Youth Voice: A conversation with a Young Wetland Champion - “To wetlands I owe everything. Absolutely everything”

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Contracting Parties at COP13 expressed great interest in engaging youth in achieving the aims of the Ramsar Convention. In response, the Ramsar Secretariat will publish every 2-3 months “Youth Voice” - a website news story featuring young people engaged in wetlands related issues.

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Emmanuel Escobar Moreno, founder of the Fundación Humedales Bogotá, during a workshop with volunteers prior the plantation of 1,600 trees

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In 2015, the first ever Young Wetland Champion Ramsar Conservation Award was granted to Fundación Humedales Bogotá – a youth-led organisation based in Colombia. We were curious to learn more about the inspiring young people behind this initiative and their journey. With this first issue of Youth Voice, we are keen to share with you our conversation with a Young Wetland Champion!

At the age of 24, Emmanuel Escobar Moreno, director and founder of Fundación Humedales Bogotá, and a team of dedicated young people set out on an important mission for Bogota’s wetlands. In the early 2000s, information on wetlands in the capital city of Colombia was scarce, dating sometimes back to the 1990s. In 2011, they created the Foundation with the aim of filling this information gap and generating a greater appreciation of wetlands among the 8 million people residing in Colombia's largest city. Today, the Foundation has grown considerably developing a wide program of activities and projects from data collection to environmental journalism, publishing over 500 web articles and a great variety of environmental education campaigns and events.

Learning with wetlands – a personal and collective journey

Emmanuel discovered wetlands through personal curiosity, living right next to one in Bogotá. He came across
Emmanuel launched a database featuring wetlands in the city of Bogota at a difficult time in his life. While first starting out in journalism, his focused changed toward wetland conservation in his search for something with more meaning. Once he found wetlands, he knew it was the right place for him. Emmanuel became a wetland autodidact, diving into biology books, surrounding himself with people that knew a lot about wetlands and the environment and spending time experiencing wetlands. This career change meant that he also changed his circle of friends and aspects of his personal life - a move that was both challenging but greatly rewarding.

“A los humedales los debo todo. Absolutamente todo.”

“To wetlands I owe everything. Absolutely everything”

Inspired by his university professors that had fought for the protection of wetlands during the 90s, Emmanuel felt that all these efforts would be lost if the next generations didn’t follow. He felt the necessity to continue this fight for the protection of wetlands.

“Me sentí como la obligación de continuar.”

“I felt this obligation to continue.”

Looking back at the development of the Foundation, Emmanuel recalls that the Foundation has become a school of life providing a platform for members to develop certain skills, become better professionals and part of a community. They went from being lost in life to finding a direction and meaning for everything through wetlands. They learned how to work together as a team and with other organisations, creating alliances and working collectively to address the complex problems affecting wetlands.

Challenges for young people in wetland conservation

One of the most difficult challenges they face is obtaining sufficient funding for all the activities they want to do. Defending wetlands also requires a lot of time but very few young people can dedicate continuous amount of time due to financial reasons. Many see themselves forced to move to something else to make a living. As a result, the Foundation lost some key people in the past.

“Lo más triste cuando se van a trabajar en algo más.”

“It’s sad when they have to go work in something else.”

An ongoing commitment to wetlands and the Ramsar Convention

For the Foundation, the 2015 Ramsar Award embodies their own commitment to the Convention and its mission. It
is an important recognition of the relevance and quality of their work. As Young Wetland Champions, they feel they have become ambassadors for the Convention - a responsibility that they uphold everyday through all their activities. The associated financial reward also allowed the Foundation to pursue activities they had been unable to develop due to limited resources. Emmanuel’s dreams for the future of the Foundation is to expand this process at a national level across Colombia and potentially through a network across Latin America.

Learn more about Fundación Humedales Bogotá here: http://humedalesbogota.com/

*Note: This short story resulted from an activity of the Youth Engagement Thematic Group focusing on collecting lessons learned from Youth-Led Initiatives around wetland conservation. The aim of this activity was to better understand the motivations and challenges of young people around wetland conservation through conversations with members of youth-led initiatives.