

Celebrating World Wetlands Day, February 2, 2010

SUMMARY REPORT ON NATIONAL FORUM: WETLANDS, YOUR LIFE SUPPORT (Centre for African Wetlands, Auditorium)

The 2nd of February each year is World Wetlands Day. It marks the date of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands on 2nd February 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar. The day was first celebrated in 1997 and since then Contracting parties to the Convention, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders have taken advantage of this great opportunity to organize activities aimed at celebrating successes in wetland conservation, and highlighting critical issues impacting on wetlands, as well as raising public awareness of the importance of wetland ecosystems.

The theme for this year's celebration was "Wetlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change. In Ghana, the day was marked with a national forum on wetlands organized by the Centre for African Wetlands (CAW), University of Ghana, and the Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission, with support from the Ghana Chamber of Mines and Goldfields-Ghana. The forum focused on three wetland issues: (i) Wetlands, water resources and sanitation (ii) Wetlands and climate change (iii) Mining and wetland ecosystems.

The aim of the forum was to give key stakeholders a voice in Ghana's wetland conservation debate. The forum brought together a team of experts who made presentations on the selected thematic areas and highlighted the key issues impacting on wetland conservation. This was followed by general discussions where participants deliberated on the critical issues on each theme and came out with recommendations for concrete actions that the nation would take to improve the health of the nation's wetlands and the quality of life for Ghanaians.

Opening the forum, the Hon. Sherry Ayittey, Minister of Environment, Science and Technology (MEST), Guest of Honour for the occasion stressed that the moment has come for Ghana to take stock of how the nation has managed her wetland ecosystems and the biodiversity they support. She touched on the key role that wetlands play in the development and survival of human communities, including the provision of food, protection from severe weather events like storms along coastal areas and also the importance of wetlands in supporting plant and animal species that are beneficial to human.

She noted that unfortunately, most of Ghana's wetlands have been degraded and the remaining ones including those designated as Ramsar sites continue to face ever increasing onslaught of natural and human disturbances. She emphasized that it is not known how much of Ghana's biodiversity have been lost along with the destruction of wetlands in the country. The Minister further spoke of her joy that the forum was geared towards finding appropriate actions aimed at protecting valuable and vulnerable natural habitats from further losses and degradation, as well as the restoration of the capacities of wetlands in order that they can fulfill their functions.

Hon. Sherry Ayittey called on the participants not only to consider the impacts of climate change on wetlands and the management of wetlands to adapt and mitigate these impacts, but also to dwell upon all the other human impacts on wetlands that are not climate-related, but have had and continue to have huge impacts on wetlands and their biodiversity. She

announced that the Government has put plans in place to revive sixteen dead lagoons in the country.

The Chairperson for the occasion, Prof. Yaa Ntiamoah-Baidu, the Founder of the Centre for African Wetlands and currently Dean of the University of Ghana School of Research and Graduate studies, recounted the nation's efforts at managing her wetland resources, dating back to the early 1990's when the country designated six wetland sites as Ramsar sites (wetland sites of International Importance). She reminded the participants of the global importance of Ghana's coastal wetlands, including even degraded wetlands such as the Korle-Lagoon, in terms of the numbers and species of waterbirds they support. She said eleven species of waterbirds occur in internationally important numbers on the Ghana coast.

She recounted the threats facing the nation's wetlands, for example, she said, "over 40 % of the original areas designated as the Sakumo and the Densu Delta Ramsar sites have been lost to housing developments; and the threats from domestic and industrial waste continue to grow". She drew attention to the scary future that the impacts of climate change pose for the communities along the Ghana coast, and urged the participants to take individual and collective action to help protect and manage the nation's wetlands for the benefit of Ghanaian people, and for the animals with whom we share the wetlands.

Ms. Sherry Ayithey (second from left), Hon Minister of Environment, Science and Technology, opened the Forum



Participants to the forum came from various interest groups including Ministries, government agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, interested people as well as graduate students from the University of Ghana, who were sponsored by the Ghana Chamber of Mines and Goldfields - Ghana. Over 90 participants attended the forum.

The panelists were Prof. Banoeng-Yakubo of the Department of Earth Science, University of Ghana and Prof. J. Kumah of the University of Mines, for Mining and Wetlands; Mr. Ben Ampomah, Water Resources Commission, and Dr. Isaac Hodgson Water Research Institute

for Wetlands, Water and Sanitation; and Mr. W. K. Agyeman-Bonsu, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Nana Kofi Adu-Nsiah, Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission for Wetlands and Climate Change. The participants' deliberations highlighted the key issues in each area and came out with a number of recommendations for action.

Actions recommended by the group on Wetlands and Climate Change climate change and wetlands were;

1. Research work including mapping out of areas of high vulnerability to be encouraged.
2. Informative research to identify and demarcate resettlement areas and areas to be put under protection.
3. Education to bring about attitudinal change from the young and old.
4. Capacity building for natural resource managers, district assemblies, planners and other stakeholders.
5. Enforcement of existing laws.
6. Establishment of environmental courts for judicious action on environmental litigations.

The group discussions on Wetlands, Water and Sanitation recommended six actions to address the issues raised:

1. A ministry should be created to cater for sanitation, with a clear mandate and well defined strategies and actions, backed by strong political will to tackle the nation's waste management crisis.
2. All Political parties to embed sanitation issues in their manifestos.
3. Adoption and implementation of national environmental sanitation policy by the government.
4. Public awareness/ Community education/ Knowledge (transfer translated into local dialects).
5. Implementation of the national water policy.
6. Finalization, adoption and implementation of the buffer zone (BZ) policy.

Recommended actions from the group on Mining and Wetland Ecosystems were:

1. Enforcement of the law by the agencies responsible for doing so.
2. Regularizing activities of illegal mining.
3. Universities and research institutions to conduct relevant research and provide advice to government and industries.
4. Adequate funding should be made available by government and other proponents for relevant research and implementation of research findings.
5. Government should aim at strengthening collaboration among different government sectors and ministries.
6. Mining companies to take the initiative to create wetlands on abandoned operations, and then channel their liquid wastes through them.

These recommendations are to be disseminated to relevant agencies and interest groups for follow-up action.

The Centre for African Wetlands and the Wildlife Division of the Ghana Forestry Commission and their partners wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Ghana Chamber of Mines and Goldfields-Ghana Ltd. that made the organization of the forum possible. We thank also the Ramsar Secretariat for the posters and publicity materials provided for the occasion. Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to the Honorable Minister of Environment, Science and Technology, Ms. Sherry Ayittey, for her time and support for the event.

Group photo of forum participants

