

Ramsar at the 10th International Wetland Conference
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Changshu, China



Plenary speech

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Wetlands, water and climate: New Horizons

Human society is facing critical choices – towards eco-civilization and sustainable development on one hand, or towards increasing poverty, social dislocation and environmental degradation on the other. With every decision, every investment, the choice is being made towards a more sustainable future, or away from it.

Wetlands have key roles to play in a more sustainable future for humanity, yet this message is not being heard and understood by many key decision-makers. In too many cases, the choice is still being made for wetland destruction, drainage or “reclamation”, bringing short-term economic gains but long-term instability. Similarly, while our economies are based upon the availability of freshwater, water allocation and water use are still being irrationally and wastefully managed. We are now running out of time to establish more sustainable approaches. The hazards of droughts and floods are being amplified through climate change, and through development decisions which disregard the dynamics of river basin hydrology.

Wetlands are the key natural assets which link sustainable development and the water cycle tightly together. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is the international legal instrument linking 169 countries – including China – which have committed to the conservation and wise use of their wetlands. This Convention is the only global agreement based upon an ecosystem type, and relating to specific key sites of international importance. In this sense Ramsar is a unique instrument for supporting sustainable development. The new Ramsar Strategic Plan for 2016-2024 sets out its key strategic objectives as : addressing the drivers of wetland loss and degradation; conserving and managing wetlands; and using wetlands wisely. This plenary session aims to set out the key targets of this wetland-focused approach, relative to the Sustainable Development Goals which were agreed by all countries in 2015, known collectively as the 2030 Agenda.

The presentation will put forward examples of wetlands within sustainable development, showing how wetlands in various contexts support livelihoods, food security, human health, water security, sustainable infrastructure solutions, disaster risk reduction, and biodiversity conservation. At the same time, the ecosystem services provided by wetlands are essential to the functioning of the entire water cycle. We need to gain a much better understanding of the science of wetlands, in order to manage wetlands more sustainably in the future. This INTECOL conference, the 10th conference of wetland scientists, is making a big step forward in that regard. The messages and the understanding generated of the complex interactions within wetlands need to be translated into policy and into investment guidelines, so that people in decision-making positions such as spatial planners, investment analysts, and politicians, will make more wetland-friendly decisions and thereby ensure our sustainable future. Some of these messages are summarized in the draft Changshu Declaration which we hope will issue forth from this conference with your support, and be taken up by the world media.