

WORLD WETLANDS DAY 2003

No Wetlands – No Water!

Each year the world celebrates World Wetlands Day (WWD) on February 2 to commemorate the 1977 signing of the Convention on Wetlands in the Iranian city of Ramsar. The Ramsar Convention 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 136 Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 1,267 wetland sites totaling 107.5 million hectares. The Convention defines wetlands as “areas of marsh, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static, flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water, the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters.”

Wetlands include reefs flats and seagrass beds in coastal areas, mudflats, mangroves, estuaries, rivers, freshwater marshes, swamp forests, saline marshes and lakes. It is home to a rich variety of flora and fauna, and is a vital feeding and breeding habitat for migratory birds.

Wetlands are sources of fresh water and food, help regulate floodwater as well as the intrusion of saline water, prevent soil erosion, retain sediments and nutrients in soil, sources of energy (hydro-electric, firewood and peat), provide water transport, and serve as habitats of plants and animals.

World Wetlands Day celebrations began in 1997 and has since become an opportunity for government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and groups of citizens at all levels of the community to undertake actions aimed at raising public awareness of the Ramsar Convention and wetland values and benefits. For instance, the Society for the Conservation of Philippine Wetlands, in cooperation with the Philippines' Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau, educated visitors at the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Nature Center on the importance of wetlands and the significance of World Wetlands Day. In Thailand, the Office of Environmental Policy and Planning conducted a World Wetlands Day Conference, which featured an exhibition of wetland products by lo-

cal communities and exhibition boards on Ramsar sites and wetland values. Other activities often undertaken to mark the event include lectures and seminars, nature walks, art contests, community clean-up projects, radio and television interviews by conservation personalities, as well as the launch of new wetland policies and new Ramsar sites.

This year's WWD theme is “No wetlands - No water”, which underscores the importance of wetlands in conjunction with the observance of 2003 as the United Nation's International Year of Freshwater (IYF). The choice of the theme is meant to strengthen efforts by the United Nations to bring attention to the importance of protecting the world's freshwater sources. Over the years there has been growing concern over the availability of safe drinking water to accommodate the needs of the world's growing population. On the surface, statistics indicate that there seems to be enough water for everybody, since we only use around 20% of the water in the world's rivers. However, the situation, as well as the quality of available water varies across the globe. It is known though that:

- 1.1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water.
- 2.3 billion people currently live around rivers where there are frequent water shortages, and
- 1.7 billion of these people live in areas where water is scarce.

Obviously, water is not distributed well enough to satisfy everybody's needs. In addition, at least 1.1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water and 3 million die each year, many of them children, from illnesses caused by contaminated water.

Wetlands play an important role in water cycle by capturing and holding rainfall and snowmelt, retaining sediments, and purifying water. And yet, human-related activities have led to the destruction of 50% of the world's remaining wet-



The Airhitamlaut river at the heart of Berbak Park in Sumatra, Indonesia.

lands. Modification of wetlands with dams and canals have significantly fragmented and altered water flow in 60% of the world's largest rivers - often compromising the many valuable ecosystem functions upon which we depend.

Wetlands have also been converted to agriculture to increase food production while depleting global freshwater supplies. Agricultural practices, particularly the use of pesticides in farming, have also contributed to the contamination of remaining wetlands. Excessive logging of forests has also led to soil erosion, causing widespread sedimentation of rivers and lakes. Pollution from industrial sources has also caused the death of a significant number of freshwater bodies and groundwater sources all over the world. The net result is a serious reduction in both freshwater quantity and quality.

This situation will not improve with a projected 1.7 billion additional people on the planet in the next 20 years, most of whom will live in developing countries. These circumstances pose a triple challenge to environmentalists all over the world. How can we ensure food, water and ecosystem security for the global population? Solutions lie in integrated water resource management strategies at the source level with full stakeholders' participation.

Approaches must incorporate improved technologies for more efficient use of water in agriculture, industry and domestic use, as well as recognise the value of water infrastructure and ecosystem protection, as well as provide the appropriate safety nets for the poor. The Ramsar Convention believes that the source of freshwater, our wetland ecosystems, should be the starting point of all integrated water management strategies. Maintaining the health of wetlands to secure our sources of freshwater and much of our food is one of the fundamental keys to a sustainable planet. ■

Surfing the Web... of Life

Protected areas that meet across international borders provide important opportunities for collaboration between managers and scientists in neighbouring countries. Various terms are used to describe these areas - transboundary protected areas, transfrontier protected areas, and peace parks are the most common.

These areas provide possibilities for promoting biodiversity conservation and sustainable use across politically divided ecosystems, while at the same time encouraging international collaboration in management, and in the sharing of experience and of information. The **World Conservation Monitoring Centre** (http://www.wcmc.org.uk/protected_areas/transboundary/index.html) provides information on the status and distribution of transboundary protected areas, key meetings on peace parks, as well as links to other sites.

The **Peace Parks Foundation** (<http://www.peaceparks.org/>) aims to facilitate the establishment of Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) in Africa while supporting sustainable economic development, the conservation of biodiversity, and regional peace and stability. The idea for the project first began in 1990, when the possibility of establishing a permanent link between some of the protected areas in southern Mozambique and their adjacent counterparts in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe was first explored. Results from the project supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)-South Africa, World Bank and Global Environment Facility suggested a conceptual shift away from the idea of strictly protected national parks towards greater emphasis on multiple resource use by local communities. The concept of transfrontier conservation area (TFCA), or peace parks, was defined as relatively large areas that straddle frontiers between two or more countries and cover large-scale natural systems encompassing one or more protected areas. Very often both human and animal populations traditionally migrated across or straddled the political boundaries concerned. In essence, TFCAs therefore extend far beyond designated protected areas, and can incorporate such innovative approaches as biosphere reserves and a wide range of community-based natural resource management programmes.

The **North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)** (<http://www.cec.org/home/index.cfm?varlan=english>) is an international organisation created by Canada, Mexico and the United States under the North American

Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC). The CEC was established to address regional environmental concerns, help prevent potential trade and environmental conflicts, and to promote the effective enforcement of environmental law. The Agreement complements the environmental provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The CEC supports projects in four major areas: Trade and the Environment; Conservation of Biodiversity; Pollutants and Health; and Law and Policy. Initiatives funded and logistically supported by the CEC seek to develop the rationale for changes in public policy and investment strategies across North America through protection of shared ecosystem.

The CEC website also has a **Transboundary Agreements Infobase** (http://www.cec.org/pubs_info_resources/law_treat_agree/transbound_agree/index.cfm?varlan=english), which gives Internet users free and unrestricted access to agreements and treaties on transboundary environmental cooperation in North America. The Infobase is part of the CEC's efforts to provide information that promotes North American cooperation on environmental issues that affect the entire region. Users can search the database by subject, agreement name, or by parties to the agreements. A complete list of agreements—there are approximately 200 individual agreements currently in the database—is also available for users to browse through. In addition, the database provides hyperlinks to the full text of the agreements, as well as to other Internet sites that provide additional information related to the agreements.

The **Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database** (<http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/>), a project of the Oregon State University Department of Geosciences in collaboration with the Northwest Alliance for Computational Science and Engineering, was developed to aid in the assessment of the process of water conflict prevention and resolution. It provides links to case studies of transboundary dispute resolution; an International Freshwater Treaties Database with more than 400 international, freshwater-related agreements, covering the years 1820 to 2001; an International River Basins Register that lists and maps the world's international river basins, delineated by continent; and an International Water Event Database documenting historical international water relations from 1948 to 1999, among others. ■