

Inputs from the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands to the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

Introduction

Wetlands are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems. They provide essential services and supply all our fresh water. Wetlands are indispensable for the countless benefits or ecosystem services that they provide humanity, ranging from freshwater supply, food and building materials, and biodiversity, to flood control, groundwater recharge, and climate change mitigation.

All these ecosystem services improve water security, including security from natural hazards and climate change adaptation.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands uses a broad definition of wetlands ¹. It includes all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans.

Conserving wetlands is a global challenge and the Convention presently counts over 170 countries as Contracting Parties, which recognize the value of having one international treaty dedicated to a single ecosystem.

The mission of the Ramsar Convention is “Conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

The wise use of wetlands, defined as “the maintenance of ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development”, contributes to poverty eradication, as has been expressed in Resolutions of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention.

In addition to direct water services, wetlands can offer cost effective solutions for other global environmental challenges, such as climate change mitigation through peatlands protection and restoration and climate change adaptation through mangroves, which can help reduce damage from increasingly frequent storms.

Wetlands are essential for sustainable development and human well-being. It underpins the provision of food, fibre and water; it mitigates and provides resilience to climate change; it supports human health, and provides jobs in agriculture, fisheries, forestry and many others sectors.

Without effective measures to conserve wetlands and use its components in a sustainable manner, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will not be achievable.

The multiple benefits and services provided by wetlands are essential in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Ramsar Convention's fourth Strategic Plan (2016-2024) identifies four overarching goals and 19 specific targets that directly support achievement of both the SDGs as well as the Aichi Targets set up by the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024 contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 1 (Poverty eradication), Goal 2 (End hunger and promote sustainable agriculture), Goal 6 (Ensure water and sanitation for all), in particular target 6.6.1, Goal 13 (Combat climate change), Goal 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources), Goal 15 (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems) and Goal 17 (Strengthen means of implementation).

The following link provides a reference to how the Ramsar Strategic Plan contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals:

http://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/ramsarsp4_sdglinks_poster_e.pdf.

In the context of the SDGs reviewed by the 2019 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, our contributions relate this time to the SDGs 6, 13, and 15.

(a) The identification of progress, gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges in achieving the SDGs; and, or in relation to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body;

The thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (COP13) was held from 22-29 October 2018, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, under the theme "Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future."

COP13 adopted 25 resolutions, including among others on; Gender and wetlands, Climate change and peatlands, blue carbon ecosystems, sustainable urbanization, agriculture, and intertidal wetlands which will contribute to the achievement of the 2030 agenda and SDGs 12, 13 and 11.,

According to Standing Committee Decision 53-17 and Resolution XIII.7 the Secretariat continues its engagement, in ongoing work on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including in the meetings of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) and the target team target on indicator 6.6.1 led by UNEP.

In this context, the Secretariat participated in the 7th and 8th meeting of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) in Vienna, Austria, from 9-12 April 2018 and Stockholm, Sweden from 6-8 November 2018.

As noted in Resolution XIII.7, at the 7th meeting, the IAEG decided to reclassify Indicator 6.6.1 and to approve two reporting lines to the SDG database hosted by the UN Statistics Division, such that UNEP will be responsible for the internationally comparable methodology with national data, regional and global aggregations for Indicator 6.6.1, and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands will contribute data from National Reports based on Ramsar definitions and requirements.

The Convention and UNEP, as co-custodians for SDG Indicator 6.6.1 will be responsible for their respective reporting lines and will jointly contribute to the SDG target 6.6 storyline. At the 8th meeting the IAEG decided to upgrade Indicator 6.6.1 to Tier I Indicator based on the review of data availability in the global SDG Indicator database. In line with Resolution XIII.7 and the National Reports to COP13, the Secretariat is preparing a gap analysis to continue working with Contracting Parties on the completion of national wetland inventories and wetland extent to report on SDG Indicator 6.6.1.

In preparation for the HLPF, the Secretariat participated in the Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Development Goal 15 and its role in advancing sustainable development through implementation of the 2030 Agenda from 14-15 May 2018, organized by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSDG-DESA) in partnership with FAO, the UN Forum on Forests, UNCCD, CBD, RAMSAR, CITES, UNDP, UNEP, WCS and IUCN.

At the HLPF, the Secretary General participated in the thematic review of SDG 6, on the High Level Side Event “Global progress on water and sanitation: SDG 6 Synthesis Report” and in the high-level panel for the thematic review of SDG 15. The CBD Secretariat, with the Secretariats of the other biodiversity-related conventions co-organized the event “Contribution of the biodiversity-related conventions to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals”.

In supporting the achievement of SDG 14 “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”, Ramsar Secretary General and the IUCN Director General as focal points for the SDG14, Communities of Ocean Action on Mangroves invited Parties and Delegates to the Ramsar COP13 special side event “UN Ocean Conference Community of Ocean Action on Mangroves: Progress and Opportunities”.

At the event, Government representatives presented insights from already existing voluntary commitments, including actions on restoration, protection and on blue carbon.

The Ramsar Regional Initiative for the Conservation and Wise Use of Mangroves and Coral Reefs and the Regional Partnership for the Conservation of the Coastal and Marine Zone of West Africa expressed the goal to submit their work as a voluntary commitment under the UN Ocean Conference Community of Ocean Action on Mangroves.

Working with wetlands can create policy synergies and can be a cost effective way of meeting a range of policy, business and private objectives. This includes water, food and energy security (ensuring water security for agriculture and energy production), poverty alleviation and meeting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Water and wetlands are at risk from climate change, sustainable management of these ecosystems can increase their resilience and hence reduce this risk.

The sustainable use of water and wetlands, by protecting the services they provide, is critical to enable society to adapt to climate change and improve social cohesion and economic stability.

Wetlands plays a major role in mitigating climate change by contributing to long-term sequestration of carbon in a number of biomes. Wetlands also underpins ecosystem resilience and thus plays a critical role in climate change adaptation, for instance as part of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and peace-building strategies. Under the Convention Contracting Parties have adopted a framework on climate change through Resolutions, XIII, 12 and 13. The recent Resolutions approved at COP13 on peatlands encourages/aim Resol.XIII13. In the COP13 national reports, 42% of Parties report having established policies or guidelines for enhancing the role of wetlands in mitigating or adapting to climate change, while 29% have partially done so. These results are slightly improved from COP12, when 40% of Parties responded positively.

42 Parties out of 174 that submitted their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2015 have included wetland-related mitigation and adaptation measures in their NDCs. Wetlands play a critical role in climate change adaptation and mitigation, and represent a major opportunity for countries seeking to meet their targets under the Paris Agreement on climate change.

(b) Valuable successful experiences and lessons learned on empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality;

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands has promoted the wise use of wetlands ecosystems as a pragmatic strategy to reverse the widespread loss and degradation of wetlands in most parts of the world. Contracting parties to the Convention commit them-selves to include wetland conservation in their natural resource management and to promote the wise use of wetlands in their territories.

Through this concept of “wise use”, which was pioneering when the Convention was drafted, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands continues to emphasize that human use on a sustainable basis is entirely compatible with Ramsar principles and wetland conservation in general. The Ramsar wise use concept applies to all wetlands and water resources in a Contracting Party’s territory, not only to those sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance. Its application is crucial to ensuring that wetlands can continue fully to deliver their vital role in supporting maintenance of biological diversity and human well-being.

Wise use is generally seen as a strategy for promoting the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands in an integrated and equitable way, and is an established example of an ‘ecosystem approach’ that places people at the centre of decision-making for natural resource management and for determining trade-offs and equitable outcomes between wetland uses and users. The wise use of all wetlands requires that Parties ensure they are addressing wetlands beyond those currently included in the Ramsar Site network. This work may occur at the national, subnational, regional, and transboundary levels, including at basin level.

The disruption of wetland functions has a high cost — economically, socially and ecologically. The disturbance of their natural balance can destroy critical gene pools required for medical and agricultural purposes, it can affect their ability to naturally improve water quality and it can ruin their use for educational and recreational purposes. The disruption of valuable wetlands must cease, the diversity of remaining wetlands must be retained, and where possible restoration and recreation of wetlands must be attempted.

Mainstreaming recognition of ecosystem functions, services and benefits into a wide range of sectors and with a broad array of actors will help ensure the success of this effort.

In terms of the relevance of wetlands for climate change mitigation and adaptation peatlands in particular, although only accounting for 3% of the earth’s surface, hold twice as much carbon as the world’s forests^{29 30}. Losing wetlands contributes to climate change, while restoring them can help build resilience and mitigate climate change.

For example, peatlands in Indonesian Borneo total approximately 5.7 million hectares and the expansion of plantations on peatlands are expected to account for 18–22% of Indonesia’s total GHG emissions by the year 2020. The Katanga Peatland Restoration and Conservation Project was set up to protect and restore 149,800 hectares of peatland ecosystems in such a way that they can support local people by providing them with sustainable sources of income through agroforestry, and to contribute to reducing global climate change³¹. Rewetting drained peatlands can significantly reduce GHG emissions and developing new forms of sustainable agricultural production under wet conditions (*paludiculture*) will reduce GHG emissions.

(c) Areas where political guidance by the HLPF is required

Concerning SDG 13, the adverse effects of climate change, such as sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and changes in hydrology and in the temperature of water bodies, will lead to a reduction in the services provided by wetlands. Removing the existing pressures on wetlands and improving their resiliency is the most effective method of coping with the adverse effects of climate change.

Conserving, maintaining, or rehabilitating wetland ecosystems can be a viable element in an overall climate change mitigation strategy. Wetlands loss and climate change further lay on the line the future health and productivity of ecosystems: higher carbon emissions and temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, soil erosion, biodiversity loss and increased water scarcity will likely alter the suitability of vast regions for food production and human habitats. Wetlands particularly help in erosion control and sediment transport, thereby contributing to land formation and increasing resilience to storms.

SDG 13 aims to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact”, while acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change. More specifically, the associated targets of SDG 13 focus on the integration of climate change measures into national policies, the improvement of education, awareness-raising and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warnings.

Combatting climate change requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged strategic approach. Impacts of climate change are felt around the world, with an increase in climate-related disasters anticipated.

Wetland based solutions using ecosystem services for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures still need to be put forward more visibly and convincingly in the UNFCCC agenda.

Parties to the Ramsar Convention agreed in 2018 on the Resolution XIII.12 Guidance on identifying peatlands as Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) for global climate change regulation as an additional argument to existing Ramsar criteria Parties.

The Conference of the Parties also adopted in 2018 the Revised guidelines for identifying and designating peatlands as wetlands of international importance. Peatlands provide space-effective terrestrial stores of carbon, and that peatland conservation, including as a cost-effective measure to maintain terrestrial carbon stores (emission avoidance), and restoration (emission reduction) are among the measures for long-term climate-change mitigation.

(d) an assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global, regional and national levels;

Wetland conservation through wise use

A primary goal of wetland recovery projects is to restore and enhance wetland benefits by re-establishing natural ecological processes. Some wetland functions can be imitated with engineered structures, but engineered methods typically do not provide the maximum ecological benefit.

Systems of protected areas in international, regional, sub-regional, and national frameworks A regional or landscape approach is necessary especially for aquatic systems that are not easily “fenced” from surrounding areas.

Protected area networks at all levels, including the designation and management of Ramsar sites (currently 2,341) play a relevant role, especially as individual sites are often functionally interconnected by reason of shared hydrology, biodiversity, and so on.

Action is needed at the international and national level to raise awareness of the benefits of wetlands ecosystems, put in place greater maintains for their survival and ensure their inclusion in national development plans ¹ in particular:

- Enhance the network of Ramsar Sites and other wetland protected areas,
- Integrate wetlands into planning and the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda
- Strengthen legal and policy arrangements to protect all wetlands
- Apply economic and financial incentives for communities and businesses
- Integrate diverse perspectives into wetland management Improve national wetland inventories and track wetland extent

Special mention should be made of the concept of NbS and its link to wetland conservation at the national and regional levels.

Ecosystem-based management and ecosystem-based adaptation or mitigation involve the conservation, sustainable management and restoration of ecosystems.

A number of Contracting Parties of Ramsar have adopted regulatory frameworks promoting NbS at the national level. An overarching framework for promoting NBS is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

NbS for water are central to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development because they also generate social, economic and environmental co-benefits, including human health and livelihoods, food and energy security, sustainable economic growth, decent jobs, ecosystem rehabilitation and maintenance, and biodiversity.

Conclusion

The Ramsar Convention brings together the community of policy and practice in the only international convention focused on a particular ecosystem type: wetlands. In adopting the

¹ Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (2018). Global Wetland Outlook: State of the World’s Wetlands and their Services to People. Gland, Switzerland: Ramsar Convention Secretariat.
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b256c78e17ba335ea89fe1f/t/5b9ffd2e0e2e7277f629eb8f/1537211739585/RAMSAR+GWO_ENGLISH_WEB.pdf

wise use approach, strategies have been introduced to safeguard and enhance the livelihoods and needs of people who live in and around wetlands, thus protecting water resources for this and future generations.

The status of global wetlands makes sobering reading; wetlands in many areas are in trouble, with serious implications for all of society. Reversing the trend of degradation and loss is critical. Integration with sustainable development strategies is needed, as part of a commitment to conserve and wisely use all wetlands, alongside strengthened policy and legislative frameworks for conservation and wise use.

Management: is required, and Ramsar’s decades of experience in wetland conservation and wise use provides the basis for improved management worldwide. Ensuring wetlands feature in landscape-scale planning is a critical step, along with bringing a wide range of stakeholders into the process and ensuring that diverse perspectives are heard and accommodated.

Investment: is vital, from governments and others, recognizing the role that wetlands play as natural infrastructure. Alongside direct financial support, a range of broader economic incentives can drive improved management practices. Sustainable approaches to production and consumption allow industry to contribute to addressing wetland challenges.

Knowledge: is key, both improving current inventories and research but, critically, also getting better at communicating this to the wider public. New technologies, and an expansion in citizen science, will both help fill current knowledge gaps.

List of further resources

13th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands “Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future” Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 21-29 October 2018 Conference

Report. https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/cop13_report_e.pdf

IPBES, 2016. Global/regional indicator factsheet. Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

https://www.ipbes.net/sites/default/files/factsheet_wcmc_wetland_extent_trend_index.pdf

IPBES, 2018a. Summary for policymakers of the thematic assessment report on land degradation and restoration of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Scholes, R., Montanarella L., Brainich, A., N., et al. (eds.). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany.

UN-Water: Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) 2017 report: Financing universal water, sanitation and hygiene under the Sustainable Development Goals (2017).



Convention on Wetlands
Convention sur les zones humides
Convención sobre los Humedales



Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (2018). Global Wetland Outlook: State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People. Gland, Switzerland: Ramsar Convention Secretariat.
<https://www.global-wetland-outlook.ramsar.org/outlook>

Ramsar Convention, (2015). Resolution XII.4. The responsibilities, roles and composition of the Standing Committee and regional categorization of countries under the Ramsar Convention.
https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/cop12_res04_sc_roles_e.pdf

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