



**CONVENTION ON  
MIGRATORY  
SPECIES**

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Samarkand, Uzbekistan, 12 – 17 February 2024  
Agenda Item 27.4

**SEAGRASS ECOSYSTEMS**

*(Prepared by the Secretariat)*

Summary:

This document highlights the importance of seagrass ecosystems and proposes the adoption of a draft Resolution and draft Decisions.

## SEAGRASS ECOSYSTEMS

### Background

1. Seagrasses are marine flowering plants consisting of 12 genera (*Amphibolis*, *Cymodocea*, *Enhalus*, *Halodule*, *Halophila*, *Phyllospadix*, *Posidonia*, *Ruppia*, *Syringodium*, *Thalassia*, *Thalassodendron* and *Zostera*) that are found in shallow waters in many parts of the world, from the tropics to the Arctic circle. They exist in 159 countries on six continents, covering over 300,000 km<sup>2</sup> (UNEP, 2020), making them one of the most widespread coastal habitats on Earth. Seagrasses form extensive underwater meadows, creating complex, highly productive and biologically rich habitats. Seagrasses also play a significant role in providing a plethora of highly valuable ecosystem services.
2. The importance of seagrass ecosystems is increasingly being recognized. In 2020, UNEP highlighted this critical coastal ecosystem with the publication of the report, [Out of the Blue: the value of seagrasses to the environment and to people](#), and, in 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 76/265 proclaiming 1 March as World Seagrass Day.
3. Seagrass ecosystems are of critical importance for many migratory marine species, including dugongs, marine turtles and sharks. They are fundamental to world fisheries production, providing valuable nursery habitat to over one fifth of the world's largest 25 fisheries. Seagrasses can improve water quality by filtering, cycling and storing nutrients and pollutants, and can reduce the incidence of pathogenic marine bacteria, which not only directly protects humans, but also reduces coral diseases and contamination in seafood. Seagrasses additionally provide cultural benefits worldwide by supporting tourism and recreational opportunities. Despite covering only 0.1 per cent of the ocean floor, these meadows are highly efficient carbon sinks, storing up to 18 per cent of the world's oceanic carbon (UNEP, 2020). Seagrasses can also buffer ocean acidification, thus contributing to the resilience of the most vulnerable ecosystems and species, such as coral reefs, and act as the first line of defence along coasts by reducing wave energy, protecting people from the increasing risk of floods and storms.

### Issues

4. Despite their importance to migratory species and to the world's climate and food security, seagrasses continue to be undervalued and under-protected. Seagrasses have been declining globally since the 1930s, with the most recent census estimating that 7 per cent of this key marine habitat is being lost worldwide per year (UNEP, 2020). Threats with the highest impact to seagrasses include agricultural and industrial run-off, coastal development and climate change. Unregulated fishing activities, anchoring, trampling and dredging also pose major threats.
5. The CMS Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) and their Habitats throughout their Range (Dugong MOU) came into effect in 2007 and has been signed by 27 signatories to date. It explicitly mentions seagrass ecosystems as the most important habitat for dugong conservation, and has several projects and programmes that focus on conserving and sustainably managing seagrass ecosystems. The Conservation and Management Plan for the MOU has a strong focus on identifying, conserving and rehabilitating seagrass ecosystems important for dugong populations. The Dugong MOU has developed and implemented best practices for mapping and studying seagrass meadows and ecosystem services, and has created an online hub to share critical information on seagrass research and conservation ([www.dugongseagrass.org](http://www.dugongseagrass.org)). The Dugong MOU is also implementing a

project focused on seagrass ecosystem services valuation and conservation in five countries in Southeast Asia (IKI-funded Seagrass Ecosystem Services Project, 2019-2023) and was a key technical partner in the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project in eight countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific (2015-2019).

6. However, seagrasses are also important for marine migratory species other than dugongs, with special importance for some species of marine turtles (particularly *Chelonia mydas*), sharks and manatees (particularly *Trichechus manatus*) that are listed in the CMS Appendices.

#### Discussion and analysis

7. Given the importance of seagrass ecosystems to migratory species, a stronger global focus on their protection is needed. In particular, Parties should identify, highlight and protect seagrass ecosystems around the world that are of particular importance to marine migratory species. Recommended actions are included in the proposed Resolution and Decisions.
8. International cooperation and coordination in seagrass conservation and management is critical to ensure the survival of seagrass as a habitat for migratory species, as well as collaboration with other relevant international instruments and processes, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

#### Recommended actions

9. The Conference of the Parties is recommended to:
  - a) adopt the draft Resolution in Annex 1 of this document;
  - b) adopt the draft Decisions in Annex 2 of this document.

**DRAFT RESOLUTION**

**CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF SEAGRASS ECOSYSTEMS**

*Highlighting* the importance of seagrass ecosystems as important habitats for migratory marine species, including dugongs, turtles and sharks,

*Recalling* UN General Assembly Resolution 76/265 proclaiming 1 March as World Seagrass Day,

*Taking note* of the 2020 report of the United Nations Environment Programme entitled 'Out of the Blue: The Value of Seagrasses to the Environment and to People' and the recommendations for seagrass conservation contained therein,

*Recognizing* the vital ecosystem services that seagrass ecosystems provide, such as carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, food security, fisheries productivity, water quality enhancement and coastal protection,

*Noting* the carbon sequestration and storage potential of seagrass ecosystems and that adopting measures to protect and restore seagrasses can contribute to the achievement of the goals and objectives of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement,

*Acknowledging* the significant threats to seagrass ecosystems, including habitat degradation, pollution, climate change, overfishing, dredging and coastal development, which have resulted in the global decline of seagrass habitats and their associated biodiversity,

*Noting* the urgent need to raise awareness at all levels and to promote and facilitate actions for the conservation and restoration of seagrasses, bearing in mind that enhancing ecosystem services and functions is important for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals,

*Recognizing* the transboundary nature of many seagrass ecosystems around the world,

*Emphasizing* the need for collaborative and coordinated efforts among countries, regional organizations, international bodies and stakeholders to conserve and sustainably manage seagrass ecosystems,

*Recalling* the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) and the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030),

*Highlighting* the work under the CMS Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) and their Habitats throughout their Range in addressing seagrass ecosystems,

*Recalling* the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, especially Targets 2 and 3,

*The Conference of the Parties to the  
Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals*

1. *Urges* Parties to recognize the importance of seagrass ecosystems as important habitats for migratory marine species such as dugongs, marine turtles and sharks;
2. *Urges* Parties to strengthen conservation and restoration measures for seagrass ecosystems, including implementing and enforcing effective legal and regulatory measures to conserve and manage seagrass ecosystems such as including seagrass ecosystems in marine protected areas, locally managed marine areas, or other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrating seagrass conservation into relevant coastal and marine spatial planning processes;
3. *Calls on* Parties to collaborate on the international conservation of seagrass ecosystems, engaging in bilateral, regional and global efforts;
4. *Encourages* Parties to conduct regular monitoring, research and data-collection on seagrass ecosystems to better understand their status, trends and ecological functions as well as their role in supporting migratory species, and to use this knowledge to inform decision-making and management actions for seagrass conservation and restoration;
5. *Recommends* Parties to provide financial support and resources for the conservation and restoration of seagrass ecosystems and the role they play in supporting migratory species;
6. *Call upon* Parties to leverage funding from relevant international and regional mechanisms, such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and other sources, to support seagrass conservation and management activities;
7. *Urges* Parties to raise public awareness of the importance of seagrass ecosystems and their role in supporting migratory species, and to engage stakeholders, including local communities, indigenous peoples, academia, industry and civil society, in seagrass conservation and management efforts through participatory processes and partnerships;
8. *Encourages* Parties to recognize the importance of seagrass ecosystems as carbon sinks and to include them in national climate change mitigation strategies, including Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement;
9. *Requests* the Secretariat to promote international cooperation and coordination on the conservation and sustainable management of seagrass ecosystems that have been identified as important habitats for marine migratory species, and to collaborate with other relevant international instruments and processes, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

DRAFT DECISIONS

**SEAGRASS ECOSYSTEMS**

***Directed to Parties***

14.AA Parties are requested to:

- a) identify, at the national level, an inventory of migratory species that use seagrass meadows, the most important seagrass meadows for migratory species, the most important threats to seagrass and drivers of seagrass loss, and the conservation actions necessary to reduce seagrass loss and restore it;
- b) include identified seagrass meadows in marine protected areas, locally managed marine areas, or other effective conservation measures;
- c) report, through the national reports, to the Conference of Parties at its 15<sup>th</sup> meeting on the progress.

***Directed to Parties, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations***

14.BB Parties, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations are encouraged to provide technical support to conservation, sustainable management and research in seagrass ecosystems that are of particular importance to marine migratory species globally.

***Directed to the Scientific Council***

14.CC The Scientific Council is requested to:

- a) provide technical support to Parties to identify an inventory of migratory species that use seagrass meadows, the most important seagrass meadows for migratory species globally, the most important threats to seagrass and drivers of seagrass loss, and the conservation actions necessary to reduce seagrass loss and restore it.

***Directed to the Secretariat***

14.DD Where appropriate, the Secretariat shall, in collaboration with Parties and subject to availability of resources:

- a) provide technical support to Parties on conservation, sustainable management and research in seagrass ecosystems that are of particular importance to marine migratory species;
- b) develop and disseminate guidelines and management tools for conservation, sustainable management and research in seagrass ecosystems that are of particular importance to marine migratory species;
- c) report to the Conference of Parties at its 15<sup>th</sup> meeting on the progress in implementing this Decision.