

World Wetlands Day 1999: a message from the Secretary General

People and wetlands - The vital link

Twenty eight years after the signing of the Convention on Wetlands in the Iranian city of Ramsar on 2 February 1971, we are celebrating wetlands as habitats that have a special link with people. Not only with communities living in or around wetlands and benefiting directly from their resources, but also with human societies at large.

Because wetlands are present everywhere: at the shores of rivers and lakes, in the oases and wadis of the deserts, in the inundated plains of tropical lands, in the form of peatlands, as karst and other forms of underground water systems, in the marine coastal zones, in the form of mangrove forests, mudflats and saline lagoons. And these are only a few of the wetland types that the founding fathers of the Ramsar treaty had in mind when in the 1960s they had the wisdom to promote international action for the conservation and "wise use", as they called it, of these precious and rich habitats.

The link is there, because we all live by or near a wetland of some sort, since, inescapably, we all live near a source of water. Yes, the vital link is there, even though we may never have thought of it, or, even worse, if we may have actively neglected that strong link with wetlands and acquiesced in their drainage, transformation, contamination as dumping sites, permanent flooding by dam construction, siltation, pollution with too many agrochemicals, and so on.

Wetlands have been terribly mistreated over the centuries, leading to the disappearance of a large proportion of these habitats, precisely because most human societies were not aware of that vital link.

Fortunately things have changed, to the point where there is now an international treaty joined by 113 countries from all regions actively working to conserve and promote the wise use of wetlands. Yet there is still much to do, everywhere, to make people perceive wetlands as important assets of the natural capital of their nations. A capital that, if well managed, will generate important returns in the form of services and goods at the disposition of development and human well being. This is the challenge: to "mainstream" wetlands in the minds of people and in government practice, so that wetlands become the preoccupation not only of the specialists and nature lovers but of the majority of society.

The Convention on Wetlands will held its triennial meeting of member countries, international agencies, community organizations, indigenous people and experts on wetlands issues in Costa Rica next May. At least 1500 people are expected to debate the vital link between people and wetlands and to adopt action tools that have been in the making since the last meeting in 1996, for application into the next century.

In the meantime, on this World Wetlands Day, I invite you to look at the wetlands nearby the place you occupy on this planet. You will see that you do not need to go too far to find them. And then, if you have not yet been aware of it, please try to discover the link that unites your daily life to that wetland; perhaps in the form of water that you drink, or in the recharge of the aquifer that you use to irrigate your land, or your small garden, in the reduced flooding of the river nearby at the time of the rains, in the fish you enjoy to have at your table, in the firewood that you use, or maybe in the medicines that are obtained from wetland plants. There are so many possible linkages between you and the wetland nearby! It may be just the beauty that you enjoyed when you walked around the other day, and all of a sudden, in the deep silence of the hour, there was that flight of thousands of birds taking to the sky for an unknown destination somewhere else in the planet, maybe thousands of

miles away, where other human beings would be as surprised with their impressive arrival as you have been with their unexpected departure.

Delmar Blasco

Secretary General

Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)