Statement: Martha Rojas Urrego, Secretary General, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

In these unprecedented times, we have seen the profound interconnections between people and nature. While rebuilding our world it is time for nature to take the central stage. We are all together in the current crisis and we can no longer delay the implementation of environmental commitments. We have a huge responsibility and a remarkable opportunity to build back our home sustainably and safely.

Our basic needs for survival: food, water and air, our economic prosperity, our health and the climate that makes our planet habitable all come from or depend on nature. Within this context, wetlands are critical to human and planet life. They are a vital component of the freshwater cycle. Directly or indirectly, wetlands provide almost all of the world’s consumption of freshwater.

Wetlands also ensure our food supply. Almost a billion households in Asia, Africa and the Americas depend on rice growing and processing for their main livelihoods. More than 660 million people rely on fishing and aquaculture for a living. Wetlands are among the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world, 40% of all species live or breed in wetlands. They are also essential to efforts to regulate the global climate. Peatlands store twice as much carbon as all the planet’s forests despite accounting for just three per cent of the world’s land surface. Wetlands also protect us from floods, droughts and other extreme weather events, thus increasing communities’ resilience.

Yet, 87% of the world’s wetlands have been lost, 35% in the last 50 years. They are disappearing three times faster than forests. These scientific findings of the Global Wetland Outlook, published in 2018, are a wakeup call to the importance to these ecosystems.

Wetlands’ degradation has been driven by megatrends such as climate change, population increase, urbanization, and pollution. Changes to land and water use, especially for agriculture have resulted in the drainage and conversion of wetlands across the world.
At the same time, conservation and sustainable use of wetlands provide effective solutions to address many of the crises we are currently facing: freshwater scarcity, climate change and biodiversity loss. Maintaining healthy freshwater wetlands means securing water supply. Conserving and sustainably using wetlands means protecting and recovering biodiversity. Keeping wetlands and rewetting them means storing the carbon in the soil, avoiding further carbon emissions and building resilience. This is why wetlands must be at the heart of sustainable development and environmental national and global discussions, decisions and actions in 2020 – and beyond.

As the international community steps up efforts to build back better we need nature. It is time to recognize the contributions of wetlands to our lives and to escalate efforts for their conservation to ensure a sustainable and safe future for all.

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