



# The Ramsar Convention: What's it all about?

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, more commonly known as the Ramsar Convention, is an international agreement promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands. It is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem.

The Ramsar Convention today has 168 Contracting Parties (member countries), and is so named for the city in Iran where the treaty was signed in 1971. Through this agreement, member countries positively commit to:

- Wise use of all their wetlands
- Designating sites for the Ramsar List of "Wetlands of International Importance" (Ramsar Sites) and their conservation
- Cooperating on transboundary wetlands and other shared interests

As of April 2015, there are over 2100 designated Ramsar Sites covering more than 208 million hectares; an area slightly larger than Mexico. The official list of Ramsar Sites is available on the Convention website at: [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org).

Wetlands on the Ramsar list are designated for their high value to the country and the world for the ecosystem services and benefits provided.

## What are Wetlands?

The definition of the word 'wetland', under the Convention, is any land area that is saturated or flooded with water, either seasonally or permanently. Inland wetlands include aquifers, lakes, rivers, streams, marshes, peatlands, ponds, flood plains and swamps. Coastal wetlands include all coastlines, mangroves, saltmarshes, estuaries, lagoons, seagrass meadows and coral reefs.

### Why should I care about Wetlands?

Traditionally viewed as wasteland or a breeding ground for disease, wetlands are vital for humanity for a number of reasons:

- **Wetlands provide fresh water**  
Freshwater wetlands give us our water for basic drinking, cooking and washing needs and for irrigation.
- **Wetlands feed humanity**  
Rice, grown in wetland paddies, is the staple diet of nearly three billion people, and accounts for 20% of the world's food.
- **Wetlands are nature's shock absorbers**  
The wetlands within river basins act as natural sponges, absorbing rainfall, reducing flood impact and this same storage capacity also helps safeguard against drought. Mangroves and coral reefs reduce the speed and height of storm surges and impact of tsunamis and hurricanes.
- **Wetlands are critical for biodiversity**  
Wetlands are home to more than 100,000 known freshwater species, and this number is growing all the time. Wetlands are also essential for many amphibians, as well as for bird breeding and migration.
- **Wetlands create sustainable products and livelihoods**  
More than 660 million people depend on fishing and aquaculture for their livelihoods. Wetlands also provide timber for building, vegetable oil, medicinal plants, raw material for weaving and fodder for animals.



## Wetlands are disappearing fast

Recent estimates show that 64% or more of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1900. Some of the main causes of the degradation and loss of wetlands are:

- Major changes in land use, especially increased agriculture and grazing
- Water diversion through dams, dykes and canalization
- Infrastructure development, particularly in urban areas, river valleys and coastal areas.

## How are Ramsar Sites designated?

Ramsar Sites are designated by the National Administrative Authority, responsible for the Ramsar Convention in each country, if they meet the technical criteria, and after due consideration of their relative importance.

## Ramsar Convention: working to prevent, stop and reverse wetland loss and degradation

Together with the Contracting Parties, Partners and International Organization Partners (IOPs), the Ramsar Convention works to:

- Encourage policies and land use planning that integrate wetland issues
- Enthuse the public about the benefits and services that wetlands provide
- Ensure significant investment into increasing awareness by working with private sector actors such as Danone-Evian and Star Alliance
- Forge alliances that align private and public sector actors to reverse the alarming loss and degradation
- Develop financing sources for wetland conservation and management.

## Ramsar Sites support livelihoods



### Philippines Tubbataha Reefs Natural Marine Park Ramsar Site

- Both a Ramsar Site and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the park charges tourists a conservation fee, which is used to manage this protected area, to compensate fishermen for the no-take zone and to fund livelihood initiatives for local communities. Scuba diving is limited to specific areas to protect the reefs from potential damage.



### Kenya Lake Nakuru Ramsar Site

- Lake Nakuru is one of Kenya's iconic tourist sites. 60% of the site's 245,000 visitors each year come from abroad. International tourists are charged an entrance fee of \$US 80, while domestic visitors pay a reduced fee equivalent to \$US 11. Revenues totalled nearly \$US 8.4 million in 2010, which helped to pay for park management, with \$US 42,000 poured back into local conservation activities each month.



### Argentina Lagunas y Esteros del Iberá Ramsar Site

- Almost 17,000 visitors per year have helped to revive the local economy and build a conservation-based tourism around the Ramsar Site near Colonia Carlos Pellegrini. This has created new jobs and diversified livelihoods, with around 90% of local people supported through work in the tourism sector with surrounding communities receiving assistance to establish nature trails and train local tourist guides.

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## The Ramsar Convention



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