Sustainable development for a viable future: The pivotal role of wetlands

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They say that when you look out at the salt flats of Bolivia located in the remote reaches of the high Altiplano plateau of the Andes Mountains—it’s like looking into the heavens. During the rainy season, when a thin layer of water covers the great expanse of the Salar de Uyuni, it’s hard to determine where earth ends and sky begins.

For those familiar with the tremendous value and functionality of the earth’s wetlands, it seems fitting that one of the most majestic places on earth is part of this most precious ecosystem, which sustains and nurtures life in an abundance of ways—both apparent and often-unforeseeable.

It seems equally fitting that this prolific and remarkable ecosystem has a pivotal role to play in one of the most principled endeavors of our era: achieving the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders in September 2015.

The 17 SDGs of Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seek to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all—without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In short, they call on every nation—and each one of us—to embrace our inherent roles as stewards of our planet and all the humanity and life that inhabit it.

The world’s wetlands have a central role to play in this timely and enormous mission. And their importance to the endeavor must be recognized. Quite simply, wetlands are an integral part of the solution—economically, socially, and environmentally. And it’s essential that wetlands be built into the SDG planning and implementation efforts of all countries and stakeholders.

By definition, wetlands are land areas saturated with water, either permanently or seasonally, where every organism and minute aspect of the environment has a unique function on which others are interdependent. They may be inland, coastal, or marine.

Either directly or indirectly, wetlands contribute to all 17
SDGs set forth. And their conservation, wise use, and restoration represent a cost-effective investment that can yield far-reaching benefits.

The 17 SDGs are very specific and include 169 targets, but the essence of their spirit is simple and complete. To each and every one, the health and sustenance of the world’s wetlands is tethered.

From ending poverty in all its forms everywhere—to ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages—to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable—to taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, wetlands hold the potential to positively advance all 17 SDGs.

All told, the world’s wetlands support 1 billion livelihoods. They provide most of the world’s fresh water. They deliver 266 million jobs in tourism worldwide. They’re an important source of food—be it from the rich fisheries they often sustain or the rice, grown in wetland paddies, that feeds 3.5 billion people. They buffer us from the catastrophic effects of extreme weather and natural disasters. They store more carbon than any other ecosystem on the planet. And wetlands sustain the biodiversity on which we’re dependent in countless ways—with 40 percent of all the world’s species living and breeding in these environments.

As the 13th Conference of Contracting Parties (COP13) of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention), scheduled for 21 to 29 October, draws near, so does the opportunity to spotlight how scaling up wetland conservation, wise use, and restoration can be instrumental for achieving each and every SDG.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its corresponding SDGs are ambitious. But they’re essential for our planet and for humankind.

As all nations work toward achieving a sustainable world, I urge policymakers, concerned stakeholders, and world citizens everywhere to embrace the critical role that each of the earth’s wetlands has and to take action in moving us forward. Identify and address underlying drivers that are leading to their rapid loss. Restore the fading wetlands we still have. Use them wisely. Build them into national SDG plans. And do everything possible to preserve, protect, and celebrate these gloriously productive and invaluable ecosystems.