WETLAND TOURISM: A GREAT EXPERIENCE

Responsible tourism supports wetlands and people

2 February WORLD WETLANDS DAY

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WETLAND TOURISM a great experience

2 February World Wetlands Day

Wetlands and their wildlife are a key part of the global tourism experience: from visiting the underground karst wetlands in Slovenia's Skocjan caves, to experiencing the breath-taking sunsets at the Port Launay Ramsar Site in the Seychelles, from watching marine turtles and humpback whales and viewing the splendour of brain corals underwater in Brazil's Abrolhos Park to trekking and bird watching in the Tsomoriri Ramsar Site at an altitude of 4,600 metres in India, not to mention the unique cultural experience that awaits you in the Kakadu National Park in Australia, home to some of the finest aboriginal art that exists anywhere. The world's Ramsar Sites and other wetlands have much to offer the adventurous tourist.

The scale of tourism:

In 2010, the number of international tourists reached 940 million, and this is forecast to grow to around 1.6 billion by 2020 – and that does not include the numbers of domestic tourists or people who make recreational trips that don't involve overnight stays.

Globally, the economic activity generated by travel and tourism represents around 5% of GDP and an estimated 6-7% of the world's jobs. With half of international tourists traveling to wetlands of all types, but particularly in coastal areas, the tourism expenditure linked to wetlands can be estimated at around USD 925 billion each year. Add domestic tourism and recreational day trips to that and the economic value generated by tourism to wetlands is truly enormous.

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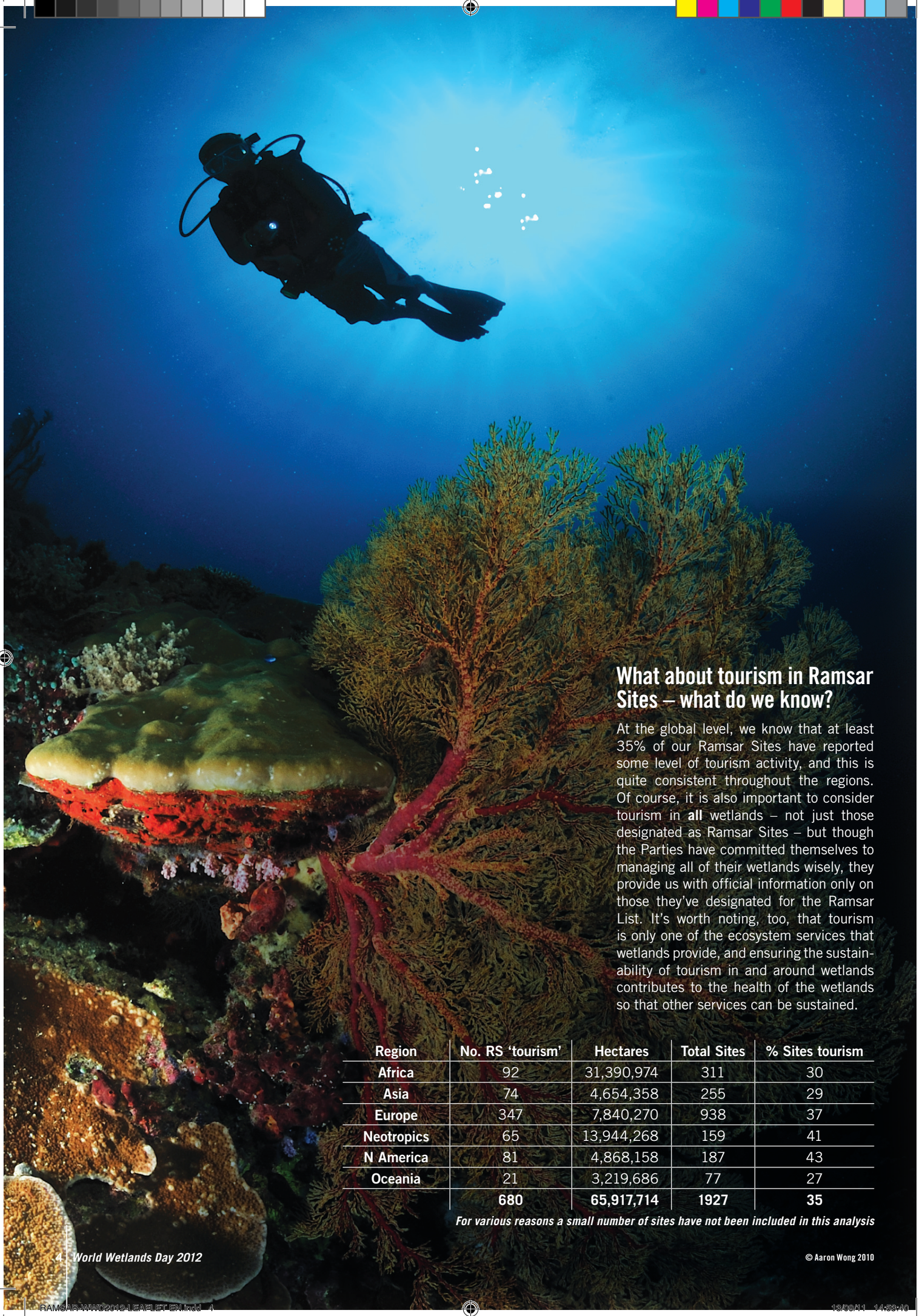

What about tourism in Ramsar Sites – what do we know?

At the global level, we know that at least 35% of our Ramsar Sites have reported some level of tourism activity, and this is quite consistent throughout the regions. Of course, it is also important to consider tourism in **all** wetlands – not just those designated as Ramsar Sites – but though the Parties have committed themselves to managing all of their wetlands wisely, they provide us with official information only on those they've designated for the Ramsar List. It's worth noting, too, that tourism is only one of the ecosystem services that wetlands provide, and ensuring the sustainability of tourism in and around wetlands contributes to the health of the wetlands so that other services can be sustained.

Region	No. RS 'tourism'	Hectares	Total Sites	% Sites tourism
Africa	92	31,390,974	311	30
Asia	74	4,654,358	255	29
Europe	347	7,840,270	938	37
Neotropics	65	13,944,268	159	41
N America	81	4,868,158	187	43
Oceania	21	3,219,686	77	27
	680	**65,917,714**	**1927**	**35**

For various reasons a small number of sites have not been included in this analysis

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Ramsar and tourism in 2012

Thus it's timely that this World Wetlands Day should be focused on tourism in and around wetlands – but there is much more to come! In June 2012, in Bucharest, Romania, the Convention will hold its 11th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties and as with previous COPs we have a theme for it, which this time will be *Wetlands, Tourism and Recreation*. Moreover, for the first time the Convention will be directly addressing tourism in wetlands with a Draft Resolution to be debated at COP11 that will help the Parties move forward at the national and local levels to achieve sustainable tourism for wetlands. The great hope is that having a formal Resolution in hand will provide a solid framework for the necessary cross-sectoral planning and decision-making that needs to be done to progress towards achieving that objective.

A further focus will come through a series of case studies on tourism in and around Ramsar Sites covering all Ramsar regions, a range of wetland types, and different scales of tourism. A booklet on wetlands and tourism will be launched at COP11 based on the key lessons learned from those case studies as well as other sources of information, with some key principles in managing wetland tourism. We WON'T be debating yet another set of guidelines for Ramsar since a variety of such guidelines are already available (e.g., the CBD's *Guidelines on Biodiversity and Tourism Developmen*t; IUCN-WCPA's *Sustainable tourism in protected areas: guidelines for planning and management*, and the World Heritage Convention's *Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites: a Practical Manual for World Heritage Site Managers*).

In all of these efforts, the Ramsar Secretariat is pleased to be working in partnership with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a specialized agency of the United Nations and the leading international organization in the field. The Secretariat has had a Memorandum of Cooperation with UNWTO since 2010 and this current work is a practical demonstration of the benefits of working cross-sectorally to deliver the wise use of wetlands.

Defining sustainable tourism and ecotourism

Within the Convention there are many reports and projects about sustainable tourism and ecotourism, the latter often portrayed as a particularly useful approach that is good both for wildlife and for local communities. But do we all mean the same thing when we use these terms? In our Draft Resolution going forward to COP11, we have adopted the UNWTO definitions of both of them.

Sustainable tourism means putting the principles of sustainable development – set out at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 – into practice in tourism. It means ensuring that tourism:

- protects the environment and helps to conserve biodiversity;
- respects host communities, their cultural heritage and values; and
- provides socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributes to poverty alleviation.

These principles form the basis of the UNWTO's full definition of sustainable tourism (available at http://sdt.unwto.org/en/content/about-us-5) and are entirely compatible with the Ramsar Convention's 'wise use' principle for wetland management.

Ecotourism is a special kind of sustainable tourism, and it needs to be defined clearly since there are so many different interpretations of this term.

The World Tourism Organization's definition of ecotourism

Ecotourism is used to mean forms of tourism which have the following characteristics:

- All nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
- It contains educational and interpretation features.
- It is generally but not exclusively organised by special tour operators for small groups. Service provider partners at the destinations tend to be small, locally owned businesses
- It minimises negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment.
- It supports the maintenance of natural areas which are used as ecotourism attractions by:

  - generating economic benefits for host communities, organizations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes;

  - providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities;

  - increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.

Source: World Tourism Organization (2001), The British Ecotourism Market, Special Report, page 19.

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Tourism in wetlands – there's good news and bad news

The good news

There is always good news! Well-managed tourism in and around wetlands can bring significant benefits, both economic and environmental, at site, regional and national levels. Local communities and local government can and often do benefit economically in terms of income and employment. At the national level, the income from tourism can be significant. For example, Namibia has calculated that in 2007 tourism contributed 14.2% of GDP (including direct and indirect contributions), and nature-based tourism activities are the leading reason for visitors to come to the country. Of Namibia's six parks, the Etosha Pans Ramsar Site attracts around 200,000 visitors per year, by far the highest number of all the parks.

The wetland itself can benefit directly when the income from tourism (entry fees, local products, etc.) is used directly for conservation measures at the wetland, thus linking tourism with long-term conservation. In Slovenia, the considerable annual income of 950,000 Euros from fees and a gift shop at the 305-hectare Skocjan Caves Ramsar Site, earned from 96,000 visitors in 2010, is re-invested in the park's infrastructure and for nature conservation efforts. In Australia's Kakadu National Park (an almost 2-million hectare Ramsar and World Heritage Site), 40% of the entrance fees from around 200,000 visitors each year is provided to the Aboriginal Lands Trust for disbursement to Kakadu's traditional owners, and the remaining 60% is used to cover the operational costs of conserving and maintaining the park's natural and cultural value.

Income can be effectively used for training local guides and tour operators so that they understand the key features of the wetland and can explain simple conservation measures to the tourists they are responsible for – and at the same time modify their own operations to minimize their impacts on the natural resource. Appropriate signage at wetlands, simple pamphlets, etc., can also demonstrate to tourists the values of wetlands and the benefits they deliver to us all.

Partnering with NGOs can provide additional expertise in managing tourism and achieving sustainability. The Tsomoriri Ramsar Site, a beautiful high-altitude wetland in Kashmir, India, has much to offer the active tourist – stunning scenery, an important breeding ground for several waterbird species (such as cranes), a nomadic culture, etc. WWF-India is working with the Department of Wildlife there in developing community-based tourism initiatives, such as homestays, local guest houses, etc., to ensure that local communities have the necessary skills to benefit directly from tourism.

Tourism businesses can give a great deal of support to sustaining biodiversity in wetlands and other ecosystems. Here are just a few examples:

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Tourism businesses can promote and support wetland biodiversity by:

- reducing pollution from tourism activities, particularly by ensuring that all liquid and solid wastes are properly treated and disposed of in ways that do not result in damage to biodiversity, and by minimising use of pesticides, fertilisers and toxic chemicals;
- obtaining all food stuffs, and other biological resources used in tourism activities, from sustainably managed sources;
- supporting biodiversity conservation by government agencies and NGOs through practical actions, including financial contributions, for example, through sponsorships and voluntary donations;
- ensuring that no invasive alien species are introduced through tourism activities;
- ensuring that no threatened or endangered species are put at risk from tourism activities or enter the tourism supply chain (especially as foods or souvenirs); and
- using the communications and marketing strengths of the tourism sector to raise awareness of tourists and destination authorities of the value of biodiversity and the steps they can take to protect it.

Source: UNWTO (2010) Tourism and Biodiversity – Achieving Common Goals Towards Sustainability, World Tourism Organization, Madrid, Spain

The bad news

The continuing rapid growth of tourism puts enormous pressure on the places – and their natural and cultural attractions – that tourists want to visit. The human species is particularly attracted to water and this has put coastal wetlands – such as sandy beaches, mangroves and coral reefs –under particularly severe threats from the development of tourist infrastructure.

Wetland ecosystems are often fragile, and without proper controls there is always a risk that tourism can have negative effects on wetland habitats, animals and plants, as well as on the local communities that may depend on the wetland for livelihood. Many of us are familiar with the downside of uncontrolled tourism: damage to coral reefs through poorly moored dive boats or poorly trained dive operators and divers; trampling effects of uncontrolled visit rates in sensitive habitats, such as peatlands, for example, leading to erosion; excessive disturbance of breeding bird populations, and so on. The list is long, particularly in coastal areas, and the WTO's publication *Tourism Congestion Management at Natural and Cultural Sites* (2004) has a wealth of suggestions for "operational congestion management".

There are also many examples of negative impacts on local communities when tourism development may exclude local users from the wetland in favour of visiting tourists, thus impacting local livelihoods, and there are sobering cases of where the economic benefits from tourism in and around wetlands has brought considerable economic benefits to the national and international tourism industry but little to the local government or local communities who have responsibility for managing the wetland and who may depend upon it.

Tourism outside wetland sites can also have adverse impacts upon the wetlands themselves. Abstraction of water for drinking, sanitation, and irrigation for tourism facilities from rivers and aquifers that maintain the wetland's water regime, overharvesting of fish and shellfish to supply hotels and restaurants, poor disposal of wastes, and in some cases the discharge of effluents into wetlands are just some of the ways in which nearby tourism developments can lead to damage to wetland ecosystems both inland and coastal. Most readers will no doubt have their own examples of this.

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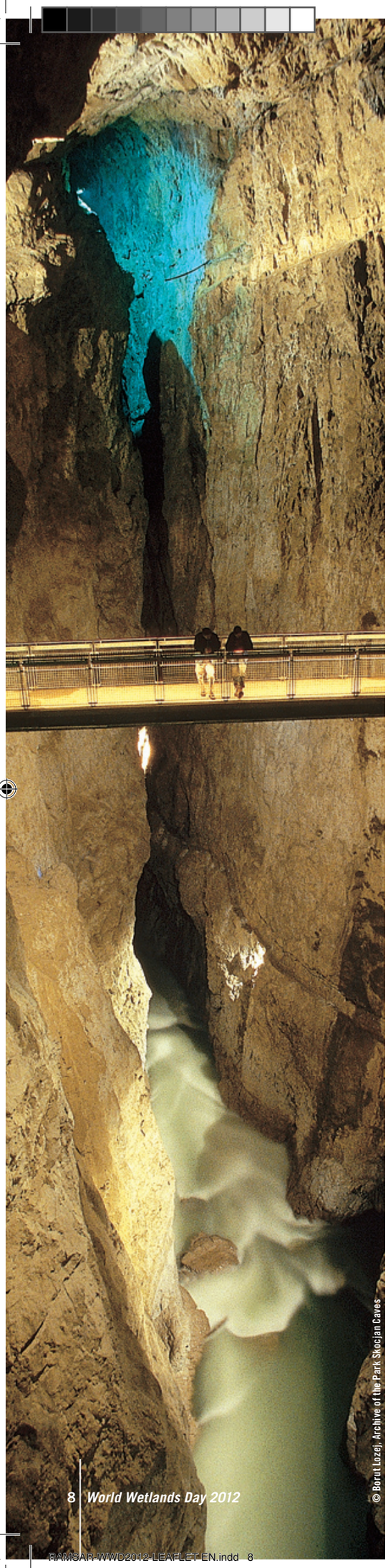

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Who can contribute to *achieving* sustainable wetland tourism?

From the Ramsar Convention's perspective, key implementers within Contracting Parties are of course our Administrative Authorities in the national governments, but in order to facilitate the sustainable management of tourism, our main implementers, both government and NGO, will need to work effectively with those involved in land-use planning, with tourism operators, with local communities and others if tourism in wetlands is to be sustainable. Quite a challenge! The key to managing tourism in wetlands is building a better understanding between these target groups.

National and regional (subnational) wetland policy makers

- Administrative Authorities and other national/provincial policy-making entities

Tourism economic sectors

- national government land-use policy makers
- tourism operators/investors/developers
- local government (in terms of destination management)

Wetland site managers

- wetland managers in the field and those working at multiple levels, including government employees as well as NGOs and in some cases managers of privately owned wetlands

Wetland tourism operators at site level

- those who offer services to tourists: guides associations, travel agencies, local tourism operators, local communities, lodging, accommodation and transport, from large multinational operators to small on- or near-site operators or even wetland managers

What can you do for this World Wetlands Day to focus on wetland tourism?

World Wetlands Day 2012 offers some great opportunities to focus your WWD campaign on some aspect of tourism relevant to wetlands in your location. Perhaps it's an opportunity to raise awareness about how people can be 'responsible tourists' both in their personal behaviour as tourists and in the choices they make for hotels or tour operators who are concerned about the sustainability of their operations. Perhaps it's an opportunity to work with local tour operators in terms of both their environmental footprint and the role they can play in raising awareness of environmental issues with tourists. Perhaps it is an opportunity to discuss with policy makers at any level the need to ensure that wetlands and their tourism values are fully integrated into tourism policies and plans, or to help local communities develop their skills as guides or in providing homestays. There are so many possibilities...

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