

# Water, Life and Culture: Celebrating Wetlands Day 2002

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Each year, environmentalists everywhere observe World Wetlands Day on February 2, which marks the signing of the international treaty officially known as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat. The agreement is also known as the Ramsar Convention, after the Iranian city where the treaty was signed in 1971. Celebration of World Wetlands Day started in 1997, and has since become an opportunity for government and non-government agencies as well as concerned citizens to raise public awareness of wetland values and renew calls for their protection.

This year's theme "Wetlands: Water, Life, and Culture" aims to encourage policy-makers, environmentalists, scientists, researchers and academics to focus on how the cultural aspects of wetlands can be used for their conservation. Wetlands provide information on one's cultural heritage, which is manifested in the storage of human-made physical structures and artifacts, traditional water and land-use management practices, as well as the religious significance people attach to such areas. Raising awareness on wetlands' environmental values should be complemented by knowledge of their cultural significance as well.

What are wetlands? These are areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and its associated flora and fauna. The Ramsar Convention 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, brack-*

## Signatories to the Convention in SEA:

Cambodia - 1999  
Indonesia - 1992  
Malaysia - 1995  
Philippines - 1994  
Thailand - 1998  
Vietnam - 1989

*ish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres".*

Wetlands may thus refer to a variety of habitat types, including rivers and lakes, coastal lagoons, mangroves, peatlands, and even coral reefs. Human-made wetlands include fishponds, irrigated agricultural land, and reservoirs. Although wetlands occur in every country, its specific global coverage is unknown. The World Conservation Monitoring Centre wetlands encompass an estimated 5.7 million km<sup>2</sup> – roughly 6% of the Earth's land surface – of which 2% are lakes, 30% bogs, 26% fens, 20% swamps, and 15% floodplains. Mangroves cover some 240,000 km<sup>2</sup> of coastal area, and an estimated 600,000 km<sup>2</sup> of coral reefs remain worldwide.

Conservation of wetlands is significant since these are among the world's most productive environments. They support immense biological diversity by providing the water and primary productivity to countless species of plants and animals for survival, and are also important storehouses of plant genetic material.

Wetlands perform many vital functions, including water storage; storm protection and flood mitigation; shoreline stabilization and ero-

sion control; groundwater recharge; water purification; and stabilisation of local climate conditions, particularly rainfall and temperature. As a result, we have been able to derive tremendous economic benefits from wetlands, such as water supply; fisheries; agriculture; timber production; energy and wildlife resources; transport and tourism opportunities. Wetlands are also significant culturally: they are related to religious and cosmological beliefs, constitute a source of artistic inspiration, provide wildlife sanctuaries, and form the basis of important local traditions.

## The Ramsar Convention

The Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty, which provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are presently 131 Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 1150 wetland sites, totaling 96.3 million hectares, designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

The official name of the treaty reflects its original emphasis on the conservation and wise use of wetlands primarily to provide habitat for waterbirds. Over the years, however, the Convention has broadened its scope to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use, recognizing wetlands as ecosystems that are extremely important for biodiversity conservation in general and for the well being of human communities (Ramsar Information Paper No. 2). The Convention ensures that threats to wetlands are addressed so that their functions, values and attributes continue for generations. ■