



**Statement from David Sheppard, Director of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), on the occasion of World Wetlands Day**

**2 February, 2010**

[for immediate release]

World Wetlands Day, on the second day of February each year, marks the day the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands was signed in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971. This annual event provides us with an opportunity to raise and strengthen awareness of the importance of wetlands throughout the world and in our region. Furthermore, with the International Year of Biodiversity kicking off across the world, including here in our Pacific islands, we are reminded yet again of the wondrous natural systems that combine to make life on our planet possible.

The 2nd of February, however, should have special significance for any one of us who has ever swam in a river, paddled a canoe through some mangroves, collected crabs or shellfish from mudflats, dived or snorkelled over a brightly coloured coral reef, or simply marveled at the beauty of a reef heron awaiting the arrival of its next meal. In fact, for all of us who call the Pacific islands our home, the 2nd of February is a time to celebrate a very special part of our natural environment – the “wetlands”.

Wetlands include our rivers, coral reefs, mangroves, mudflats, marshes and seagrass beds. In the Pacific islands, they provide for us tremendous economic and conservation benefits through fisheries production, flood control, shoreline stabilization, maintenance of coastal water quality and provision of recreational opportunities. Wetlands also house extensive biodiversity, ranging from algae and lichens to plants, insects, crustaceans, birds, fish and corals.

As we reflect on the immense economic, social and ecological value of our wetlands, we are also painfully aware of the rapid rate at which many of our wetlands are being degraded and disappearing. Wetlands are often wrongfully thought of as wastelands and are subject to land reclamation projects where they are filled in to provide more building space. In other areas, they are used as waste dumping grounds resulting in toxic and harmful substances entering the waterways and ocean. Furthermore, wetlands tend to be over-used through excessive withdrawals of water or through the removal of key species from the area.

Losing our wetlands means losing the valuable services they provide and this almost always impacts negatively on humans. Tourism, food security and coastal protection are often the most obvious losers when wetlands die. In small islands, the poorest people, often live very near to and depend directly on wetland ecosystems for their livelihood. They are also the least able to cope with the impacts of wetland loss.

Climate change adds another dimension to the continuing destruction of our wetlands but it brings a greater imperative for their preservation. Across the Pacific, there is growing evidence

that climate change is resulting in more frequent cyclones and storm surges, coastal erosion, loss of fish breeding grounds and reduced water quality on many small islands.

However, it is also becoming clear that better management and protection of our wetland ecosystems could help islands build resilience and adapt better to the impacts of our changing climate. Strong mangrove areas, for example, act as highly effective buffers against storm surges and cyclonic waves; healthy coral reefs and seagrass beds provide breeding grounds for fish, thus strengthening food security of coastal dwelling populations; healthy and strong coral reefs are also the first line of defense against storm surges and waves associated with the changing climate. The interaction between healthy coral reefs and healthy mangroves can therefore not be discounted as a major defensive asset of our islands, and one that we need to protect.

This year's theme for World Wetlands Day is "Caring for Wetlands – An answer to climate change". For the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), this could not be more appropriate. Protecting and conserving the diversity of life, including conserving our valuable wetlands and adapting to and building resilience to climate change impacts are inextricably interlinked. SPREP recognises that we cannot realistically address one without the other and, more importantly, that human activity is as much to blame as climate change for the continuing destruction of our natural ecosystems.

This year, the International Year of Biodiversity, presents us with an opportunity to take stock of our ongoing contribution to nature conservation and work towards building island resilience to the ever-increasing impacts of climate change. It may seem all too simple, but if we strengthen our commitment to conserving mangroves, coral reefs and seagrass beds; improving waste management and preventing marine pollution; and to reducing our consumption of fossil fuels, we have hope that we can save our wetlands and possibly set our islands in good stead to withstand the impacts of climate change.

This World Wetlands Day, I challenge every person living in our islands, no matter who you are or what you do, to step up and make one change in your life for the well-being of the unique water-based environments in which we live.

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World Wetlands Day (WWD) is observed each year to mark the day of the signing of the Wetlands Convention in Ramsar, Iran in 1971. WWD was celebrated for the first time in 1997. Each year, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and groups of citizens at all levels of the community have taken advantage of the opportunity to undertake actions aimed at raising public awareness of wetland values and benefits in general and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in particular.

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