

# Shellman named to head national Ramsar group

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By *STEPHANIE A. DURHAM*

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Eleven years after riding a barge down Caddo Lake with Don Henley and committing to help the lake, Dwight Shellman has been elected national Ramsar chairman, where he'll preside over the only international committee dedicated to wetlands preservation.

"Don Henley asked me to come and help. I was doing this type of work in Colorado eleven years ago and he asked me to come down and see if we could help these folks. We went to Uncertain and rode on the barge like everybody else does, and I think it's really worth helping," he said.

Shellman, currently executive director of the Caddo Lake Institute, was elected Saturday at the National Ramsar Convention at Caddo Lake.

He cited community service and wetlands education as the primary focus of his tenure.

"I've always had an avocation of community-based protection of environmental neighborhood resources. I've always felt that the people who live in the place have better ability to appreciate it than people who don't. We should give them the support they need to protect their neighborhood and community environments," he said. "The chairmanship is an opportunity to put teams together, to build a network with other Ramsar network communities."

Shellman plans to deliver service to the 18 Ramsar sites and to develop relationships between those sites.

"We provide what the communities don't have, such as engineering, science and education," he said.

Educational and outreach committees are tools he'll use to further his agenda as national chairman.

"The theme that I have introduced to the (Ramsar) group and that they have endorsed is to convert from a group of people sitting inside the Washington beltway to an organization that serves the Ramsar sites in the western hemisphere," he said, "Until the people who live in the Ramsar communities see value in the committee, it won't be relevant and they're unlikely to participate."

He added that bringing Ramsar issues to the community would turn residents into "citizen diplomats" and "citizen scientists."

He'll also construct the first U.S. Ramsar Service Center, currently in the planning stages, which will be located at the former Longhorn Ammunition Plant. Within the next year, he'll help develop a plan to convert the building to house a visitor's center, wetlands science education facility, and a service center.

Under Shellman's plan, community leaders would form outreach teams and participate in needs-assessment tours of other wetlands, then evaluate how the Caddo Lake Ramsar program could help.

"We want to emphasize the fact that we want to share visitors among Ramsar sites so we have a small, appropriate ecotourism activity exchange," he said. "It's very ambitious, but we will start off with team trips to sites in the U.S. and that will become part of the ultimate Ramsar center program."

Shellman plans to use a web site, Ramsarecotourism.net, as a joint marketing project between Ramsar sites.

Ideally, citizens would submit quality reports on Ramsar sites' lodging, restaurants and over-all experience to the internet sites.

Shellman said he thrives on the necessary ambition of his new, potentially high-pressure post.

"When you tell people you're going to do things like this, you better do them, and I intend to as chair," said Shellman, "The Caddo Lake Center will take this on as a permanent mission in the western hemisphere. It will take two years for building to be done and five to get it up to speed."

His long-term plans include a science and service center and a visitor's center with models of the wetlands and basin, and full-time scientists to research and compare physical models.