

# WE MUST VALUE AND CONSERVE OUR COASTAL WETLANDS



Anada Tiéga  
Secretary General  
The Convention on Wetlands  
Ramsar Secretariat



The services provided by wetland ecosystems are immense, arguably at least \$14 trillion per year, according to the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Yet the value of these services still remains widely unappreciated, as we are continuing to destroy both coastal and inland wetlands faster than any other ecosystem. We need to radically shift our thinking and decision making to recognize coastal wetlands as key tools for our future livelihoods.

Under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, wetlands include all coastal and nearshore marine systems to a permanent inundation depth of six meters. Such systems include marine subtidal aquatic beds; coral reefs; rocky marine shores; sand, shingle, or pebble shores; estuarine waters; intertidal mud, sand, or salt flats; intertidal marshes; intertidal forested wetlands such as mangroves; coastal brackish/saline lagoons; coastal freshwater lagoons; and karst and cave systems. Coastal wetlands also are integral parts of large marine ecosystems—the regions of ocean and coastal space that encompass river basins and estuaries and extend out to the seaward boundary of continental shelves and the seaward margins of coastal current systems.

Many studies highlight the vital role of coastal zone management. For instance, coastal habitats provide over 80 percent of the marine fish that humans consume. Coastal

wetlands also play an important role in many other areas that affect human livelihoods, including food security and health care, flood control, shoreline stabilization and storm protection, water purification, sediment and nutrient retention, climate change mitigation and adaptation, recreation and tourism, and enrichment of cultural values. For example, recent studies have calculated that for the coastal areas of the United States, coastal wetlands provide \$23 billion each year in storm protection services.

The multiple roles of wetland ecosystems and their value to humanity are increasingly understood and documented. This has led to massive expenditures to restore lost or degraded hydrological and biological functions of wetlands. However, there is also ample evidence that it is much more cost-effective to maintain our coastal wetlands than to restore systems that have been degraded or destroyed. Restoration alone is not enough; we have to improve sustainable management practices on a significant global scale, particularly as the world's leaders try to cope with the accelerating water crisis and the effects of climate change.

Although we know an increasing amount about the values of different wetlands, including coastal systems, the science of ecosystem valuation is still developing and evolving, and much more needs to be done to understand the

full value of such systems. For example, we have not yet fully recognized the major role different coastal and inland wetlands play in the global carbon cycle. We can anticipate that forested coastal systems such as mangroves are playing a role in carbon sequestration and storage. A recent assessment by the Ramsar STRP also indicates that wetlands—particularly intertidal marshes such as salt marshes—play a major role in carbon storage that may be an order of magnitude greater than for many inland peatlands. While there is still uncertainty over the precise figures, it is becoming clear that we need to pay much more attention to maintaining the ecological character of such coastal wetlands not only for their services such as food and coastal protection, but also in our climate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Integrated coastal management is an important organizing principle that can have positive results on many



Shutterstock Images LLC

wetland values, including biodiversity, fisheries, and the management of marine protected areas. Both the World Bank's work and the experience of the Ramsar Convention emphasize that the conservation and wise use of coastal wetlands are potentially affected when development occurs along the coasts or when resources are extracted or altered. It is also encouraging to recognize that many countries are taking major steps to conserve, restore, and enhance the wise use of the multiple values of wetlands. For example, Coastal America's Corporate Wetland Restoration Partnership—with more than 400 corporations and NGOs working together to provide matching funds and in-kind services—has made significant contributions to wetland restoration and protection.

Many coastal wetlands have major aesthetic and recreational value. In Asia and Pacific developing countries, as well as in Africa's small-island countries such as Mauritius and the Seychelles, tropical coastal tourism is a major industry, contributing significantly to economic growth and local employment. However, we have to recognize that coastal tourism is dependent on the natural environment. In this regard, the trends are not always good; in some cases, biodiversity hotspots are increasingly being turned into tourism hotspots. It is important to recognize that the coastal ecosystem of small islands is particularly vulnerable to ecological damage caused by excessive numbers of tourists. Inadequate tourism planning can lead to unsustainable coastal tourism, with significant direct and indirect impacts on biodiversity conservation.

The Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention met for their 10th Conference (COP10) in late October 2008. The meeting was hosted by the Republic of Korea. Participating governments paid particular attention to the closely interrelated issues of water, human health, climate change, food security, poverty reduction, and human well-being in relation to the key role of wetlands. COP10 provided an opportunity for all governments, and not just those parts of governments directly responsible for wetlands, to stress that the success of all development sectors depends on maintaining wetlands and their services, as much as wetlands themselves depend on decisions made in other sectors. Working more closely together for a sustainable wetland future will be critical.

*Anada Tiéga, Secretary General, The Ramsar Convention Secretariat  
28 Rue Mauverney, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland  
Tel. +41 22 999 0180, Fax. +41 22 999 0169  
Email: [tiega@ramsar.org](mailto:tiega@ramsar.org), Website: [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org).*