

Caddo Lake: Ramsar treaty offers wetland guidelines; unrelated to the United Nations

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The United Nations and its agencies cannot in any way control or even influence the management or ownership of the Caddo Lake wetlands due to the Ramsar Convention.

During the last election, some charged that the treaty made Caddo Lake — about 8,000 wetland acres of which are covered by the Ramsar treaty — vulnerable to United Nations control.

Even the Republican Party of Texas and of Harrison County linked Caddo Lake and the U.N. in a recently adopted platform and resolution, respectively.

A March, 2004, handbill advertising a Tarrant County Republican Assembly meeting said "Why is the U.N. in Texas? Why do they want Texas water?"

The assembly is a Fort Worth-based private political organization.

But the Ramsar convention and the U.N. are totally unrelated and it is impossible for the U.N. to control a Ramsar site in any way, either directly or through other organizations, according to U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Environment Claudia McMurry.

The Ramsar conventions are "completely independent of the U.N. There is no connection or relationship. Ramsar is independent and is funded by parties" meaning countries that signed the Ramsar treaty, McMurry said.

The U.N. "cannot control or affect the site in any way," McMurry said. "It has no legal rights on the property and has no regulatory authority.

"The property remains under the jurisdiction of the nation or state or locality where it's located."

McMurry said that the Ramsar Convention's archives are kept at UNESCO, which is a U.N. organization, but UNESCO simply acts as the convention's document repository, or library.

The treaty, formally called "The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, Especially as Waterfowl Habitat," was created in 1971 and was signed by the United States in 1987. It encourages nations to conserve their wetlands, provides guidelines, conservation training and access to financial resources, according to Ramsar literature.

The treaty has been signed by 134 nations and covers 1,360 sites, including about 19 in the United States.

The treaty — which is administered by a staff and a decision making committee — does not affect a nation's wetland laws and has no legal weight, McMurry said, but it does create wetland guidelines to which countries can voluntarily adhere.

It has, she said, "no force of law."

Asked why the treaty was created, McMurry said the "theory would be if" a nation makes "a national commitment to something, that means the government thinks

it's important. The citizens think it's important.

"It's a genuine commitment to the environment and that is not easily reversed."

Caddo Lake's wetlands were designated as the 13th U.S. "Wetland of International Importance," by Ramsar, in 1993 and the designated area was enlarged in 1995.

A national wildlife refuge — formerly the Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant site — now shares more than 5,000 acres of the Ramsar site.

When wetlands acreage becomes a Ramsar site, it has influence on people who can help protect it, said Herb Raffaele, chief of division of international conservation for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For instance, he said, a developer had his eye on a piece of property in Kansas that bordered the Quivera National Wildlife Refuge, which is a Ramsar site.

But when a state legislator promoting the development was told Quivera had been declared a site of international importance, he pulled his support and the development was located elsewhere.

"Being a Ramsar site said there was something special about" it, Raffaele said.

Fish and Wildlife Service personnel must give their stamp of approval before a wetland can be designated a Ramsar site, he said, citing several steps before his agency does so, including finding a legislator that supports it.

"We make the decision, not Ramsar, and Ramsar has no choice but to accept it," he said.

A National Ramsar Committee is created in each country in which a Ramsar site exists, including the United States. Raffaele said the national committees — the members of which serve as volunteers — encourage communities to get involved with nearby sites, among other things.

Caddo Lake Institute Chairman Dwight Shellman is chairman of America's National Committee.

Ramsar sites attract people who are interested in nature, Raffaele said, and the sites also give nearby communities the ability to create festivals connected to bird watching or other ecologically-centered activities.