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Getting to Yes: Professor Kim Diana Connolly Represents the U.S. in Tough Global Wetlands Negotiation

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Professor Kim Diana Connolly, vice dean for legal affairs of the Law School’s clinical program, traveled July 6 to 13. The occasion was familiarly known as COP11, or more formally, the 11th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The Ramsar Convention, signed in Iran in 1971, seeks to stem the loss of wetlands and promote their economic, cultural, scientific and recreational value. Signatories to the treaty, including the United States, meet every three years to consider further resolutions on wetlands preservation and update each other on their work on behalf of wetlands in their countries.

Connolly, who serves as chair of the U.S. National Ramsar Committee, was there as a member of the U.S. delegation. She has published several articles on the treaty, and notes that 34 U.S. sites have been designated as Ramsar wetlands – as small as a protected area on the Ohio State University campus, and as big as the Florida Everglades. Worldwide, over 2,000 wetlands have been designated as being of international importance.

The designation, Connolly says, imposes very limited legal obligations on the country where the wetlands are located, but carries a kind of moral suasion that can protect the sites from encroachment and development.

The major work of the 10-day conference was hammering out resolutions that deal with wetlands. Connolly was the lead person for the U.S. delegation on a resolution asserting that global climate change has significant impact on wetland resources, that countries should institute measures to protect wetlands against its effects and prepare for a changing planet, and that scientists associated with the Secretariat should engage in serious efforts to study the matter.

The resolution process may seem like a debate team’s worst nightmare, but Connolly says it provides fodder for the classroom. “I will teach multilateral negotiation by using this example, so I have more teaching opportunities for my students,” she says. “I came back with great stories and pictures, and they engage more in learning about the nuts and bolts of negotiation by hearing about this and seeing the pictures. It’s how real negotiation works.” Connolly adds that the working group “would have gotten to a resolution without me, but one of the things I did in the working group was that I spoke as a law professor who teaches negotiation, and thus helped people procedurally work through the process.”

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