

Symposium 07 Key issues in the conservation of sites important for birds

Introduction

Des CALLAGHAN¹, Colin BIBBY²

1. BirdLife International, European Division Office, Droevendaalsesteeg 3a, PO Box 127, NL-6700 AC Wageningen, Netherlands; D.Callaghan@birdlife.agro.nl

2. BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge CB30NA, UK; colin.bibby@dial.pipex.com

Central to adequate land-use planning is the identification and conservation of sites of exceptional importance for biodiversity. This is crucial because such sites cannot be replaced once they are lost to development, i.e., they represent "critical natural capital". The Important Bird Area (IBA) program of BirdLife International is a worldwide project aimed at identifying and conserving important sites using birds as flagships. By 2001, over 8 000 IBAs had been identified and documented, including 4 000 in Europe, 500 in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1 250 in Africa, 1 500 in Asia generally, 1 500 in the Americas, and 5 in the Pacific. For each site, data is collected by standardized methods that details geography, birds, habitats, land-use, threats and protection. This is stored, analyzed and reported with purposely-built computer software "The World Bird Database".

To date the IBA program has produced a very large body of conservation advocacy and action at national levels. These include the establishment of local site support groups, the creation and management of new protected areas, the establishment of integrated conservation and development projects for key IBAs, and the strengthening of national legislation. At regional levels, especially within the European Union, more and more IBAs are being designated for protection under international agreements and conventions. Globally, the importance of IBAs has been recognized by the World Bank in their Critical Natural Habitats operational policy, and by the Global Environment Facility in its own strategy. The IBA program is undergoing exciting broadscale development from the identification and documentation of sites to action, advocacy and monitoring. This symposium brings together speakers from four conti-

nents and presents recent experience with and current thinking on key issues involving site identification and prioritization, site monitoring, and local community involvement. Included is an update on the Asian IBA program and an analysis of the situation in China.

The influence of the IBA program is helped by its criteria for operations which are objective and globally agreed as well as being applicable and implementable at national levels. There is growing evidence that the IBA program identifies many sites of wider importance for biodiversity, though not, of course, all of them. The purpose of the program is to promote effective conservation, though this symposium focuses mainly on the scientific aspects, particularly the need for effective monitoring.

Given the scarcity of resources, thought has been given to the development of effective monitoring methods that are simple to do and focused on the most pressing priorities. Only on such a basis will monitoring programs be sustainable in the longer term. Outputs need to be targeted at clear constituencies if they are to achieve real impact. Development and refinement of approaches will be an iterative process. Ornithologists understand increasingly that conservation is only partly a scientific activity. Every bit as important is the social and political stage on which the science plays. It is a common thread running through the contributions in this symposium.

All presentations are reported here except the first paper by Leon Bennun, "Site identification and prioritization", which was drawn from African experience in establishing Important Bird Areas and given as an oral. An abstract of it is published in the Abstract Volume for the Congress.