



CONVENTION ON WETLANDS  
CONVENTION SUR LES ZONES HUMIDES  
CONVENCIÓN SOBRE LOS HUMEDALES  
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

**World  
Wetlands Day**  
2 February 2015

**Wetlands for  
our Future**



## Statement from Dr. Christopher Briggs, Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention on the occasion of World Wetlands Day

2 February 2015

### **“Wetlands for our future”**

I am delighted to be joining you to celebrate World Wetlands Day! This year I will be seeing again how Uganda, which is a key Party to the Ramsar Convention, makes this day special and makes wetlands come alive and leap into people’s imaginations. With the Ramsar Centre for East Africa, I will be visiting the Letembe Bay site.

With our theme this year as “Wetlands for our Future”, we want to highlight the choices ahead of us all, considering the all-too-real threat to wetlands around the world. Latest research indicates that over 64% of the world’s wetlands have been destroyed since 1900, and in some regions, notably Asia, the loss is even higher.

This rapid decline means that access to fresh water is worsening for almost two billion people worldwide, while flood control, disaster risk reduction, carbon storage and traditional wetland livelihoods are all suffering and our futures with them. In addition to loss of water and other wetlands services, the richness of wildlife - our biodiversity - has also been affected. Populations of freshwater species have declined by 76% in the last forty years, according to WWF’s Living Planet Index, and this is a worse prospect than any other place on earth.

What is driving this loss? Unfortunately, wetlands are often viewed as wasteland; something to be drained, filled and converted to other purposes. The main causes of wetlands loss and degradation are changes in land use, especially conversion to agriculture and grazing and the growth of cities and their infrastructure. And this is all made worse by the leakage into our wetlands of an excess of nutrients, and water being diverted to make dams, ponds, channels and canals.

To combat the downward global trends in loss and degradation of wetlands, Ramsar has a new strategy to reverse the trends and is working to put in place a Global Partnership for Wetlands Restoration. This will initially focus on cities and water, working to improve access to good quality of drinking water for people in densely populated urban areas. Thanks to a generous grant from the Norwegian Government, we will be funding projects in Nepal, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique and Uganda this year.

The reason we should care more about our wetlands is because they are the only source of our fresh water and the essential ingredient for all development. So, we need to educate people of all ages to understand how wetlands already play a part in their lives and get them to care as passionately as we do for their maintenance and restoration:

- Wetlands provide the fresh water for every one of us. Every human needs 20-50 litres of water a day for basic drinking, cooking and cleaning. Wetlands provide that water.
- Wetlands also filter and clean harmful chemicals and waste from water. Plants from wetlands can help absorb harmful fertilizers and pesticides, as well as heavy metals and toxins from industry. Topically we can say that the Nakivubo Swamp in Kampala, Uganda filters all the sewage and industrial wastes for free; a treatment plant to do the same would cost over \$2 million per year.
- Wetlands feed humanity. Rice, grown in wetland paddies, is the staple diet of nearly three billion people. And the average human consumes 19 kg of fish each year, but few know that almost all commercial fish breed and raise their young in coastal marshes and estuaries.
- 70% of all fresh water we extract from wetlands globally is used for irrigation of our crops and help powers the business of agriculture that maintains over 570 million farms and keeps us fed.
- Wetlands are bursting with biodiversity. Wetlands are home to more than 100,000 known freshwater species alone, and that number is growing every year. In just 10 years, 272 new species of freshwater fish were discovered in the Amazon.
- Wetlands act as nature's shock absorbers. Wetlands within river basins act as natural sponges, absorbing rainfall, creating wide surface pools that reduce the impact of flooding in rivers. The same storage capacity also safeguards against drought.
- Wetlands help fight climate change. Peatlands alone store more than twice as much carbon as all the forests in the world! In the face of rising sea levels, coastal wetlands reduce the impact of typhoons and tsunamis. They also bind the shoreline and resist increasing levels of erosion.
- Wetlands provide sustainable livelihoods and products. 61.8 million people depend directly on fishing and fisheries for a living. Timber for building, vegetable oil, medicinal plants, animal fodder, and stems and leaves for weaving also come from well managed wetlands.

But wetlands are also part of our emotional history. Who can't remember a childhood trip to the beach, learning to fish in a river, fishing in a pond in the summer time? I spent all my youth in rivers and ponds catching fish and damming streams and had fun all summer long and came back every day with wet clothes and boots full of water. Since then, I have been in and out of wetlands all my life, and enjoyed them all.

This year, we are inviting people to think about their own wetlands story, and how they can help to stop this dramatic loss of wetlands. We would like you to visit our website or use our twitter hashtag “Wetlands For Our Future” to make a pledge to help wetlands and join thousands of people around the world who also want to reverse the trend. Your pledge can be as simple as taking shorter showers to save water, or making sure you take reusable bags to the supermarket, or getting more practically involved by helping to organise a clean-up of your local wetland.

Educating younger people is vital. We need to get the next generation engaged and knowledgeable on how important wetlands are and the more people know, the further we can spread the message.

This year, for young people between the ages of 15 and 24, we are running a photo competition in partnership with the Star Alliance. From today until the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March, visit a wetland, and take a picture there, for the chance to win a free flight anywhere in the world to visit a wetland site. All submissions to our site, [www.worldwetlandsday.org](http://www.worldwetlandsday.org) will be voted on and the shortlisted finalists judged by a panel of experts including renowned UK landscape photographer Charlie Waite.

So join us this year, and take up the challenge to help secure Wetlands for all our Futures.  
Happy World Wetlands Day.