

Briefing Note

Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in Wetlands: Linkages with the Ramsar Convention

Focus on Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI)

Introduction

Wetlands, including rivers, lakes, peatlands, floodplains, mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs, are among the most biologically rich yet threatened ecosystems globally. They provide critical ecosystem services including water regulation, fisheries production, flood control, climate mitigation, and biodiversity conservation, while sustaining the livelihoods and food security of millions of people.

Despite their importance, wetlands remain significantly underrepresented in conventional protected area systems. The 2022 Indo-Burma Wetland Outlook highlighted that coastal natural wetlands in the region have been undergoing long-term area losses, particularly of tidal flats and mangroves. The loss of coastal wetlands across four of the five Indo-Burma countries accounts for one fifth of the total global loss of coastal wetlands. Freshwater ecosystems in the region are also at risk: natural wetlands have been converted to rice paddy and then subsequently to aquaculture ponds. To continue to meet the demand for rice, further natural wetlands have then been converted to agriculture to replace the areas lost to fish production.

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted in 2022 under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), provides a global roadmap for protecting nature and restoring ecosystems. The framework sets out four long-term goals for 2050 and 23 targets to be achieved by 2030, guiding countries in their efforts to address biodiversity loss.

At its core, the GBF's 2030 mission is to *halt and reverse biodiversity loss and place nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of both people and the planet*.

One of its central commitments, Target 3, focuses on improving the status of biodiversity by safeguarding ecosystems, species and genetic diversity. It calls on countries to ensure that by 2030 at least 30% of the world's terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas are effectively conserved and managed. This includes areas that are particularly important for biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Importantly, the target recognises that conservation can be achieved through well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas as well as other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs). It also acknowledges the vital role of Indigenous peoples and local communities, including the recognition of their traditional territories and stewardship practices.

The framework emphasises that conservation efforts should be integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and ocean systems, and that any sustainable use of resources in these areas must remain fully consistent with long-term biodiversity conservation outcomes.

During the 15th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP15) to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, parties adopted *Resolution XV.18: Achieving the equitable governance and effective conservation of wetlands as protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs)*.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971) provides the primary global framework for wetland conservation. Ramsar Sites are designated as Wetlands of International Importance, yet many Ramsar sites are not formally protected areas under national legislation. Instead, they are governed through community management systems, fisheries governance, traditional tenure systems, or sectoral management frameworks.

OECMs therefore provide an important mechanism to recognise and support effective conservation outcomes in wetlands beyond formal protected areas, complementing Ramsar site designations and strengthening the implementation of KMGBF Target 3.

Understanding OECMs and Their Relevance to Wetlands

An OECM is defined by the CBD in Decision 14/8 as: *“A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable.”*

OECMs recognise that conservation outcomes can occur in areas where biodiversity conservation may not be the primary management objective, but where governance and management practices nonetheless maintain ecological integrity.

Wetlands are particularly suited for OECM recognition because many are governed through diverse institutional arrangements including:

- community fisheries systems
- traditional land and water management practices
- Indigenous stewardship systems
- customary tenure and local governance
- sustainable production landscapes such as rice-fish systems

Recent guidance from the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) highlights that inland water ecosystems often require landscape-scale governance approaches, since rivers, floodplains, and wetlands function as highly connected ecological systems. Recognising OECMs in freshwater systems can therefore help strengthen ecological connectivity across watersheds and river basins, complementing protected areas.

Emerging research further highlights that OECMs can strengthen ecosystem-based management, climate resilience, and inclusive conservation approaches, while integrating biodiversity conservation into broader land and water management systems.

The study *“Unpacking OECMs: Pathways for Effective Implementation and Operationalisation in Asia”* emphasises that OECMs are essential tools for achieving inclusive biodiversity conservation and climate resilience while supporting sustainable development. The study also highlights the role of OECMs in spatial planning and participatory governance at the basin scale. In this context, wetland ecosystems such as river corridors, floodplains, peatlands, lakes and coastal wetlands represent significant opportunities for identifying OECMs.

Synergies Between Ramsar Sites and OECMs

The Ramsar Convention and the CBD framework on OECMs are complementary instruments for wetland conservation.

Ramsar designation recognises Wetlands of International Importance and promotes their wise use through sustainable management and conservation planning.

OECMs recognise areas where effective biodiversity conservation occurs regardless of the primary management objective.

Together, Ramsar sites and OECMs can contribute to:

- achieving KMGBF Target 3
- strengthening freshwater and coastal biodiversity conservation
- improving ecological connectivity across river basins
- recognising community-based wetland governance systems
- supporting diverse conservation actors including local communities, Indigenous peoples, and private landowners.

The Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) has increasingly acknowledged the importance of landscape approaches and governance diversity in wetland conservation, highlighting opportunities for synergies with OECM recognition.

Ramsar Sites and Protected Area Status

Globally, Ramsar sites exist under diverse governance arrangements. Many Ramsar sites are designated as protected areas and managed under national conservation authorities. These sites typically benefit from legal protection frameworks, management plans, and dedicated conservation agencies. However, a large number of Ramsar wetlands are not formally protected areas. Instead, they are governed through alternative management systems such as:

- fisheries governance frameworks
- local government management
- Indigenous or customary governance systems
- sustainable agricultural landscapes

Such areas may qualify as OECMs where governance systems effectively maintain biodiversity and ecological integrity over the long term. Recognising such areas as OECMs could therefore strengthen conservation outcomes while acknowledging existing governance systems and management practices.

Relevance for the Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI)

The Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI) promotes collaboration among Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. The region hosts globally significant wetland ecosystems including the Mekong River Basin, Tonle Sap Lake, extensive mangrove forests and river deltas.

These ecosystems support one of the world's largest inland fisheries, providing food security for millions of people. They also enhance flood regulation and climate resilience, while providing habitat for globally important biodiversity including migratory birds and aquatic species. However, many wetlands in the Mekong region remain outside formal protected area systems, making them strong candidates for OECM recognition.

Opportunities for OECMs in IBRRI Countries

Several governance systems across the Mekong region demonstrate strong potential for recognition as wetland OECMs. In Cambodia and Lao PDR, community fisheries areas regulate fishing practices, protect flooded forests, and maintain fish spawning habitats. These locally managed systems often demonstrate long-term biodiversity outcomes and strong community stewardship, making them potential candidates for OECM recognition.

Many wetlands occur within rice-farming landscapes and floodplain agriculture systems. Sustainable management practices—such as rice–fish systems and integrated floodplain agriculture, can support biodiversity while maintaining local livelihoods. The Mekong Basin also contains large transboundary freshwater ecosystems, where coordinated governance across countries could support landscape-scale OECMs. Potential examples include the Mekong mainstream wetlands, Sesan–Srepok river systems and the Mekong Delta. Recognising OECMs in such systems could help strengthen ecological connectivity across river basins, which is critical for freshwater biodiversity conservation.

Integrating Ramsar sites and OECMs in IBRRI countries could therefore support several strategic objectives:

- achieving global biodiversity targets under the KMGBF
- strengthening conservation of wetland biodiversity
- enhancing ecological connectivity across landscapes and river basins
- supporting nature-based livelihoods and sustainable resource use

Conclusion

Wetlands are among the most threatened ecosystems globally, yet they remain underrepresented in protected area networks. Achieving KMGBF Target 3 will therefore require expanding conservation approaches beyond traditional protected areas to include diverse governance systems and management practices.

OECMs offer an important mechanism for recognising and supporting conservation outcomes in wetlands and river basins, particularly where biodiversity conservation is achieved through community stewardship, sustainable production systems, and sectoral governance frameworks.

Strengthening synergies between Ramsar Sites and OECMs can help enhance wetland conservation outcomes by improving ecological connectivity, supporting governance diversity, and recognising the contributions of local communities, Indigenous peoples, and other stakeholders.

For IBRRI, integrating OECMs into regional wetland conservation strategies offers significant opportunities to expand conservation coverage, strengthen transboundary cooperation, and support sustainable livelihoods across the Mekong Basin.

Advancing this agenda will require stronger policy integration, improved technical guidance, and enhanced collaboration among biodiversity, water, fisheries, and agricultural sectors. By aligning Ramsar implementation with the broader Target 3 framework, countries in the Indo-Burma region can help bend the curve of freshwater biodiversity loss while supporting resilient ecosystems and communities.

References

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