

# The Ramsar Convention: What's it all about?

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, more commonly known as the Ramsar Convention, is an international agreement promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands. It is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem.



Talaiu Island in Vanua Levu



Soft coral garden, Great Sea Reef's marine protected area



www.ramsar.org

The Ramsar Convention today has 168 Contracting Parties (member countries), and is so named for the city in Iran where the treaty was signed in 1971. Through this agreement, member countries positively commit to:

- Wise use of all their wetlands
- Designating sites for the Ramsar List of "Wetlands of International Importance" (Ramsar Sites) and their conservation
- Cooperating on transboundary wetlands and other shared interests

As of April 2015, there are over 2100 designated Ramsar Sites covering more than 208 million hectares; an area slightly larger than Mexico. The official list of Ramsar Sites is available on the Convention website at: [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org).

Wetlands on the Ramsar list are designated for their high value to the country and the world for the ecosystem services and benefits provided.

## What are Wetlands?

The definition of the word 'wetland', under the Convention, is any land area that is saturated or flooded with water, either seasonally or permanently.

Inland wetlands include aquifers, lakes, rivers, streams, marshes, peatlands, ponds, flood plains and swamps. Coastal wetlands include all coastlines, mangroves, saltmarshes, estuaries, lagoons, seagrass meadows and coral reefs.

## Why should I care about Wetlands?

Traditionally viewed as wasteland or a breeding ground for disease, wetlands are vital for humanity for a number of reasons:

- **Wetlands provide fresh water**  
Freshwater wetlands give us our water for basic drinking, cooking and washing needs and for irrigation.
- **Wetlands feed humanity**  
Rice, grown in wetland paddies, is the staple diet of nearly three billion people, and accounts for 20% of the world's food.

## Wetlands are nature's shock absorbers

- The wetlands within river basins act as natural sponges, absorbing rainfall, reducing flood impact and this same storage capacity also helps safeguard against drought. Mangroves and coral reefs reduce the speed and height of storm surges and impact of tsunamis and hurricanes.

## Wetlands are critical for biodiversity

- Wetlands are home to more than 100,000 known freshwater species, and this number is growing all the time. Wetlands are also essential for many amphibians, as well as for bird breeding and migration.

## Wetlands create sustainable products and livelihoods

- More than 660 million people depend on fishing and aquaculture for their livelihoods. Wetlands also provide timber for building, vegetable oil, medicinal plants, raw material for weaving and fodder for animals.



Navua river gorge



Upper Navua river rafting



River Fiji tour guide

## Fiji

### The Upper Navua Conservation Area (UNCA)

The UNCA is a source of economic sustenance to the nearby village communities with its wide range of food products, building materials, medicine source, and ornamental materials not to mention the river has been used as a means of transportation for so many years.

The UNCA is traditionally owned and is leased to Rivers Fiji Limited through conservation lease. Through the management of eco-tourism company Rivers Fiji Limited, who operate whitewater rafting activities at the UNCA, the village communities of Nabukelevu, Wainadiro and Waibogi have been provided employment opportunities as rafting guides, porters and drivers. Rivers Fiji Ltd, when possible have often used the local resources provided by the nearby village communities and this relationship strengthens the link between business and the local community.

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## The Ramsar Convention

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## Wetlands are disappearing fast

Recent estimates show that 64% or more of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1900. Some of the main causes of the degradation and loss of wetlands are:

- Major changes in land use, especially increased agriculture and grazing
- Water diversion through dams, dykes and canalization
- Infrastructure development, particularly in urban areas, river valleys and coastal areas.

## How are Ramsar Sites designated?

Ramsar Sites are designated by the National Administrative Authority, responsible for the Ramsar Convention in each country, if they meet the technical criteria, and after due consideration of their relative importance.

## Ramsar Convention: working to prevent, stop and reverse wetland loss and degradation

Together with the Contracting Parties, Partners and International Organization Partners (IOPs), the Ramsar Convention works to:

- Encourage policies and land use planning that integrate wetland issues
- Enthuse the public about the benefits and services that wetlands provide
- Ensure significant investment into increasing awareness by working with private sector actors such as Danone-Evian and Star Alliance
- Forge alliances that align private and public sector actors to reverse the alarming loss and degradation
- Develop financing sources for wetland conservation and management.



# Wetlands: why should I care?



Inland Swamp Nadrau near Tomanivi



Drano or salt lake in Savusavu



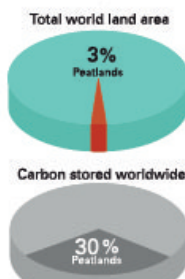
Totoya Island and barrier reef



Sigatoka River



Mangroves



Source: TEEB: The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for Water and Wetlands

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Humans often equate wetlands with wasteland; a place to be drained, filled in, burnt off and re-purposed. In fact, scientific studies show that 64% of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1900. Measured against 1700, an estimated 87% have been lost.

Why is this such an alarming trend? And why are wetlands actually essential to sustainable development for the human race?

## Wetlands are everywhere

- Wetlands are land areas that are saturated or flooded with water either permanently or seasonally.
- Inland wetlands include marshes, ponds, lakes, fens, rivers, floodplains, and swamps.
- Coastal wetlands include saltwater marshes, estuaries, mangroves, lagoons and even coral reefs.
- Fish ponds, rice paddies, and salt pans are human-made wetlands.
- Wetlands range in size from less than a single hectare to the Pantanal in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay, which covers an area three times the size of Ireland.



Lake Tagimocia fresh water lake

## Wetlands ensure fresh water for all of us

- Less than 3% of the world's water is fresh, and most of that is frozen. Yet every human requires 20-50 litres of water a day for basic drinking, cooking and cleaning. Wetlands provide our water needs and help replenish the groundwater aquifers that are an important source of fresh water for humanity.

## Wetlands guarantee our food supply

- Humans consume 19kg of fish each year on average. Most commercial fish depend on coastal wetlands for part of their life cycle.



Cukini Island patchy mangrove system in Vanua Levu

## Wetlands are nature's shock absorbers

- Peatlands and wet grasslands in river basins act as natural sponges, absorbing rainfall, creating wide surface pools and reducing floods in streams and rivers. This storage capacity also helps safeguard against drought.
- Mangroves, saltmarshes and coral reefs all reduce the speed and height of storm surges. Their roots bind the shoreline, resist erosion by wind and waves, and increase resilience against climate change.

## Wetlands store carbon

- Peatlands alone cover an estimated 3% of the world's land area, but they hold 30% of all carbon stored on land. This is twice the amount stored in all the world's forests. But when they are burned or drained for agriculture, they go from being a carbon sink to a carbon source. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from peatland fires, drainage and extraction equate to 10% of all annual fossil fuel emissions.

## Wetlands are critical for biodiversity

- Wetlands are home to more than 100,000 known freshwater species alone, and this number is growing all the time. From 1999 to 2009, some 257 new species of freshwater fish were discovered in the Amazon.
- Wetlands are essential for many amphibians and reptiles, as well as for bird breeding and migration.

- Rice, grown in wetland paddies, is the staple diet of nearly three billion people, and accounts for 20% of the world's nutritional intake.

## Wetlands purify and filter harmful waste from water

- Some of the pollutants from pesticides, industry and mining, including heavy metals and toxins are absorbed by wetland sediments, plants and marine life.
- Almost two billion people in Asia and 380 million Europeans depend on groundwater aquifers for their water supply.

Parties to the Ramsar Convention are obligated to designate important national wetland sites as Ramsar Site, promote trainings in wetland research and management, and promote international and regional cooperation.

### Upper Navua Conservation Area (UNCA)

- Fiji's first national Ramsar Site located in the Province of Serua on the South Central site of Viti Levu.
- With an area of 615 hectares the Ramsar site contains a spectacular count of Fiji's native and or endemic species.
- UNCA is a source of economic sustenance to the nearby village communities with its wide range of food products, building materials, medicine source, and ornamental materials not to mention the river has been used as a means of transportation for so many years.

### Qoliqoli Cokovata

- Fiji's second Ramsar site located north coast of Vanua Levu forms part of Fiji's Great Sea Reef (GSR) or Cakaulevu which extends over 200km from Udu point at the northern tip of Vanua Levu, across the Bligh waters to the barrier reef system of the Yasawa Islands.
- The GSR is the longest and most diverse reef system in Fiji and is the third longest barrier reef system in the world.
- GSR supports key sources of food security, income and employment for households, communities and groups as resource owners and users alike in the Fisheries and Tourism sectors.

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**FIJI**  
Fiji became a party to the Ramsar convention on wetlands of international importance in the year 2006.

