Convention on Wetlands

Ramsar

Wetlands: a global disappearing act

It's a sobering picture. Scientific estimates show that 64% of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1900. In some regions, notably Asia, the loss is even higher. Inland wetlands are disappearing at a faster pace than coastal ones, but the overall trend is clear.

As a result, access to fresh water is declining for one to two billion people worldwide, while flood control, carbon storage and traditional wetland livelihoods all suffer. In parallel, the populations of freshwater species declined by 76% between 1970 and 2010 according to WWF's Living Planet Index.

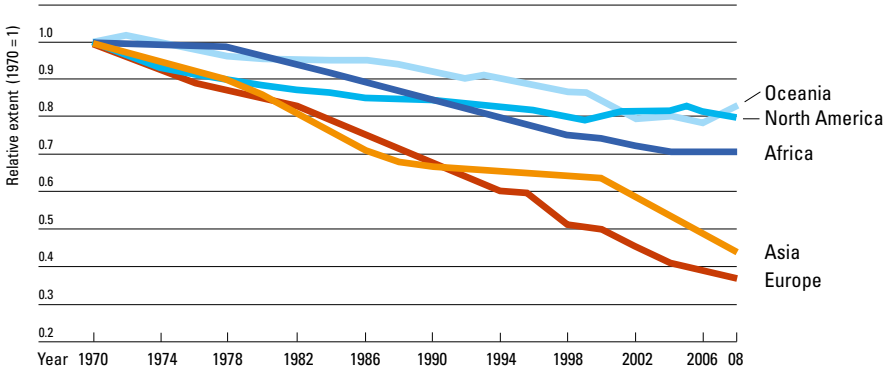
Ramsar is a joint sponsor of the Wetlands Extent Index, which provides an indicator of the loss in recent decades, measuring the decrease in a global sampling of more than 1000 wetland sites between 1970 and 2008. Overall, these sites shrank by an average of 40% over the period. Individual wetlands and regions vary widely, but the continuing trend is unmistakable.

What is driving this loss?

Unfortunately, wetlands are often viewed as wasteland; something to be drained, filled and converted to other purposes. The main causes of the degradation and loss of wetlands are:

- Major changes in land use, especially an increase in agriculture and grazing animals
- Water diversion through dams, dikes and canalization
- Infrastructure development, particularly in river valleys and coastal areas
- Air and water pollution and excess nutrients

Wetlands Extent Index



Wetlands Extent Index as published in the CBD Technical Series No. 78: *Progress Towards the Aichi Biodiversity Targets*

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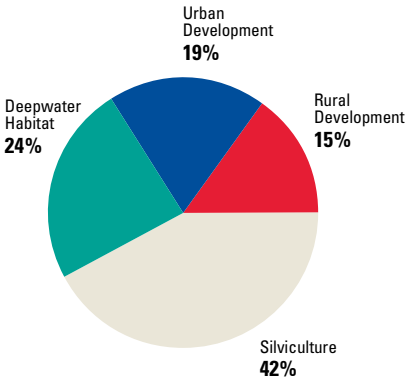
Ex-wetlands: where are they now?

Drivers of loss can vary widely from country to country. In the United States, drainage for forest-related uses such as logging accounted for a considerable share of wetlands loss between 1998 and 2009. Inundation caused major declines as well. Urban and rural development together accounted for just over a third of wetland losses.

Drivers of US Wetland Loss

1998-2009



Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service: *Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Conterminous United States 1998 to 2004* and *2004 to 2009*

What can decision-makers do?

Decision-makers can help slow, stop and reverse the trend in several ways:

- Make policies that consider the ecosystem services that wetlands provide, and integrate them into land use planning.
- Use all remaining wetland sites wisely; meeting human needs while sustaining biodiversity and other wetland services.
- Restore wetlands that have been degraded.
- Develop financing sources for wetlands conservation.
- Educate others about the benefits of wetlands.

Photo: Swiss Study Foundation

Detailed suggestions for wise management at site level can be found in Fact Sheet 2 *Wetlands: wise use basics on site*. Actions that individuals can take for wetlands are outlined in depth in Fact Sheet 4 *Wetlands: What can I do?*

Need more detail?

Ramsar makes a wide variety of materials available for wetlands stakeholders and decision-makers. Particularly useful are the Ramsar *Wise Use Handbooks*, a series of booklets that provide detailed guidance on all aspects of wetlands, ranging from policy-making and community participation to monitoring and wetlands site management. They can be downloaded free of charge from www.ramsar.org/wise-use-wetlands.

The Ramsar Convention

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, commonly known as the Ramsar Convention, is a global intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. It is the only global treaty to focus on one single ecosystem.