

PRESS RELEASE ON WORLD WETLAND DAY CELEBRATION 2ND
FEBRUARY, 2009.

Today 2nd February 2009 is being observed as World Wetland Day. Nigeria joins the rest of the world in celebrating its 37th World Wetlands Day. This day is set aside annually to commemorate and create public awareness on wetlands values and functions that are critical to sustainable human livelihoods especially the communities living around wetland ecosystems and also to highlight the importance of the Niger River Basin. The theme for this year's celebration is **"Upstream and Downstream"** wetlands connect us all. This is an important theme for Nigeria which is located downstream from the Niger River Basin. The health of the entire river that links 10 countries together is of crucial importance to ensure millions of people in Nigeria with fresh water and food.

2. Nigeria became a party to the Convention on 2nd February 2001, which coincidentally is the day set aside to commemorate the World Wetlands Day. The Convention is an intergovernmental agreement whose mission is conservation and wise use of wetlands through international cooperation as a means to achieving sustainable development throughout the world. Wetlands are habitats/places such as marshes, swamps, flood plains, rivers, lakes mangroves and other marine areas that hold water not deeper than six (6) meters at low tide as well as human-made wetlands such as ponds, lakes. They are habitats to a wide variety of wildlife (plants and animals).

3. Wetlands are vital link in the water cycle. They hold the key to water supply and sanitation and provide the basis for livelihoods, such as those based on fisheries, forms of agriculture, transport and construction materials. Wetlands therefore perform a wide variety of functions that include flood control, ground water recharge, shore line stabilization and storm protection, climate moderation and also serve as habitat for living things, recreation and tourism and cultural values.

4. Unfortunately, these rich and fragile ecosystems all over the world are under threats. Destruction of wetland ecosystems is taking place at an alarming rate. We face large scale diversion of water for irrigation, burning and exploitation of peatland, extensive drainage of marshes and pollution of lakes and rivers. The loss of some of our wetlands has resulted in the loss of countless species of animals and plants. The livelihood and culture of a large number of our people especially the local communities living around the wetland will be endangered if wetlands and their resources became further depleted.

5. Furthermore, the role of wetland services for adaptation to impacts of climate change includes:

- Reduction of peak flood flows by delaying and storing flood waters as well as retention of polluted flood waters and improvement of their quality in lakes and flood plains;
- Regulation of river flows, thus releasing flood flows slowly over time.
- Maintenance of river based flows by releasing wet season flows slowly during drought periods in marshes lakes and flood plains
- Save guard against saltwater intrusion when coastal freshwater areas dry up in mangroves and other coastal wetland ecosystems.
- Provision of nurseries for coastal fisheries.
- Assisting in the recovery of local community livelihoods after storms by providing sources of food and building materials in coastal wetlands e.g. mangroves.

6. The Hadejia Nguru Lake and Marma Channels was designated as a site of international importance in year 2000 and currently 11 more Ramsar sites have been so designated nationwide in year 2008. To demonstrate the importance of these sites for instance, the Hadejia Nguru Wetlands, provide habitat to migratory birds during winter for breeding before returning back to Europe in spring.

7. In view of the importance of the interdependent relationship between wetland ecosystems, health, human wellbeing, and economic growth, there is the urgent need for all hands to be on deck especially our media partners to generate a greater awareness amongst the people on the intrinsic values of our wetlands. Our people must therefore be truly sensitized on the importance of their conservation and wise use..

The DON'Ts include the following amongst others:

- Dumping of waste
- Use of harmful chemicals for fishing
- Reclamation/drainage of wetlands for physical development and
- Over harvesting of wetlands resources

8. As wetlands are a source of water, food and income for the majority of our communities and most developmental plans do not include wetlands, resulting in their degradation, the Federal Ministry of Environment plans to work with the State and Local Governments as well as the affected communities, and the private sector to manage existing wetlands effectively and restore the degraded wetlands throughout the country. As a first step, the Ministry is developing a National Wetland Policy and in collaboration with the states develop

management plans for the designated Ramsar sites of International importance. Also, the Ministry is working in the Nypa Palm infested States to remove the nypa palm and re-establish the mangrove ecosystem.

9. The Niger River Basin stretches from the highlands of Guinea to the Niger Delta and links 10 countries together. These countries are collaborating under the Niger Basin Authority, of which Nigeria presently holds the secretariat. In 2002 the Ramsar Convention and the Niger Basin Authority signed (2002) a Memorandum of Understanding. This MoU reinforces the importance of ensuring the management and conservation of the wetlands in the Niger River Basin for the health of the entire River Basin and the people that depend on it. To secure this the Niger Basin Authority is supported by the Niger Basin Initiative, an alliance of Wetlands International (WI), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF).

10. The Niger Delta connects millions of people, but is in some areas degraded. The values of the wetlands in the area could be ensured and restored through the following activities:

- (a) Development of a management plan for the wetlands and its resources;
- (b) Capacity building of local communities for employment opportunities and wealth creation;
- (c) Organize communities into user cooperative groups;
- (d) Establishment of research centres to bring in innovations on the alternative use of the wetlands resources;
- (e) Involving the communities in the governance of the wetlands resources

11. In conclusion, the important roles played by wetlands cannot be over emphasized. There is a need for all stakeholders to be involved for the conservation and wide use of the resources available to mankind for the present and future generations. When these rich ecosystems are used sustainably they will alleviate poverty especially in communities living around them.

For more information on World Wetland Day in Nigeria:

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