

## CULTURAL VALUE

THIS IS A RELATIVELY POORLY DOCUMENTED FUNCTION OF WETLANDS, yet there are many instances where wetlands have significant religious, historical, archaeological or other cultural values for local communities, representing a part of a nation's heritage.

Some wetlands support traditional activities that represent part of the history of the nation – at Mai Po marshes, for example, these human-made wetlands represent the only remaining place where Hong Kong residents can witness the operation of the Gei Wai (shrimp ponds), a traditional method of shrimp cultivation practised by local people for hundreds of years.

In some cultures wetlands may have deep religious significance for local people. In Tibet, pre-Buddhist belief identified various lakes as sacred, making them objects of worship as well as ensuring their protection from pollution and other harm. As Buddhism took over, these beliefs remained, albeit in a modified form, and certain lakes in Tibet are still sacred to the people with strict regulations that determine their exploitation.

In Australia, many wetlands have significant social and cultural value for their traditional Aboriginal owners. On the Coburg Peninsula (the world's first Ramsar site), the traditional Aboriginal owners still conduct an active ceremonial life and undertake semi-traditional hunting and gathering in this coastal wetland. This site also has historical significance for European settlers. Many other wetland sites around the world are of archaeological significance, such as the Stavns Fjord Ramsar site in Denmark which is widely known for the archaeological significance of the remains from the early settlers in the Bronze Age and constructions from the Viking era. In recent weeks, divers have discovered a temple that pre-dates

### *In Brief*

- ✓ **Although largely an unexplored, poorly documented subject, wetlands are frequently of religious, historical, archaeological or other cultural significance at the local or national level.**
- ✓ **In a preliminary survey of Ramsar sites, over 30% of a sample of 603 Ramsar sites recorded some archaeological, historical, religious mythological or cultural significance at either local or national level.**
- ◆ **In Portugal, despite the investment of US\$ 150 million, authorities abandoned the construction of the C6a Dam in 1995 after Palaeolithic engravings were unearthed.**
- ◆ **In Tibet certain lakes have deep religious significance for local populations and associated with this are strict regulations that determine exploitation of the lakes.**
- ◆ **The Coburg Peninsula Ramsar site in Australia has great significance for the traditional Aboriginal owners, who still conduct an active ceremonial life and undertake semi-traditional hunting and gathering.**
- ◆ **The operation of the *Gei Wai*, a traditional way of shrimp cultivation practised by local people for hundreds of years, can only be seen by Hong Kong residents at the Mai Po marshes Ramsar site.**
- ◆ **The Stavns Fjord Ramsar site in Denmark is an outstanding archaeological site from the Bronze age.**
- ◆ **Divers in Lake Titicaca have recently discovered a temple that pre-dates the Inca period.**

## CULTURAL VALUE...

the Inca era at the bottom of Lake Titicaca, a Ramsar site spanning the border between Peru and Bolivia.

While it is very hard to put a “dollar” value on this cultural function, the construction of Portugal’s C $\hat{o}$ a Dam does give an indication of the value at

least some countries place on their cultural heritage: despite the US\$ 150 million already invested in the dam, construction was abandoned in 1995 after Palaeolithic engravings were unearthed.

A recent preliminary study by Dave Pritchard of the cultural values of Ramsar sites indicates that this cultural function of wetlands is widespread and worthy of more attention - of 603 Ramsar sites recently examined, over 30% were recorded as having archaeological, historical, cultural, religious, mythological or artistic/creative significance, either on a local or national scale, in addition to their many other values. ◆



Photo: WWF/Sture Karlson



Photo: B. Phillips

## Wetland Values and Functions

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CONVENTION ON WETLANDS  
CONVENTION SUR LES ZONES HUMIDES  
CONVENCIÓN SOBRE LOS HUMEDALES  
(Ramsar, Iran, 1971)