World Wetlands Day
2 February 2018
Wetlands for a sustainable urban future

Urban wetlands: prized land, not wasteland

Half of humanity about 4 billion people live in urban areas today. By 2050 that proportion will reach 66% as people move to cities in search of jobs and a vibrant social life. Cities account for around 80% of global economic output. As cities expand and demand for land increases, the tendency is to encroach on wetlands, they are degraded, filled in and built upon. Yet when left intact or restored, urban wetlands make cities liveable:

Reduce flooding

Wetlands act as giant sponges that absorb flood waters. Rivers, ponds, lakes and marshes soak up and store heavy rainfall. In coastal cities, saltmarshes and mangroves work as a buffer against storm surges.

Replenish drinking water

Groundwater aquifers, rainwater and rivers are the source of almost all drinking water. Wetlands filter the water that seeps into aquifers, helping to replenish this important water source. Protecting rivers and limiting harmful run-off also helps safeguard the water supply.

Filter waste and improve water quality

The silt-rich soil and abundant plants in wetlands function as water filters, which absorb some harmful toxins, agricultural pesticides and industrial waste. Urban wetlands also help treat sewage from households.

Improve urban air quality

Wetlands radiate moist air thanks to their high water levels and lush plant life. This naturally cools the air in the local surroundings; a relief both in tropical cities and in extremely dry climates.

Promote human well-being

When preserved as green spaces in cities, wetlands offer residents a space for recreation and access to diversity of plant and animal life. Studies confirm that interacting with nature reduces stress and improves our health.

Enable people to earn a living

Many types of fish spawn and breed in wetlands, making them popular fishing grounds. Wetlands provide reeds and grasses for weaving, medicinal plants and fruits; all valuable goods for local residents. Wetlands also attract tourism, another important source of jobs.

What are urban wetlands?

Wetlands are land areas that are flooded with water, either seasonally or permanently. Urban wetlands are found in and around cities or their suburbs. They include rivers and their flood plains, lakes, and swamps as well as coastal variants such as salt marshes, mangroves and coral reefs.

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Did you know?

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The first cities sprung up in the wetland floodplains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. On these fertile plains, early settlers could practice agriculture, access water and transport their goods.

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Retain and restore: practical ways cities can manage and preserve urban wetlands

Urban planners and decision-makers face a practical dilemma: how to meet the increasing demand for land in cities while still preserving the natural environment. Urban wetlands play a vital role in making cities safe, resilient and sustainable; the aims of SDG 11.

Involve local residents in wetland planning

The Stung Treng Ramsar Site covers 14,600 hectares (56 sq. miles) of river wetland and islands along the Mekong River. Its 21 villages and 10,000 people depend heavily on fishing, and the Site is home to the critically endangered Siamese crocodile. An assessment in 2007 led by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature helped inspire a community-led movement to restrict fishing in critical zones of the Site and as well during spawning season. The result is larger fish are returning.

Integrate wetlands into policy and planning

Accra is Ghana's capital and largest city, located on a coastal plain where wetlands provide natural flood control, water filtering and fishing. As growth threatens its wetlands, the city has responded by mainstreaming wetlands into policy and planning. It is strictly enforcing building regulations and pollution controls, has defined clear greenbelts to limit sprawl, created programs that encourage residents to help conserve local wetlands, and designated two of them as Ramsar Sites.

Restore urban wetlands

Located in a loop of the Thames River on the site of four old water reservoirs, the London Wetland Centre is a 40-hectare (100-acre) restored urban wetland run by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT). It is home to a vast range of wildlife including 180 bird species. This site is now a focus for wetland education attracting 170,000 visitors annually, and includes a visitor centre with an observatory.

Reduce excessive water consumption and harmful runoff

From 2012-14, Quito received support to measure its carbon and water footprints. Now the city aims to cut the municipal water footprint by 68% by 2032. New policies to promote ecological toilets, water efficient appliances and water recycling will avoid around 1.5 billion cubic meters of water consumption.

Organize community wetland clean-ups

Bolsa Chica is a 356-hectare (880-acre) protected coastal wetland in Huntington Beach, a suburb of Los Angeles. The Bolsa Chica Conservancy holds two public service days each month. Volunteers remove an estimated 10 tons of trash and debris from the site's waterways and trails annually.

Did you know?

During Hurricane Sandy, wetlands averted $625 million in property damage in coastal areas of the US. Following the severe storms and the damaging floods that hit the Caribbean, the USA, Bangladesh and Nepal in 2017, more cities recognize the vital role of urban wetlands.

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Walking the talk: Urban wetlands, making cities liveable

The world's urban population is increasing by 2.4% each year, and the number of mega-cities with more than ten million inhabitants will jump from 31 to 41 by 2030. This growth spurt is an opportunity to integrate wetlands into urban planning.

Restored Xin'an River waterfront Huangshan City, China

The Xin'an River flows through the middle of Huangshan City, an urban center of 1.4 million people, named after the distinctive Yellow Mountains that dominate the area. A 7.5 km stretch of the southern edge of the river has been restored to natural wetland, bringing natural flood control together with a new green belt that includes a wetland park, botanical gardens and defined housing developments.


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Nakivubo Swamp, Kampala, Uganda

Rapidly growing Kampala is the capital of Uganda. The Nakivubo Swamp covers some 550 hectares (1,360 acres), stretching from the city's industrial heart through residential areas with around 100,000 households. A 2003 estimate put the value of its natural water treatment services at $US2 million per year. Wetlands naturally filter and reduce the contaminants that drain into natural and man-made water systems.


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Văcărești Nature Park, Bucharest, Romania

Declared a protected zone in 2014, Văcărești Nature Park is a 183-hectare (450-acre) urban wetland just 4km from the center of Romania's largest and most densely populated city. The site is a unique case of nature totally reclaiming a man-made reservoir that has been abandoned since 1989. It's now a rich ecosystem with hundreds of species of flowers and plants around three ponds. Home to a vast range of bird and animal life including otters and turtles, the park provides a green lung to the built-up city surrounding the site.

That Luang Marsh, Vientiane Lao PDR

Located on the edge of Vientiane, this 2000-hectare (4,940-acre) marsh has long been a buffer against flooding and a provider of livelihoods for local fisherman, as well as a source of rice and vegetables. A recent WWF and WWT project constructed six water treatment wetlands here for a primary school, a paper mill and a brewery, proving that these can be a low-cost, low-energy way to treat urban waste water. These systems are part of a larger management plan for the marsh, which also foresees specific urban development zones.

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