

Editorial

The Urgency of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in Africa

February 2nd of every year is designated “World Wetlands Day” to focus international attention on the importance of protecting endangered wetlands, and on repairing damaged ecosystems. The international Convention on Wetlands (also known as Ramsar Convention because it was originally signed in that Iranian city in 1971) “provides a framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.” There are 47 African countries (out of a total of global 158) that are recognized as Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention (Table 1). As at 8 February 2008, there are 1,718 designated “Ramsar wetland sites” covering more than 159,517,260 hectares, globally¹.

The eighth Conference of Parties (COP-8) to the Ramsar Convention adopted a mission statement, which is “the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world.” The theme for COP-10 “Health Wetlands, Health People” is particularly relevant to African countries. COP-10 is scheduled to be held between 28 October and 4 November, 2008 in Changwon, Republic of South Korea².

To prepare for COP-10, the African Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention met in Yaoundé, Cameroon during November 2007 to evaluate progress on exiting Ramsar sites, consider new threats, and to iron out priorities. There are six Ramsar sub-regions in Africa, namely Central Africa, East Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, and Indian Ocean Island States. These sub-regions have the responsibility to identify capacity building objectives. Unfortunately, most agreed that the work of the Convention is not being done effectively because of “lack of political will and human resources among others to implement the Convention³.” The Ramsar secretariat in Africa is chronically and desperately understaffed, and there is very little being done to frame the issue of wetland health as linked permanently to population health, which should get the attention of agencies and actors in all sectors of government and the economy. Specifically, the regional group identified the following issue framing priorities:

1. Wetlands and human health
2. Mining and extractive industries
3. Threats and challenges for African wetlands
4. Wetlands and Climate Change
5. Links to poverty eradication
6. Financing wetlands-related projects
7. Knowledge sharing and access to information

In his address to the regional conference, the Prime Minister of Cameroon extolled the significance of African wetlands for African countries. For example, malaria, river blindness, schistosomiasis are clearly associated with wetlands and these diseases exert a serious burden on African health. The environmental impacts of mineral mining are extremely serious, and remain unabated, leading to loss of arable land and pollution with toxic metals. Climate change impacts on wetlands are also leading to population migration and the subsequent re-distribution of disease burden.

Africa has many examples in her history of the impacts of changes in wetland resources have had devastating effects on the health of the population. Two recent examples are presented here, the shrinking Lake Chad, which serves at least four countries and is the center of various environmental stresses, including agricultural fires and dust storms (Figure 1). According to some studies, the forced migration of people in response to the declining sustainability of Lake Chad may have contributed to adverse changes in the AIDS epidemic in the sub-region^{4,5}.

¹ The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. <http://www.ramsar.org/>. Accessed on 9th February 2008.

² COP-10. http://www.ramsar.org/index_cop10_e.htm

³ Africa Regional Meeting in preparation of Ramsar COP10, Cameroon, 26-30 November 2007. http://www.ramsar.org/mtg/mtg_reg_africa2008_news_pm.htm. Accessed on 10 February 2008.

⁴ <http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Countries/chad.asp>

⁵ Joseph Yves Zoa Zoa. 2006. Cattle Breeders and the Spread of AIDS in the Lake Chad Basin. The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa in a Historical Perspective, *Philippe Denis and Charles Becker (eds)*. Online edition, October 2006. pp. 73-85.

Table 1. Ramsar Sites in African Countries⁶.

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF SITES	TOTAL AREA COVERED (Hectares)
Algeria	42	2,959,615
Benin	4	1,179,354
Botswana	1	5,537,400
Burkina Faso	3	299,200
Burundi	1	1,000
Cameroon	3	606,615
Cape Verde	1	Unknown
Central African Republic	1	101,300
Chad	5	9,879,068
Congo	5	438,960
Cote d'Ivoire	6	127,344
Democratic Republic of Congo	2	866,000
Egypt	2	105,700
Equatorial Guinea	3	136,000
Gabon	6	1,763,769
Gambia	2	26,304
Ghana	6	178,410
Guinea	16	6,422,361
Guinea-Bissau	1	39,098
Kenya	5	101,849
Lesotho	1	434
Liberia	5	95,879
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	2	83
Madagascar	6	787,555
Malawi	1	224,800
Mali	1	4,119,500
Mauritania	2	1,231,100
Mauritius	2	379
Morocco	24	272,010
Mozambique	1	688,000
Namibia	4	629,600
Niger	12	58,100
Nigeria	1	58,100
Rwanda	1	Unkown
Senegal	4	99,720
Sierra Leone	1	295,000
South Africa	19	543,978
Sudan	2	7,784,600
Togo	20	1,210,400
Tunisia	20	726,541
Uganda	11	354,803
United Republic of Tanzania	4	4,868,424
Zambia	8	4,030,500

Kenya's Lake Naivasha has also undergone drastic changes over the past two decades, due to a combination of urbanization, agricultural development, and climate change (Figure 2). Eutrophication of the water due to excessive nutrient pollution is visible in satellite images, and it is not clear what the ultimate outcome and impacts on population health will be, but the time to take urgent action is now. It is time that all Africans take responsibility for the precious wetlands and allocate necessary human, financial, scientific, and technological resources to their preservation.

⁶ The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. <http://www.ramsar.org/>. Accessed on 9th February 2008.

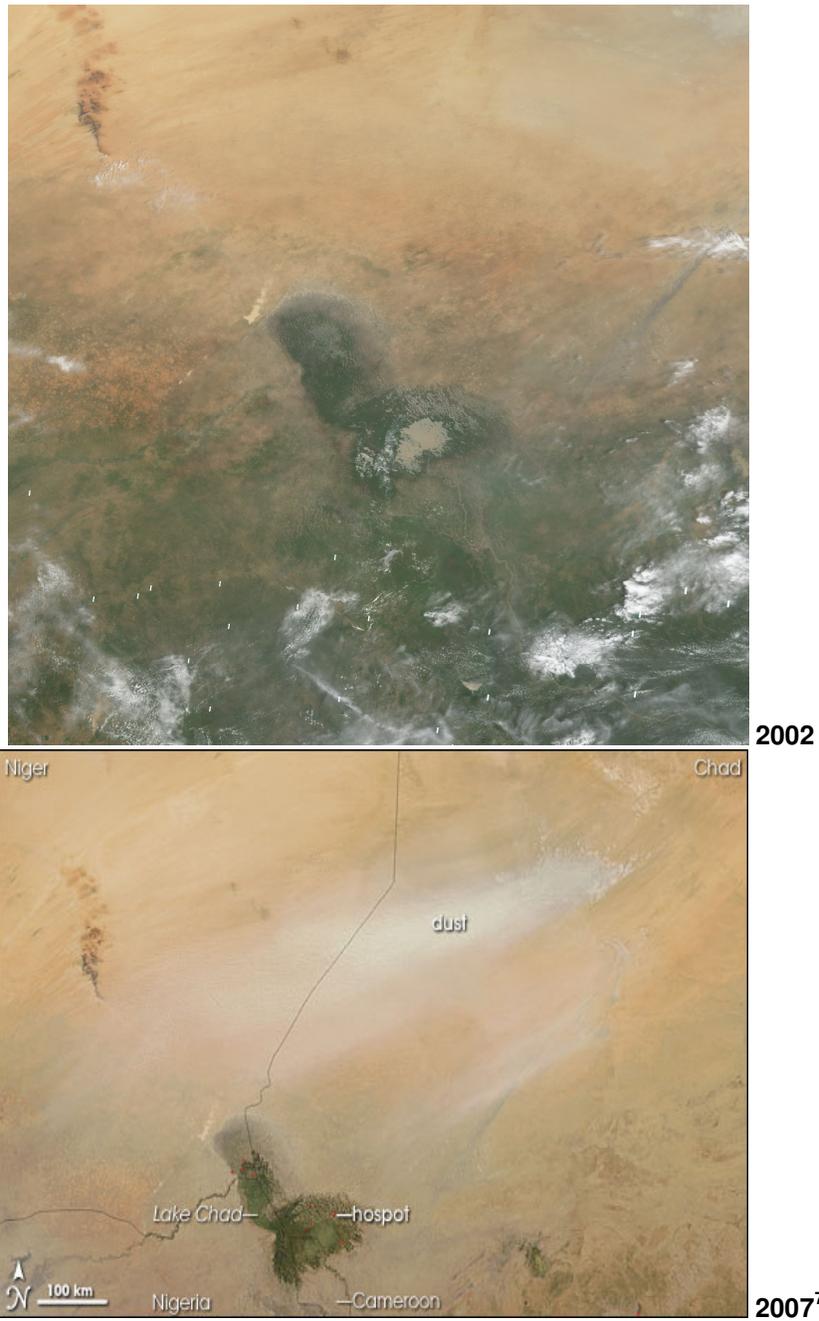


Figure 1. Water supply in Lake Chad has shrunk by more than 90% since records became available. The lake's resources are used internationally, and population migration due to the changes is affecting population health in the region⁸.

⁷ NASA image courtesy the MODIS Rapid Response Team at NASA GSFC. The Rapid Response Team offers daily images of this area. http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/natural_hazards_v2.php3?img_id=14157.
⁸Image by Jesse Allen, based on data from the MODIS Rapid Response Team at NASA-GSFC.

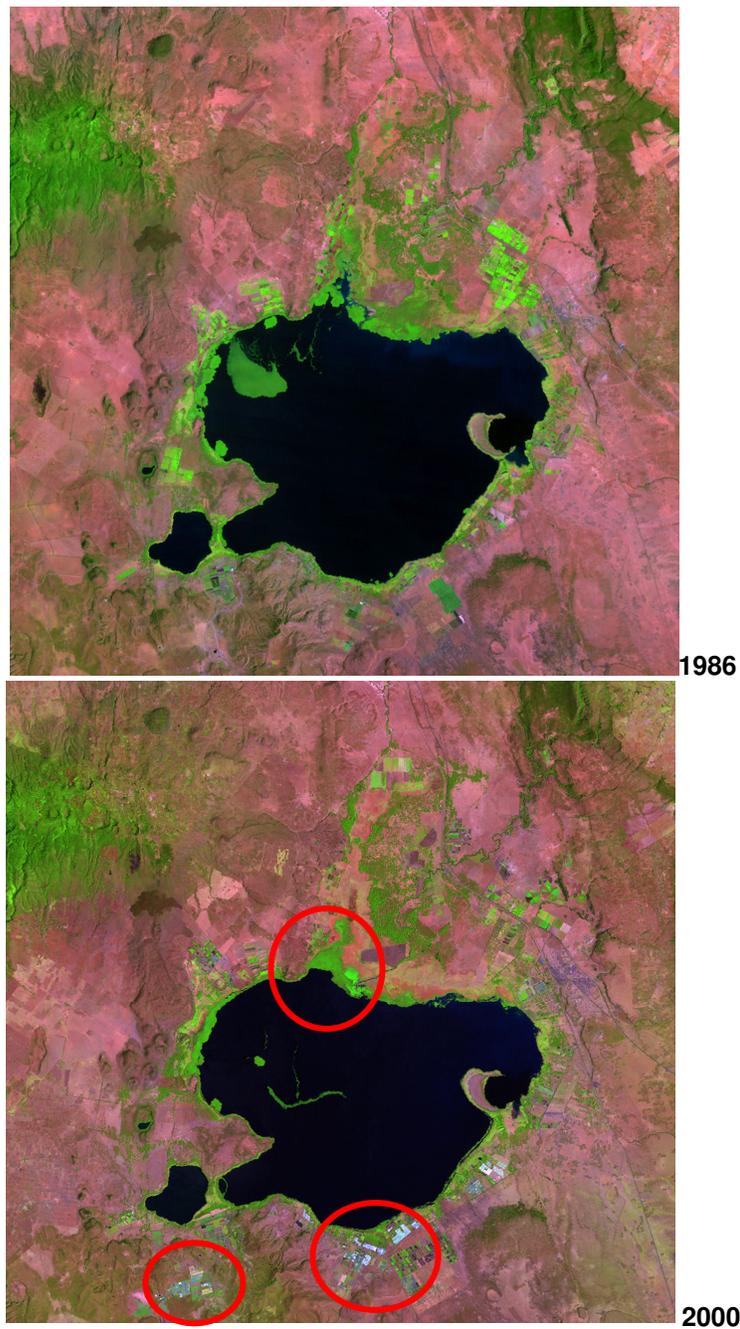


Figure 2. Changes in the Lake Naivasha in the Rift Valley region of Kenya⁹. The red circles denote major areas of change noticeable in 2000.

Oladele A. Ogunseitan

Editor-in-Chief

⁹ Images by Jesse Allen, based on data provided by University of Maryland Global Land Cover Facility. http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Newsroom/Newimages/images.php3?img_id=16495).