



Wetland food

Adequate, good quality food is a prerequisite for healthy people, and wetlands are key contributors, supplying us with a broad range of wild and cultivated food sources such as fish (including shellfish), certain mammals, plants (rice, seaweeds, a range of leafy vegetables, fruits, and nuts, etc.), reptiles, amphibians, insects and other arthropods, snails . . . and more.

Harvesting fish resources from coastal and inland waters has been a source of sustenance and livelihood for millennia. Today one billion people – largely in developing countries – rely on fish as their main or sole source of animal protein and many more consume fish regularly. The fish we eat comes from both capture fisheries (62%) and aquaculture (38%) and both are heavily dependent on healthy coastal and inland wetlands. Achieving sustainability is a major challenge – 75% of our commercially important marine stocks of fish are currently being overfished and so too are many inland fish stocks; aquaculture, now the fastest-growing sector in the food production industry

in the world, brings its own share of sustainability challenges through the side effects of pollution, habitat destruction (especially mangroves), escape of non-native species, etc.

While the loss or diminished availability of fish protein may be unwelcome for many of us, for most of the one billion people who are both poor and dependent on fish, failing fish harvests can have direct effects on their health through malnutrition leading to higher susceptibility to diseases.

Perhaps the most well-known wetland plant is rice, now largely a cultivated plant. Nearly 50% of the world's population, mainly in Asia, depends on rice as a staple food item. Other wetland plants, such as seaweeds (both naturally occurring and cultivated), also play a significant role in food supply, and many local communities rely upon a number of leafy plants in wetlands as a source of vegetables in their daily diets.

Rice provides an interesting wetland food example that is replicated in many wetlands. For many communities, particularly in Asia, rice is grown for livelihoods as well as for home consumption, but padi fields can provide

much more than rice. In a study in Lao PDR, at least 17 of the 26 fish species that were harvested as a main source of protein occurred in padi fields and six of them bred there. In addition, villagers consumed five amphibian species, and at least two reptile, two prawn, four mollusc and 10 aquatic plant species from the same source.

Our wetlands will continue to provide food to keep us healthy - but there are many human actions that negatively affect the ability of wetlands to continue to provide for us. Pollution, excessive water abstraction, poor sanitation, overharvesting and, of course, wetland destruction, all reduce or destroy the capacity of wetlands to provide food for human consumption.

