

Wetland Conservation

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Wetlands include swamps, marshes, billabongs, lakes, salt marshes, mudflats, mangroves, coral reefs, fens, peat lands, or bodies of water — whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary. Water within these areas can be static or flowing, fresh, brackish or saline. Wetlands are important to us all because they protect our shores from wave action, reduce the impacts of floods, absorb pollutants and provide habitat for animals and plants. Wetlands are also important because they purify our water, acting as natural filters.

Peat-forming wetlands, an estimated 60% of all the wetlands distributed globally, occur predominantly in the northern boreal and the tropical zones of the world. These ecosystems are subjected to a series of land use pressures including active forestry development of tropical forest species, agricultural drainage, energy, and horticultural uses of peat resources, and flooding for hydroelectric reservoirs. Peat lands are vitally linked to conservation issues such as carbon sequestration affecting global climate change, and provision of key habitat for a diverse range of the world's flora and fauna. They also are the source of a significant portion of the freshwater and many other economic resources vital to human survival. This is particularly important in developing nations (Environmental Concern, 2005). As Jamie Pittock the Director of WWF Living Waters Program stated, "Managing wetlands sustainably will aid significantly in meeting the target set by the World Summit on Sustainable Development of halving the number of people without adequate water and sanitation services by 2015."

Wetlands are among the most biologically diverse and productive environments in nature. However, many also see them as a nuisance and an impediment to development and agriculture. According to Environmental Concern, "In 1840, the Swamp Land Act pronounced, 'If there is any fact which may be supposed to be known by everybody and therefore by the courts, it is that swamps and stagnant waters are the cause of malaria and malignant fevers, and that public power is never more legitimately exercised than in removing such nuisances.'" Because of such misconceptions the United States has lost over 50% of its wetland resources. Of the estimated 221 million acres of wetlands originally in the lower 48 states, only 104 million acres remain an aggregate loss of over 53 percent (Dahl, 1990). California itself has lost 91 percent of its wetlands mainly due to agriculture. This loss has led many problems such as the loss of waterfowl habitat, fish and shellfish nursery grounds, floodwater storage, storm surge protection and water quality benefits. Considering the harm educational campaigns have done in the past, it stands to reason that educational campaigns can be effective in the restoration, conservation, and protection of wetlands today.

Roughly 50% of all USDA conservation spending since 1985 has been for land retirement. The two major programs: Wetlands Reserve Program and Conservation Reserve Program 2002 Farm Act expands authority for land retirement by four million acres, an 11% increase. A

significant share will be devoted to wetlands as the Wetlands Reserve Program cap doubles from 1.075 million acres to 2.275 million acres. An economic disincentive program states that farmers or ranchers lose eligibility for farm program benefits if they produce an agricultural commodity on a wetland converted after December 23, 1985 or if they convert a wetland after November 28, 1990 to make agricultural production possible.

Protecting, restoring, and managing representative networks of freshwater habitats is urgently required to conserve freshwater biodiversity and ensure supplies of water, food, materials and services for communities.

Information for this article was sourced from:

1. Environmental Concern. 2005. <http://www.wetland.org/>.
2. Housing and Environment. 2005. <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/extension/housing/>.