

# Wetlands – an inspiration in art, literature, music, and folklore

**W**etlands and water have stimulated the creative talents of humans from the earliest times, producing a great wealth of songs, music, dance, art, literature, stories and rituals. The early dependency of most people on wetland resources generated a rich oral tradition of songs, stories and dances that were collective expressions of respect and, indeed, reverence towards wetlands and often helped to maintain traditional management practices. They are still part of everyday life for many of the estimated three million indigenous people living within at least 5,000 distinct cultures worldwide.

Water and wetlands have been key factors in many ancient festivals still observed at least at some level today, such as the Loi Kratong water festival in Thailand in which people release a *kratong*, a floating cup made of banana leaf or coloured paper containing a candle, incense sticks and flowers, into flowing water as an expression of reverence for the water itself. Similar festivals are celebrated in Laos and Myanmar. The water festival celebrated annually by the Dai people in China is associated with fertility and good fortune. Crane festivals have been common in Japan for centuries, welcoming the arrival of birds in winter and celebrating their departure to breed in Siberia in spring, and the cranes remain a powerful symbol of long life in Chinese and Japanese culture.

While many ancient traditions are still practised, over the centuries most people have become physically further removed from wetlands in their everyday life, yet wetlands remain a source of inspiration, sometimes in quite different ways. Consider the contrasting perceptions of wetlands in these descriptions by two 19th century writers:

*a gloomy waste of waters ... a hideous expanse of reeds ... impassable by human foot ... an atmosphere pregnant with pestilence* (R. Warner, 1826)

*aquatic flowers of every hue and variety are to be seen on every side of this place of profound and wild solitude ... pervaded by silence* (Buckingham Smith, 1847).



This painting was produced in Costa Rica during the 7th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) to the Ramsar Convention, May 1999. The 7 indigenous artists, from the Solentiname archipelago in the south-east corner of Lake Cocibolca, Nicaragua, live in fishing and farming communities that are closely linked to their wetland environment. Their presence at the Conference was part of a much larger project organized by IUCN-Mesoamerica that brought together local groups in several countries to discuss the importance of wetlands in their lives; an outcome of the meeting was a “People’s declaration on wetlands”, which was subsequently presented at the Conference ([http://ramsar.org/cop7\\_declaration.htm](http://ramsar.org/cop7_declaration.htm)). As part of the project, a workshop for artists in Solentiname encouraged an artistic expression of the close relationship between the people and their wetlands, and a group of these artists, working during the COP in Costa Rica, produced this painting of their Solentiname environment. The painting is currently displayed in the office of the Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention in Switzerland.

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Wetlands may be seen as sinister places of evil and danger or places of unparalleled natural beauty: both visions have inspired artists, writers, poets and musicians.

Wetlands and their wildlife have been recurring subjects for Chinese and Japanese artists for thousands of years and today their brush paintings of peaceful wetland scenes and wetland species are widely appreciated, as for example, the work of the famous 19th century Japanese artist, Eigaku Kano. Much of the most well-known art of ancient Egypt was inspired by the flora and fauna of the Nile. Western European landscape painting from the 15th to the early 20th century, developed in the north by Patinir,

Dürer and Ruisdael, furthered by other artists such as Canaletto in Venice, and later consolidated with the Romanticism of the English painters Turner and Constable, found some of its favourite themes in lakes, marshes and rivers. The French impressionist, Claude Monet, concluded his work with a series of paintings of aquatic plants in the pond that he had built at his home in Giverny, France. To this day, indigenous artists around the world create exciting works based upon wetland themes.

In English literature, estuaries have been described as wild and thrilling but awesome places, as in the classic *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. In their more gentle guise they also feature as places of haven and romance, as in the wetland setting in Daphne Du Maurier's *Frenchman's Creek*. The 'darker' side of wetlands has inspired writers and cinema producers, with marshes and swamps providing a dangerous environment for heroic deeds or an eerie setting for crime or the supernatural. Considered a classic in 'Western' cinema, *The African Queen*, from the novel by C.S. Forester, set in wetlands around Lake Victoria in Africa, provides a typical example. Even the names given to some wetlands imply their forbidding nature, such as the Great Dismal Swamp in the USA, reputedly named by an English explorer who described it as a "horrible desert, the foul damps ascend without ceasing, corrupt the air and render it unfit for respiration".

Mires and peatlands are common wetland types in northern Europe and this landscape has been the basis for stories, legends and festivals for people in the area. That it can still inspire local people is clear from a short story competition, based on mires and peatlands, launched by the Finnish Peatland Society in 1998 which elicited almost one thousand entries from authors in Finland, Sweden and Canada. While many stories were based upon natural themes, a number made use of the wetland setting to create fictional stories of crime, romance, war and the supernatural.

Originally part of the religion of Greece and Asia Minor more than 3000 years ago, the stories of the Greek gods and their deeds became Greek mythology and a rich source of literature, poetry and art. Wetlands in Greek mythology were

often sacred places associated with deities, and several Greek gods chose rivers such as the Acheloo and Alfiós as their "bodies". The River Styx (probably the River Acheron today) was particularly significant as it separated the world of the living from Hades, the world of the dead. The oral and literary poets who gave artistic form to the symbols and stories of Greek mythology, like Homer and Hesiod some 2500 years ago and Ovid of Augustan Rome, draw upon inland, river, and coastal scenes for many of their most exciting tales.

A wealth of poetry has been inspired by wetlands. Although much of it may be known at only national or even local level, it still represents a powerful expression of wetland cultural heritage and can contribute much to raising awareness about wetlands. This is the case in Cuba, for example, where a local poet, Efraín Otaño Gerardo, inspired by the Ciénaga de Zapata Ramsar site in Cuba, has written many poems about the wetland and its wildlife that have recently been gathered for publication as a book.

There is a wonderful wealth of classical European music with water or wetlands themes; Handel intended his Water Music, for example, to be played over water, and it was performed for King George I on the River Thames in 1715. Other notable pieces include, amongst others, Smetana's Vltava, Telemann's Hamburg Ebb and Flood, Elgar's Sea Pictures, Schubert's Trout Quintet, and Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake ballet.

In recent times wetlands have inspired "new" traditions such as the shorebird festivals developing in the USA and Mexico over the last ten years; numbering already over 100, they attract local people and visitors to wetlands to celebrate the arrival of shorebirds in spring. This is tomorrow's cultural heritage in the making.

In all of these areas, the scenes and associations of wetlands have contributed in vital ways to the artistic heritage of most and perhaps all cultures around the world, and these few examples barely scratch the surface. The huge influence that wetlands have had upon the visual, oral and performance arts, not only in the classical Western tradition but also in national and local cultures of all parts of the world, requires much more study in order to be better understood and appreciated.

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CONVENTION ON WETLANDS  
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)