Our dangerous indifference to the world’s richest ecosystem: Natural wetlands

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Indigenous peoples in the Americas have long revered the sea turtle as a symbol of Mother Earth. Indeed, many cultures across the globe and centuries have attributed wisdom, longevity, and endurance to this captivating, long-lived creature.

Yet, our collective and overwhelming lack of awareness of the importance of wetlands—the nesting grounds for these awe-inspiring and fabled animals—has made them the most threatened and endangered species in this habitat. Sea turtles are 100 percent globally threatened and 33 percent critically endangered.

Wetlands are a vital source of life—not only for the sea turtle and many of earth’s creatures, but for the prosperity of humankind. Our future is inextricably tied to these natural environments.

Still, wetlands are grossly misunderstood and dangerously underappreciated. They hold the dual and paradoxical status of being both our earth’s most productive ecosystem—and its most endangered, being lost at the fastest rate. In fact, they get the least recognition of any ecosystem, including among environmentalists and policymakers with the greatest influence for protecting them.

The terms “swampland” and “wasteland” in and of themselves are myth-promoting misnomers with connotations that undermine the protection of these precious environments that in actual fact teem with life, service, and value for all of society.

Wetlands cover more than 12.1 million kilometers worldwide. They encompass rivers, streams, natural lakes, ponds, and aquifers; peatlands, including bogs, mires, and fens; marshes and swamps, including flood plains; lagoons and coastal estuaries, including unvegetated tidal flats and salt marshes; seagrass beds, mangroves, and coastal deltas; man-made wetlands, such as rice paddies; and our quickly dying coral reefs—among other specifically defined areas of land that are saturated or flooded with water, either seasonally or permanently.
Wetlands serve society in many important and surprising ways. Mangroves protect the coasts of Sri Lanka and Malaysia from devastating tsunamis, hurricanes, and other storms. Africa’s wetlands ensure food security through the richness of its fisheries, while often providing the sole source of water for drinking, cooking, and washing—helping entire communities survive in the face of extreme poverty. Peatlands provide the largest store of carbon in Europe, a continent long-affected by prehistoric and preindustrial deforestation. The crucial wetlands of South America maintain ten percent of the world’s biodiversity along the Amazon—which has direct implications on climate, carbon storage, and our ability to discover new life-saving medicines, provide food, conduct scientific research, and create indispensable textiles, all while allowing regional economies to benefit from ecotourism. The Coastal wetlands of China, particularly near Shanghai and along the Yellow Sea—the midpoint of the East-Asian Australasian Flyway—nurture the nearly 500 species of migratory birds as they travel between their breeding grounds in the Artic and wintering habitats in Southeast Asia and the Southern Hemisphere. And not without significance, wetlands provide nesting ground in the sands of Cancun, Mexico, and elsewhere, for the cherished sea turtle.

Whether in Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa, Australia, or anywhere across the globe, wetlands serve all peoples of the world. And their continued destruction will have unforeseen, reverberating consequences for each of the world’s economies and for every one of us.

"COP13 comes at a critical juncture. Our planet’s wetlands are disappearing faster than our forests—at the alarming rate of one percent every year. And the decisions and actions taken at this Convention will be instrumental in helping achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)." - Martha Rojas Urrego

On 21 to 29 October, government representatives from 170 countries will meet in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, at the 13th Conference of Contracting Parties (COP13) of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention). Signed in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran, the Ramsar Convention is an international agreement advancing the conservation and sustainable use of the world’s wetlands. Notably, it is the only global treaty that focuses on a single ecosystem.

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During this brief but encouraging window of opportunity in October, we must take the podium, educate the world on the critical importance of wetlands, and incite definitive, positive action among policymakers. Across the globe, legislative bodies need to integrate wetlands into policy programs and make investments into their sustainability. Among our world’s citizenry, we must inspire one another, in our personal and business lives, to step forward in our own communities as faithful stewards of this irreplaceable and invaluable ecosystem—which has steadfastly served
us in a myriad of obvious and wonderfully mysterious ways.

Only we can save this rapidly disappearing and perilously undervalued ecosystem.

And we must—for without the world’s wetlands, we all hang in the balance.

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