

# Wetlands International Specialist Groups

## Origin of Specialist Groups

Within WI the Specialist Groups evolved in the early 70s into what was then known as taxonomic research groups made up of species experts. In the 80s thematic groups were formed based on a WI led needs assessment. The IUCN Species Survival Commission also had Specialist Groups on various taxa since the 1950s; the Specialist Groups on birds being jointly managed with BirdLife International. As the SSC/BI Specialist Groups evolved to include waterbirds, Wetlands International, BirdLife International and SSC came to the realisation that both the WI taxonomic Research Groups and the SSC Specialist Groups were essentially the same type of volunteer structure, with very similar objectives and activities. In most cases the members of each were the same people! Under these circumstances it was soon realised that there would be benefit in "sharing" the Groups and have them operate under a common frame. This also led to the need for harmonisation of these groups under a common name and they are now known as Specialist Groups. Among these Specialist Groups, the taxonomic groups on waterbirds are operated jointly with IUCN (SSC) and BirdLife International and are also known as the 'Waterbird Network'.

## What are Specialist Groups?

Specialist Groups are volunteer networks of expert scientists who provide information and advice in support of the programmes and projects of the organisations mentioned above. In the case of Wetlands International this is in line with the strategy of Wetlands International as approved by its Board of Directors.

Wetlands International is a networking and facilitating organisation. The network of Specialist Groups is a vital part of Wetlands International, essential for the delivery of wetland and wetland species expertise in support of wetland conservation globally.

There are currently 19 Specialist Groups within WI: 14 covering waterbird taxa and 5 thematic groups on wetlands and wetland and waterbird issues. Overall our Specialist Group network involves over 2,000 people. There are plans to further develop more groups in relation to delivery of WI strategy e.g. Freshwater Fish Specialist Group.



*WI /IUCN SSC Specialist Group Coordinators, WI Staff and Partner organisation reps at the annual SG Coordinators meeting, Wageningen, May 2003*

Wetlands International Specialist Groups are globally co-ordinated by Dr Douglas Taylor, Wetlands International's International Science Co-ordinator and supported by Tunde Ojei, Specialist Group Network Development and Support officer, while Mariano Gimenez-Dixon, coordinates Specialist Groups for the IUCN SSC.

Specialist Groups have either as a group, or group of members published scientific and technical reports, as well as Bulletins, Newsletters and workshop proceedings.



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### Opportunities of this relationship (SG Perspective):

- Outlet of scientific data
- Overlap in objectives with WI, BI and SSC
- Use of the name and partnership with internationally renowned NGOs
- A way to see scientific knowledge transform into conservation
- Possible support
- Access to data held by WI, BI and SSC

### How do Specialist Groups operate?

Specialist Groups have developed in a variety of ways, and their sizes and structures reflect this. Some are large groups with a wide membership, others are smaller networks of invited experts. For example, the International Wader Study Group (WSG), is an independent nongovernmental (non-profit) organisation that acts as our Wader Specialist Group. Each Specialist Group is led by one or more Co-ordinators who represent their groups on Wetlands International's Board of Members, and also represented on the Board of Directors. Specialist Groups have a global remit, although not all are currently active in all parts of the world. Specialist Groups are at present developing their regional structures to provide more direct links with Wetlands International's regional organisation.

A number of Specialist Groups already have Regional Co-ordinators covering particular geographic areas, and Assistant Co-ordinators dealing with particular topics or species.

### Major Characteristics of SGs:

- Independent
- Rely on voluntary work
- Self-motivated
- Often relying on institutional support
- Ability to develop proposals in collaboration with WI and IUCN SSC



*SG Coordinators at a workshop*

### The Value of the Partnership to Wetlands International

Specialist Groups:

- provide strategic guidance to Wetlands International's organisational development and priorities, through representation on the Advisory Council, Board of members, Board of Directors and Regional Councils;
- contribute to the delivery of Wetlands International's information and advice on research, conservation and management of wetlands and wetland species, through accessing expert networks and developing partnerships;
- provide information and technical advice as part of Wetlands International's technical support and input to global conventions (such as Ramsar, Bonn Convention on Biological Diversity);
- undertake or lead projects on behalf of Wetlands International;
- represent Wetlands International, as a member of its network, at external for a and to other organisations, and
- promote and publicise the role of Wetlands International in wetlands and waterbirds conservation to the global scientific community.

Many Specialist Groups produce regular Bulletins and newsletters for their members, hold conferences and workshops, and publish proceedings volumes. Specialist Groups have, or are developing, registers of members' interests and expertise.