



The Changwon Declaration on human well-being and wetlands

WHY SHOULD YOU READ AND USE THIS DECLARATION?

Wetlands provide food, store carbon, regulate the water flows, store energy, and are crucial for biodiversity. Their benefits to people are essential for the future security of humankind. Conservation and the wise and use of wetlands are vital for people, especially the poor.

Human well-being depends on many benefits provided to people by ecosystems, some of which come from healthy wetlands. Policymaking, planning, decision-making and management action by a wide range of sectors, at all levels from international to local, can benefit from the global consensus input that the Ramsar Convention provides. This includes the identification of the relevance of wetlands, the importance of their conservation and wise use, and ensuring security of the benefits that wetlands provide in terms of water, carbon storage, food, energy, biodiversity and livelihoods. It also includes technical know-how, guidance, models and support networks to help in putting this knowledge to practical use.

The Changwon Declaration presents an overview of priority action steps that together show “how to” deliver some of the world’s most critical environmental sustainability goals.

The Changwon Declaration is a statement and call to action from the 10th meeting of the Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which was held in Changwon, Republic of Korea, from 28 October to 4 November 2008

The Changwon Declaration is relevant to all of us, everywhere, who are concerned with the future of our environment.

If you are a planner, policymaker, decision-maker, elected representative or manager in any environmental, land or resource-use sector, or working in the fields of education and communication, human health, economics or livelihoods, then this Declaration is directed to you. Your actions influence the future of wetlands.

Where does this Declaration come from?

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is the global intergovernmental agreement concerned with the conservation and wise use of all the world's wetlands. It was established in the city of Ramsar in the Islamic Republic of Iran on 2 February 1971.

The mission of the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)¹ is:

“the conservation and wise use² of all wetlands³ through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

As the Ramsar Convention approaches four decades of existence, it continues to grow and to focus its agenda on the critical priorities for the environment at global, national and local levels. The Conference of the Convention's Contracting Parties held its 10th meeting in Changwon, Republic of Korea, from 28 October to 4 November 2008, on the theme of “Healthy wetlands, healthy people”⁴, focusing on the link between human well-being and the functions of wetlands and the identification of positive actions in this regard.

Who should use this Declaration?

The Conference addresses this Declaration to all stakeholders in environmental governance and management, particularly those in positions of leadership, both in relevant fora at global level, including heads of government, and equally in “hands-on” delivery at local and river basin levels.

Why is it not “just another Declaration”?

Declarations have been issued from many international environmental conferences. The Changwon Declaration aims not to cover “standard” ground, but to add value by:

- being directed primarily to audiences beyond the Ramsar Convention itself, and to opportunities for action;
- offering positive, practical action steps; and
- defining the ways in which the Declaration's impact will be assured.

What is in this Declaration?

The Declaration highlights positive actions for ensuring human well-being and security outcomes in the future under five priority thematic headings below, followed by two key areas of cross-cutting delivery mechanisms.

What does this mean in practice?

Water and wetlands

The degradation and loss of wetlands is more rapid than that of other ecosystems, and this trend is accelerating, due to major changes in land use, water diversions, and infrastructure development. Access to freshwater is declining for 1-2 billion people worldwide, and this in turn negatively affects food production, human health, and economic development, and it can increase societal conflict.

There is an urgent need to improve water governance. Instead of being demand-driven, which promotes over-allocation of water, water governance should treat wetlands as our “*natural water infrastructure*”, integral to water resource management at the scale of river basins.

Continuing with “business as usual” is not an option.

Our increasing demand for, and over-use of, water jeopardizes human well-being and the environment. Access to safe water, human health, food production, economic development and geopolitical stability are made less secure by the degradation of wetlands driven by the rapidly widening gap between water demand and supply.

There is often not enough water to meet our direct human needs and to maintain the wetlands we need. Even with current attempts to maintain water flows for ecosystems, the capacity of wetlands to continue to deliver benefits to people and biodiversity, including clean and reliable water supplies, is declining. Actions to support water allocation to ecosystems, such as environmental flows, placing upper limits on water allocations (water ‘caps’), and new water management legislation, must be strengthened.

To close this “water gap”, we need to:

- **use our available water more efficiently;**
- **stop our wetlands from becoming degraded or lost** – based on clearly recognizing that we all depend on healthy wetlands for our water security, and that wetland services are currently being lost at a faster rate than in any other ecosystem;
- **restore our wetlands that are already degraded** – this offers us an efficient and cost-effective means of increasing ground and surface water storage, improving water quality, sustaining agriculture and fisheries, and protecting biodiversity.
- **wisely manage and protect our wetlands** – by always ensuring that they have enough water for them to continue to be the source of the quantity and quality of the water we need for food production, drinking water and sanitation. Failure to do so makes our water problems worse, **since wetlands are the only source of water to which we have easy access.**

Climate change and wetlands

Many types of wetlands play an important role in sequestering and storing carbon. They are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts, while human disturbances of the same wetland systems can cause huge carbon emissions.

Wetlands are vital parts of the natural infrastructure we need for addressing climate change. Degradation and loss of wetlands make climate change worse and leave people more vulnerable to climate change impacts such as floods, droughts and famine. Many climate change policy responses for more water storage and transfers, as well as energy generation, if poorly implemented, may deleteriously impact on wetlands.

Climate change is increasing uncertainty in water management and making it more difficult to close the gap between water demand and supply. We will increasingly feel the effects of climate change most directly through changes in the distribution and availability of water, increasing pressures on the health of wetlands. Restoring wetlands and maintaining hydrological cycles is of utmost importance in responses for addressing climate change, flood mitigation, water supply, food provision and biodiversity conservation.

Coastal wetlands will play a major part in strategies established to deal with problems in coastal areas created by sea level rise.

Governments need to include water and wetland management in effective strategies for addressing climate change at national level. Decision-makers need to recognize the natural infrastructure of wetlands as a major asset in combating and adapting to climate change.

Water and well-functioning wetlands play a key role in responding to climate change and in regulating natural climatic processes (through the water cycle, maintenance of biodiversity, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and buffering of impacts). Conservation and wise use of wetlands help to reduce the negative economic, social and ecological effects that may result.

Developing opportunities should be seized for collaboration among international technical bodies involved in climate change (e.g., the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel), **to share understanding and harmonise analyses**, especially in relation to wetlands/water/climate linkages.

People's livelihoods and wetlands

When policies in different sectors are not harmonised, many major developments and infrastructure schemes aimed at poverty reduction can actually lead to the degradation of wetlands, thus undermining their ability to provide vital services for local communities and ultimately leading to further and deepening poverty.

Action is needed to maintain the benefits provided by wetlands for economic development and the livelihoods of people, especially the poor. Investment in maintenance of the services provided by wetlands should be integral to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and related policies and plans.

Wise use, management and restoration of wetlands should help to build opportunities for improving people's livelihoods, particularly for wetland-dependent, marginalised and vulnerable people. Wetland degradation affects livelihoods and exacerbates poverty, particularly in marginalised and vulnerable sections of society.

Wetland/livelihoods linkages need to be better analysed and documented. Capacity and partnerships should be promoted at multiple levels to support learning, collecting and sharing knowledge about these linkages.

Sustainable wetland management should be supported by indigenous and traditional knowledge, recognition of cultural identities associated with wetlands, stewardship promoted by economic incentives, and diversification of the support base for livelihoods.

People's health and wetlands

Wetlands are important for the health benefits they provide, and also as places that people can visit for education, recreation, ecotourism, spiritual and cultural experiences, or simply to enjoy their natural beauty.

Interrelationships between wetland ecosystems and human health should be a key component of national and international policies, plans and strategies.

Development sectors, including mining, other extractive industries, infrastructure development, water and sanitation, energy, agriculture, transport and others can have direct or indirect effects on wetlands. These lead to negative impacts on wetland ecosystem services, including those that support human health and well-being. Managers and decision-makers in such development sectors need to be more aware of this and take all possible measures to avoid these negative impacts.

The health and wetland sectors need to co-manage the links between wetland ecological character⁵ and human health. Wetland and water managers must identify and implement interventions that benefit both wetland ecosystem “health” and human health.

It is already clear that many of the continuing pressures on wetlands that are driving trends in human health are rooted in issues of water, as for example waterborne transmission of diseases and vectors and/or dwindling supplies of water of suitable quality for food production, sanitation, and drinking water.

Land use change, biodiversity and wetlands

Better knowledge and understanding of the costs and benefits of changes to wetland ecosystems lead to better decision-making. Decisions on land use change must integrate adequate knowledge of the range of benefits, and their values, that wetlands provide for people and biodiversity.

Decision-making should, wherever possible, give priority to safeguarding naturally-functioning wetlands and the benefits they provide, especially through ensuring the sustainability of ecosystem services, while recognizing that human-made wetland systems can also make a significant contribution to water and food security objectives.

More actions are required to address the root causes of the loss of biodiversity and to reverse these losses by reference to agreed recovery targets, including targets to be adopted in the follow-up to the “2010 target”⁶ concerning significant reduction in the rate of decline of biodiversity.

What types of cross-cutting mechanisms are most helpful in delivering all this?

Planning, decision-making, finance and economics

Policy development and decision-making in response to each of the issues addressed in this Declaration very often require tradeoffs across policy objectives from multiple sectors. Sound decision-making depends upon wise balancing of legitimate objectives that are interconnected, even if full and detailed information is not available.

Good use of rapid and practical decision-support tools (such as rapid assessment, conflict resolution, mediation, decision-trees, and cost-benefit analysis) can often be of critical assistance in identifying issues and policy options.

Full recognition should be given to the significance of wetlands in spatial planning, especially Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites⁷), so that the values they represent can properly inform land-use and investment priority-setting and the adoption of necessary safeguards.

Cost-benefit analyses should be sufficiently comprehensive to best reflect the economic value of wetlands, as well as the reality that investing in the maintenance of wetland ecological character is usually a much more cost-effective strategy than later remediation for the loss of wetland services.

Adequate and sustainable financing for wetland conservation and wise use is essential, and this can be helped by the use of innovative financial instruments and partnerships between those sectors and stakeholders outside the Ramsar Convention who might not have worked together on wetland issues in the past. Especially when resources are limited, activities relevant to wetland conservation and wise use should seek to maximise the efficiency of use of currently available resources.

Sharing knowledge and experience

Basic information on the global extent and characterisation of wetlands urgently needs to be enhanced. There are increasing opportunities to make good use of evolving earth observation techniques and other information technologies.

Organizations with shared interests in data and information and knowledge (including indigenous and traditional knowledge) relevant to the issues covered in this Declaration should intensify efforts to seek common, harmonised and accessible approaches, so that knowledge and experience (for example, concerning good practices) can be shared more effectively, including through appropriate information technology applications.

Your call to action

Each and every one of us has a stake in the outcomes that are supported by this Declaration.

Many groups around the world are already working towards the wise use of wetlands in just the way this Declaration calls for. There are valuable experiences and knowledge to be shared that can help us all to make real, tangible progress. Reach out, get connected, get wet!

Ensuring impact

Measures of the success of this Declaration will include:

- its existence becoming widely known, reported, translated and remembered;
- its messages being taken up in planning and decision-making in local and river basin level governance/management processes;
- its relevant elements being incorporated into national-level plans, decisions and action programmes;
- its elements being incorporated into international policy statements, decisions and action programmes, including through briefings for government delegations to relevant international meetings.

Notes:

¹The **Ramsar Convention on Wetlands** is the lead intergovernmental authority on wetlands and strives to ensure that the contributions wetlands make to all aspects of human well-being are recognized and strengthened in all sectors and at all levels of society.

²**“Wise use”** of wetlands has been defined under the Convention as “the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development”. (The phrase “in the context of sustainable development” is intended to recognize that whilst some wetland development is inevitable and that many developments bring important benefits to society, developments can be facilitated in sustainable ways by approaches elaborated under the Convention, and it is not appropriate to imply that ‘development’ is an objective for every wetland.)

³**“Wetlands”** encompass a broader range of ecosystems than is often realised. Article 1.1 of the Ramsar Convention defines them as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres”.

⁴ In recent years, Ramsar **Conferences of the Contracting Parties (COPs) have been given themed titles** to reflect priority issues of the moment in the Convention’s evolution. Previous themes have emphasised different aspects of the links between wetlands and people, and the theme for COP10, “Healthy wetlands, healthy people”, positions the Convention in relation to an emerging understanding about the critical links between wetlands and human health and sets the context for the adoption of new decisions in this area.

⁵ The **“ecological character”** of wetlands is a key concept of the Ramsar Convention, defined as “the combination of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services that characterise the wetland at a given point in time”. (Within this context, ecosystem benefits are defined in accordance with the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment definition of ecosystem services as “the benefits that people receive from ecosystems”).

⁶ The “**2010 Biodiversity target**”, adopted by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and by Heads of State at the 2002 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), is “to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth.”

⁷ “**Ramsar sites**” (Wetlands of International Importance) are recognized and designated by the governments of the world that are Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention. They form the largest global network of “protected areas”, currently (as of November 2008) covering over 168 million hectares in over 1,822 sites.