway and West-Africa.

In parallel, the Dutch University of Groningen (Prof. Piersma and co-workers) implements a long-term research programme, funded by the Dutch Wadden Sea Fund, on a few selected species of long distance migrant waders, such as Spoonbill and Brent Goose; using the flyway approach as a META-ecosystem.

In 2011, the EU decided to provide a voluntary contribution to UNEP among other things to support the implementation of MEAs administered by UNEP. The UNEP/CMS and UNEP/AEWA Secretariats have developed a common project on capacity building in Africa and this project has been submitted to the EU and approved within the framework of the above-mentioned cooperation. A substantial grant will become available to support capacity building in Africa in the period 2012-2014. The FTK is one of the tools that will be used for this capacity building and the project can therefore be considered as a follow-up project to WOW. The funds allocated to this project by the EU will, however, not be sufficient to roll out a full capacity building programme with the aim of strengthening the implementation of AEWA and CMS (and its agreements) in Africa.

In mid-2012, supported by the Arcadia Foundation, Wetlands International will initiate a three-year programme that aims at building local capacity for planning and conserving wetlands along the flyway and will facilitate conservation actions at selected sites in North-western Russia and West Africa.

Finally: the 'Hague Action Statement' as endorsed at the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of AEWA, June 2010 ([http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/symposium/docs/the\\_hague\\_action\\_statement.pdf](http://www.unep-aewa.org/meetings/symposium/docs/the_hague_action_statement.pdf)), also called for urgent flyway conservation actions on non-waterbird species; particularly in the Sub-Saharan region. This has been taken up by the Dutch BirdLife partner (Vogelbescherming) in the framework of the project "*Living on the Edge*", a flyway conservation programme funded by the Dutch Postal Code lottery.

Cooperation exists between the above-mentioned different flyway projects providing good conditions for an efficient use of the restricted resources available and a maximum on conservation output. Quite a number of people, already active within the WOW project, are also involved in these new flyway projects. Tools developed under WOW (FTK and CSN), are used in all the training and conservation programmes.

For more information please see:

- WOW Project Website (Archive of the Project): [www.wingsoverwetlands.org](http://www.wingsoverwetlands.org)
- WOW Partnership Website: [www.flywaypartnership.org](http://www.flywaypartnership.org) (under construction)
- Wadden Sea Flyway Initiative: [www.waddensea-secretariat.org](http://www.waddensea-secretariat.org)