

The cultural heritage of wetlands

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Archaeologists can tell us that the close association between people and wetlands has an ancient history. The artefacts they have found in waterlogged soils from all over the world document the extensive human use of wetlands, a reflection of the immense wealth of wetland natural resources that has sustained human populations for millennia. Today there are communities in all countries that still retain these close links, their daily activities formed by the rhythm of wetland cycles.

Of course this relationship between wetlands and people extends far beyond the value of the natural resources or the vital services of wetlands. It includes a rich cultural heritage that has evolved over time, a heritage that is worthy of much greater attention by the wider wetland community concerned with the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

The extent and diversity of this heritage should not be underestimated: a recent analysis of almost half of the Convention's Ramsar Sites has confirmed that there is an enormous wealth and diversity of cultural heritage recorded in these wetlands. It takes many forms, from human-made physical structures and artefacts, palaeontological records in sediments and peats, and places of special religious significance, to traditional water and land-use management practices that have sustained human populations and crafted unique wetland landscapes.

Many of the traditional techniques people have evolved to manage wetlands for exploitation – whether it be to extract salt, grow rice, make use of mangrove trees, harvest fish or cut reeds – have stood the test of time as techniques that both sustain people and conserve wetlands. Maintaining these successful techniques wherever possible safeguards the cultural heritage associated with the wet-



Spear fishing in the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve, Brazil, where traditional knowledge plays a key role in the management process.

lands as well as the wetlands themselves. Indeed, maintaining these techniques as well as the traditional knowledge that lies behind them, is widely recognized as a key tool in the conservation of biological diversity.

For many urban populations the immediacy of the wetland relationship has been lost, but this cultural heritage represents a link with the past and the wetland cultural landscape still provides that intangible 'sense of place' that draws the urbanite to wetland areas all over the world and inspires artists and writers alike.

Wetland destruction and the loss of traditional management practices means not only the loss of the more tangible wetland values such as flood control, groundwater replenishment, nutrient cycling, etc., but also the loss of our wetland cultural heritage.



ROGER JAENSCH, WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL

Processing sago, a staple carbohydrate in some parts of Asia, from the trunk of a wetland plant, the sago palm, in Papua New Guinea.

Ramsar's World Wetlands Day 2002 is focused on the cultural heritage in wetlands and the need for management strategies that will safeguard this heritage as well as the natural values and functions of wetlands. These fact sheets look at the many aspects of cultural heritage in our wetlands and give a preview of some of the guidance on integrating cultural issues into the wise use and management of wetlands that will be presented to the Ramsar community in the upcoming Conference of the Parties in, Valencia, Spain, in November 2002, when the theme will be *Wetlands: water, life and culture*.

In preparing these sheets for World Wetlands Day, the Ramsar Bureau has called upon the expertise of archaeologists, ethnobiologists, wetland ecologists, conservationists working with the world's religious leaders and advisors to the World Heritage Convention, testimony in itself to the multi-faceted nature of the cultural heritage associated with wetlands.

As part of your World Wetlands Day celebrations why not assess the cultural heritage in your wetlands – and tell us in the Bureau so that we can compile more information about the cultural heritage in our Ramsar sites and other wetlands.

Just think – how we use our wetlands today becomes tomorrow's cultural heritage. What legacy will we leave future generations?

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