Wetlands; a sustainable solution for water purification and security

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Statement to UN Environment Assembly on behalf of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Secretary General Martha Rojas Urrego

Our wetlands, which include freshwater bodies such as lakes, rivers, swamps, marshes and also marine and coastal wetlands such as mangroves, and coral reefs are under severe threat. All these wetlands provide us with water and food and sustain our livelihoods and economies. The future survival of our planet depends on the health of these ecosystems.

Freshwater bodies are the end point for industrial and biological waste, in the form of sewage, rainwater runoff filled with nutrient-rich fertilizers and agrochemicals and pathogens from untreated wastewater. Pollutants find their way through river systems into seas, sometimes creating coastal ocean zones void of oxygen and aquatic life.

It is estimated that 80 percent of the waste we produce is dumped untreated into waters, polluting water supplies. Freshwater pollution is recognized as a growing global concern that is threatening access to safe drinking water for 1.8 billion people. Global demand for water continues to rise and a supply gap of 40% is projected by 2030.

Finding sustainable solutions for improved management and re-use of waste-water is urgent. In this regard, wetlands play a significant role in pollution control and detoxification. They are commonly referred to as the earth’s kidneys, because they function as filters, absorbing pesticides and chemicals and removing harmful waste from water.

For example, the Nakivubo Swamp in Kampala, Uganda, filters the city’s sewage and industrial waste. The economic value of water purification services of the Nakivubo Wetland has been estimated as $ 1.8 million per year. The East Kolkata Wetlands in India treat urban waste from the city and the treated water is used for pisciculture and agriculture and thus providing livelihood directly for 50,000 people.

Wetlands are a cost effective and sustainable solution to be considered in integrated efforts to prevent, reduce and control freshwater and marine and coastal pollution and improve access to clean and safe water for all.
We need to urgently step up the protection, sustainable management and restoration of wetlands as an essential element in integrated policies and actions for a pollution free planet. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is a ready-made mechanism for this. The Convention is an intergovernmental treaty which brings together 169 countries present here and provides the global framework for the conservation and sustainable use of all wetlands. The Convention thus provides an important platform from which to achieve SDG6 on water and SDG 14 on oceans.

The 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention, to be held in October 2018 in Dubai, will provide an important opportunity for countries to elevate the conservation of wetlands to realize their vital role towards a pollution free planet and thus to ensure access to safe water and livelihoods for all.

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