

WETLANDS AND LIVELIHOODS



Wetlands provide more than a billion livelihoods across the world in an array of activities that also deliver food, water supplies, transport, and leisure. But ongoing wetland loss is driving a vicious cycle of declining biodiversity and deepening poverty. Action is needed to shift to a virtuous cycle of sustainability that creates opportunities for people to make a living while protecting wetlands and their multiple benefits for humanity and nature.



WHY WETLAND LIVELIHOODS MATTER

Wetlands are essential for human health and prosperity. They provide us with fresh water, supply our food, sustain biodiversity, protect against flooding, and store carbon dioxide. As a major source of employment globally, they are also ideally placed to deliver truly sustainable livelihoods, allowing people to earn a living without undermining their natural resource base.

More than a billion people across the world depend on wetlands for their livelihoods – that's about one in eight people on Earth. Wetlands host a diverse range of jobs that support entire communities.

- **Rice farming:** Rice, grown in wetland paddies, is the staple diet of 3.5 billion people and accounts for 20% of all calories consumed by humans. Almost a billion households in Asia, Africa and the Americas depend on rice growing and processing for their main livelihoods. About 80% of the world's rice is produced by small-scale farmers and is consumed locally.

- **Fishing:** Most commercial fish species breed and raise their young in coastal marshes and estuaries. In addition, more than 40% of fish production is now through aquaculture. The average person consumes 19kg of fish every year. More than 660 million people depend on fishing and aquaculture for a living.

- **Tourism and leisure:** An estimated half of international tourists seek relaxation in wetland areas, especially coastal zones. The travel and tourism sectors support 266 million jobs, accounting for 8.9% of the world's total employment.



- **Transport:** Rivers and inland waterways play a vital role in transporting goods and people in many parts of the world. In the Amazon basin, rivers carry 12 million passengers and 50 million tons of freight each year, sustaining 41 shipping companies and thousands of workers.

- **Water provision:** Vast networks deliver fresh water and remove and treat wastewater, while employing large workforces. For example, Bangkok's Metropolitan Waterworks Authority employs over 5,300 staff.

- **Traditional wetland livelihoods:** Medicinal plants, dyes, fruits, reeds, and grasses are just a few of the wetland products that provide jobs in harvesting and processing, especially in developing countries. For example, the reeds and papyrus collected from the Barotse floodplain wetlands in Zambia are estimated to be worth US\$373,000 per year to local communities.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Despite the millions of jobs and other vital benefits that they provide, 64% of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1900, while populations of freshwater species declined by 76% between 1970 and 2010. The wetlands that remain are often so degraded that many people who rely directly on their fish, plants, wildlife and water for their livelihoods – often the very poor – are being driven into even deeper poverty. To make matters worse, by 2025, it is estimated that 35% of people will face declining water supplies.

This vicious cycle of wetland loss, threatened livelihoods, and deepening poverty is the result of a point of view that mistakenly sees wetlands as wastelands rather than lifegiving sources of jobs, incomes, and essential ecosystem services. A key challenge is to change mindsets to encourage governments and communities to value and prioritize wetlands.



WHAT CAN WE DO?

Enabling people to earn a decent, sustainable living and ensuring that wetlands can continue to provide drinking water, biodiversity, food and their many other benefits, do not have to be conflicting goals. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals underline that reducing poverty demands that we also protect and restore ecosystems such as wetlands.

The solution demands a shift from the vicious cycle of disappearing wetlands and diminishing livelihoods to a virtuous cycle of sustainability that balances economic development, social development, and environmental protection to benefit both human life and wetland biodiversity.

Three key ingredients can create the right conditions to promote sustainable wetland livelihoods.



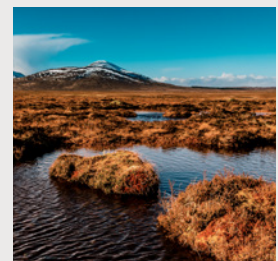
1. Using a people-centred approach to understand needs. *This involves assessing how vulnerable people are to shocks, natural disasters and civil strife, and how to reduce that vulnerability; understanding how important seasonal prices and employment opportunities are, and exploring other options; and taking an inventory of the potential resources available.*



2. Making multiple types of 'capital' available: This includes: actual products harvested from wetlands such as reeds, fish or rice; training, skills and knowledge needed to pursue opportunities and understand trade-offs; good health to allow people to earn a living; a voice in planning how local wetlands should be used; basic infrastructure, equipment and tools; and access to credit, cash or micro-loans.



3. Identifying who can provide the different kinds of 'capital'. *Developing sustainable livelihoods in wetlands involves integrating the engagement of key actors, including governments, institutions, NGOs and local communities, determining who will take on what role, and helping them to make the necessary changes happen.*

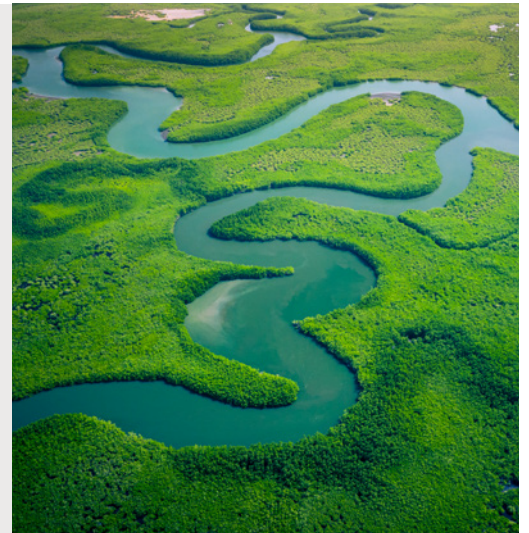


Establishing these conditions in a wetland region can provide the set of capabilities, activities and resources that are required for people to make a sustainable living, while protecting wetland ecosystems and the many services they deliver.

WHAT ARE WETLANDS?

Wetlands are a major, planet-wide habitat that make life on Earth possible. Article 1.1 of the Convention on Wetlands defines wetlands as: “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres.” They are ecosystems where water is the primary factor controlling

the environment and the associated plant and animal life. This encompasses all inland wetlands, such as marshes, ponds, lakes, fens, rivers, floodplains, and swamps; a range of coastal wetlands, including saltwater marshes, estuaries, mangroves, lagoons, and coral reefs; and human-made wetlands like fishponds, rice paddies, and salt pans. Global inland and coastal wetlands cover over 12.1 million km², an area larger than Canada.



SEA TURTLE PATROL IN BRAZIL

In 1980, an organization called Tamar began hiring local fishermen to patrol the sea turtle nesting beaches in their regular fishing areas during the nesting season. The goal was to help protect five endangered species of sea turtles in Brazil. The patrol succeeded in halting the take of turtles and eggs and provided local residents with alternative, sustainable livelihoods.

Today, Tamar protects roughly 1,100km of coastline with a network of 23 bases located in important areas for sea turtle feeding, nesting, and development

More than 1,300 people (85% of them local coastal residents) are directly involved with the initiative. This includes 400 fishermen who work in field activities, and people from 25 fishing villages who staff visitor centres, work in shops or as guides, run conservation education activities, and make Tamar clothing for sale. The Tamar sea turtle patrol has become a model for conservation programmes worldwide.



THE CONVENTION ON WETLANDS

Adopted in Ramsar, Iran in 1971, the Convention on Wetlands is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem. Its 171 Contracting Parties commit to:

- **Designate wetlands of high value on the list of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites), and**
- **Use all wetlands wisely and cooperate on transboundary issues.**

Today there are 2,400 designated Ramsar Sites, covering a total surface area of over 250 million hectares (an area slightly larger than Algeria). The network of Ramsar Sites includes coastal and inland wetlands of all types. The Convention on Wetlands is working to reverse wetland loss and degradation around the world. The Convention supports sustainable development, disaster resilience, and climate action, contributing to 16 different Sustainable Development Goals.