



Restoring wetlands and drylands: achieving Land Degradation Neutrality

Joint Statement by the UNCCD and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands
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The world's population is projected to expand to 8.3 billion in the next fifteen years, with food demand rising by 50%. To meet this demand, we will need to find an extra 4 million hectares of cropland per year. At the same time, water insecurity is growing. Drought is becoming more prevalent. The land is becoming drier with changing weather patterns. While wetlands are disappearing at an alarming rate: a 64% decline since 1900. The loss of these vital natural assets is amplified by an ever-increasing demand for land for food production.

This has led to a vicious cycle of decreased replenishment of groundwater aquifers, increased susceptibility to coastal surges and inland flooding, and a lower water table. Already, one third of our farmland has been degraded beyond use, and half of what's still left is moderately or severely degraded.

Agricultural lands and wetlands are two sides of the same coin when it comes to sustainable land management. One cannot thrive at the expense of the other. The relationship between land, water and food insecurity are deeply intertwined and touch everyone.

In the face of this apparent conundrum, the secretariats of the UNCCD and the Ramsar Convention are here at the IUCN World Parks Congress 2014 to make a public commitment: to create a sustainable and resilient future for our children by stopping and reversing land degradation.

The goal that makes sense is to achieve Land Degradation Neutrality. This means that all communities worldwide aim to reach a state where the total area of healthy and productive land and wetlands stabilises and eventually increases.

This means addressing the drivers of degradation and then promoting restoration – across the board. Returning the 500 million hectares of abandoned farmland to fertility and to sustainable agricultural practices is far more cost-effective than finding new land for agricultural use. It can help mitigate climatic changes by drawing CO₂ from the atmosphere into the soil and optimise the fresh water, nutrient, carbon and biomass cycle. Restoring flood plains in river basins and coastal wetlands would provide increased protection from flooding and storm surges in an era of rising sea levels, while raising the water table that is so essential to growing crops. Across the board, communities will be more resilient to climate change and biodiversity will flourish.

Both organizations stand firmly behind this goal.

Ramsar's draft Strategic Plan for 2016-21 already has as its vision to "prevent, stop and reverse the degradation and loss of wetlands and to use them wisely." Ramsar is also initiating a Global Partnership for Wetland Restoration, with emphasis on restoring flood plains in river basins, coastal wetlands, and peatlands.

The UNCCD meanwhile is already building a global partnership to reverse and prevent desertification and land degradation and to mitigate the effects of drought in affected areas for both poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.

This Congress's 'Promise of Sydney' marks a deliberate step away from former declarations, towards actively implementing bold and inspirational solutions for the future.

In line with this, both Ramsar and the UNCCD make a common commitment to Land Degradation Neutrality. It forms the foundation of a happy and resilient future for parks, people and the planet. It is a daring yet achievable solution.