



Drive to protect world's wetlands

Vegetated wetlands, such as swamps and marshes, are some of the most wildlife-rich ecosystems on the planet, their shallow waters and abundant plant life supporting everything from insects to ducks to moose. But these wetlands, as well as lakes, rivers and other watery environments around the world, are in peril, with many polluted or degraded as a result of climate change and human development.

In recent months, though, Governments have stepped up their efforts to protect and restore these natural spaces, a drive experts say is not only crucial for protecting biodiversity, but also countering the climate crisis. A November 2022 meeting of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands raised the profile of wetlands and their crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, humanity's blueprint for a better future.

The following month at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference, countries reached a landmark agreement to protect nature, a deal that included a provision to restore at least 30 percent of degraded inland water bodies and conserve healthy freshwater ecosystems in an equitable way. Coastal and freshwater wetland ecosystems are home to 40 percent of all biodiversity. Peatlands, a particular type of vegetated wetland, store twice as much carbon as the world's forests. Yet, over the past 200 years, wetlands have been drained to make way for farmland or infrastructure development.

Around 35 percent of the world's wetlands, which also reduce the impact of flooding and cleanse polluted water, were lost between 1970 and 2015. The loss rate has been accelerating since 2000.

Depending on the amount of sea-level rise caused by the climate crisis, 20 - 90 percent of current coastal wetlands, which sequester carbon up to 55 times faster than tropical rainforests, may be lost by the end of the Century. Wetlands - important stopovers for migratory birds - have also lost more biodiversity than other terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

"In line with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, we must stop policies and subsidies that incentivize deforestation and wetlands degradation from source to sea and promote their urgent restoration", says Mrs. Leticia Carvalho, head of the Marine and Freshwater Branch at the UN Environment Program (UNEP).

"At the same time, we must guide and drive investments to protect priority ecosystems, such as peatlands, and encourage the private sector to commit to deforestation and peatland-drainage-free

supply chains," she adds. That message comes just ahead of World Wetlands Day, which falls on 2nd February. This year the day highlights the urgent need to restore wetlands. It is also a precursor to the UN Water Conference, an international gathering that begins on 22nd March.

Aware of the risks of wetland degradation to economies and societies, in March 2022, countries at the UN Environment Assembly adopted resolutions on lakes and nature-based solutions. This followed resolutions specifically on peatlands, which helped raise global awareness of the importance of conserving and restoring wetlands of all kinds. The resolutions were designed to pave the way for action and for local and national conservation campaigns that include Government backing and finance.

Back from the brink

Countries around the world are now beginning to restore their wetlands. Examples of wetland conservation initiatives include the development of emerging sponge cities in China and the Government-backed restoration of the United Kingdom's Great North Bog, a significant area for both carbon and water storage. Research shows that accelerated efforts to conserve and restore wetlands are crucial as the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss and pollution and waste is amplifying the effects of wetland degradation. But adequate finance and political will are key.

According to UNEP's 2022 State of Finance for Nature report, climate, biodiversity and land degradation goals will be out of reach unless investments in nature-based solutions quickly ramp up to US\$ 384 billion per year by 2025. That would be more than double the current total of US\$ 154 billion a year.

"We're running out of chances to protect the services provided by wetlands that societies depend on for a sustainable future", said Mrs. Leticia Carvalho. "We must ramp up international solidarity, capacity-building and funding without further delay."



▲ *Covering bare peat with Sphagnum-rich heather brash is a crucial part of peatland restoration in Northern England*

Good news from Argentina

In December 2022, legislators in Argentina's Southernmost Tierra del Fuego Province passed a law to permanently protect the rugged Mitre Peninsula. This remote corner of South America is home to underwater kelp forests and one of the largest peatland complexes in South America, two powerhouse ecosystems that combined make up Argentina's biggest carbon sink.

The creation of the new protected area, roughly the size of the Grand Canyon National Park in the United States, is an important step to counter the climate crisis, say experts. The Global Peatlands Initiative, coordinated by UNEP, has been campaigning for the protection of South America's peatlands for several years.

The success in Argentina is a small piece of good news for peatlands, which make up about half of the world's inland vegetated wetlands. According to the UNEP-supported Global Peatlands Assessment, the Earth is losing 500,000 hectares of peatlands a year, an area almost twice the size of Egypt's sprawling capital, Cairo. The draining and degradation of peatlands releases massive amounts of carbon dioxide and contributes around 4 percent of global human-induced greenhouse gas emissions.

"This is exactly what the protection of key habitats should look like", said Mrs. Kristine Tompkins, a UN Patron of Protected Areas and the Co-Founder of Tompkins Conservation, an environmental non-profit group. "This park is a new highwater mark for global conservation and the fight against climate change".

World Wetlands Day on 2nd February seeks to drive awareness of the benefits of wetlands and encourage people to conserve and sustainably use these landscapes. UNEP is a long-time supporter of efforts to protect wetlands and monitors their status, along with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. UNEP helps countries monitor and protect wetlands and other ecosystems in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. New data collection for Sustainable Development Goal 6, which covers water and sanitation, is being launched in the spring of 2023 ■

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