Wetlands International Europe's reaction to the EU 2030 Biodiversity strategy

"Bringing nature back in our lives" is a strong and encouraging title for this communication, recognising the role of healthy ecosystems like wetlands as premier nature-based solution to rebuild society's resilience, secure clean water supplies, reduce the impact of floods and droughts, enable food security and buffer people against the ravages of climate change[1] .

Wetlands International European Association welcomes the commitment to *invest in nature protection and restoration for Europe's economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.* **This is a unique opportunity to shape a new society in harmony with nature[2].** We must not forget that the biodiversity and climate crisis is a much bigger and persistent challenge for humanity than COVID-19. It is our duty to prepare and mitigate for the growing climate emergency and ensure the conservation of our natural resources for new generations. This includes protecting and restoring vital wetland habitats, such as rivers and peatlands.

We call on the European Parliament and the Council to endorse this strategy and to ensure that the Nature Restoration Plan will be presented in 2021 according wetlands a prominent place.

1. Protect and recover Europe's wetland biodiversity

➢ We welcome that the European Commission has repeatedly emphasized the need to protect and restore wetlands ecosystems to bring substantial socio-economic benefits[3]

Europe's wetlands and their biodiversity face an emergency just as acute as the EU's climate emergency. Wetlands comprise about 2% of the EU's territory (12.5% at pan-European level) and 4.3% of the Natura 2000 area, and are among the most threatened ecosystems in Europe[4] – **with 35% having disappeared since 1970 and a rate of loss three times faster than forests**.[5] This comes at an enormous cost and loss of the valuable services they provide, directly impacting Europe's greenhouse gas emissions, quality and quantity of our waters and biodiversity. Europe and the world face a growing freshwater biodiversity crisis. Wetlands are home to more than 40% of the world's species, but 83% of freshwater species numbers have declined globally since 1970, worse than other ecosystems.[6] **The cost of losing wetlands is disproportionally high, in part because of the connectivity role they play**. At landscape and river basin scale, wetlands are critical for the migration of fish, eels and other taxa. At a continental scale, wetlands are essential habitat for migratory waterbirds, a very visible flagship component and indicator of Europe's biodiversity.

Despite the potential of nature-based solutions, they currently attract less than 1% of total investments into water resource management.[7] Bold and large-scale nature restoration targets, with strong enforcement mechanisms are urgently needed to make optimal use of the potential of wetland solutions as part of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030

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[1] https://www.wetlands.org/news/act-now-to-build-back-the-bond-between-people-and-nature/

[2] Post COVID 19: unique opportunity to shape a new society in harmony with nature, Wetlands International European Association 2020

[3] *protecting coastal wetlands could save the insurance industry around €50 billion annually through reducing flood damage losses*, COM(2020) 380 final

[4] https://www.eea.europa.eu/signals/signals-2018-content-list/articles/life-under-water-faces-serious-threats

[5] Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (2018). Global Wetland Outlook

[6] http://www.wwf.eu/campaigns/living_planet_report_2018/

[7] WWAP/UN-Water. (2018). The United Nations World Water Development Report.

2. Legally binding restoration targets for wetlands

- **We welcome the Commission's proposal to restoring freshwater ecosystems through the existing legal framework on water and the target for restoring 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers.**

Good ecological status for European waters is still a distant prospect. The proposed EU Nature Restoration Plan is an opportunity to ensure that the pace of ecological improvement of water bodies in Europe will overtake the pace of their degradation. Large-scale measures for ecological restoration are needed to tackle the enduring pressures on rivers and wetlands. Remaining free-flowing rivers in Europe urgently need strong protection. At the same time, we note that the future of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) remains uncertain. Therefore, we urge the Commission to declare that it will preserve the WFD in its current form, in line with the conclusions of the European Commission's evaluation of water legislation that the WFD is "broadly fit for purpose".

- **We applaud the commitment of the European Commission to present in 2021 binding EU nature restorations targets to restore healthy and resilient ecosystems, including the most-carbon-rich ones such as seagrass meadows, wetlands, peatlands, bogs and marshes.**

As Wetlands International, **we consider peatlands to be treasures**, providing numerous ecosystem services and playing a role in disaster risk reduction. These ecosystems store huge amounts of fresh water and host unique biodiversity in rich peat swamp forests. Peatlands represent the world's most effective carbon stores.[8] When peatlands are drained, they become net carbon emitters instead of active carbon stores. In the EU, they cover only 3% of the land surface but degraded peatlands emit 25% of all greenhouse gases from the agriculture, energy and forestry sectors.

We need to strictly protect them, as mentioned in the communication, but of upmost importance is ending the repeated and severe damage to peatlands by **fostering a fundamental change in peat management patterns, prohibiting, or at least minimizing, the drainage process**. Sustainably managed peatlands will be essential to achieving a climate neutral continent by 2050.

- **We believe that the efforts of the Commission to avoid or minimize the placing of products associated, in particular, with deforestation or forest degradation on the EU market and to promote forest-friendly imports and value chains is positive but not enough.**

We must not **forget specific wetland issues related to key commodities** such as shrimp (mangrove conversion, land-subsidence, huge carbon emissions from soils, biodiversity loss), soy (large scale habitat conversion, biodiversity loss), palm oil and pulp (large-scale habitat conversion, biodiversity loss) and beef (habitat conversion). **We call for value chain enhancement processes that set strict criteria and legislation to prevent such impacts.**

photo credit: Francesco Veronesi

- **The Commission will take a number of steps to crack down on illegal wildlife trade. We keep calling out to Europe: Stop illegal trafficking of European Eel!**

Despite the measures taken by the EU to ban all imports and exports of European Eel to and from the EU, poaching and illegal trade of the European eel have occurred, endangering the species and making the assessment of the impact of fishery, and its management, difficult. More need to be done

- **While greeting the prominent role of nature based solutions in the communication, we strongly stress that alongside green-grey infrastructures, space should be given to blue-green infrastructures**

Nature-based solutions such as restoring mangrove buffers in degraded coastal areas or preserving peatlands have the potential to solve many of our climate and water challenges, reduce vulnerability and help us adapt to a changing climate[9].

Blue-Green Infrastructure merges the dynamic and adaptable properties of natural areas (wetlands) with the semi-natural (linear parks with roads), that are interconnected (with drainage systems and green roof corridors). This interconnected network allows the flow of persons, water and biodiversity. Additionally, this reduces the disaster risks related to climate change, such as floods, droughts and landslides. Well-managed Blue-Green Infrastructure is economical, scalable and sustainable. It can even contribute to the grey infrastructure, said **Sander Carpaij**, Urban Coordinator Wetland International[10]

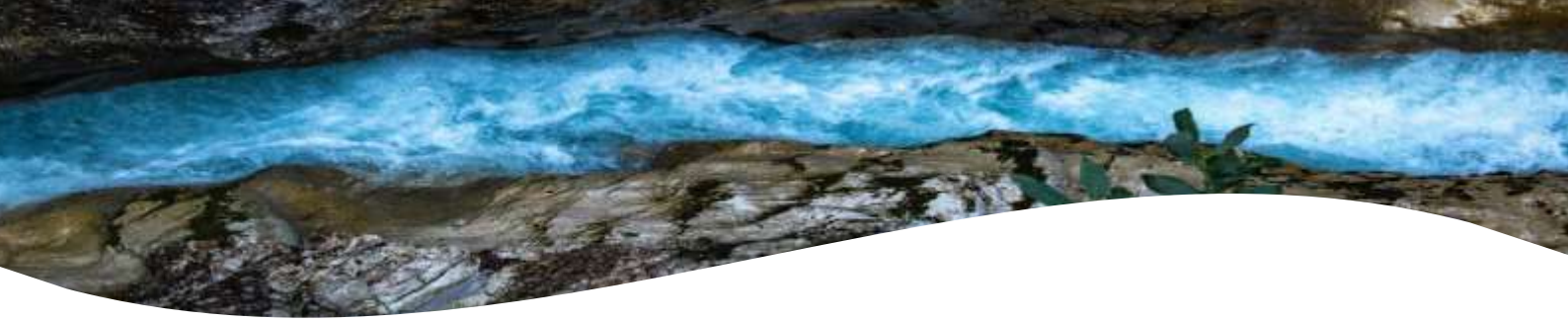
We call on the EU **to launch a Cities Initiative** that includes urban wetlands and blue-green infrastructure specifically in land-use plans, with specific zoning, and climate change adaptation plans that prioritise their protection;

3.Enable Transformative Change for NBS

- **Without a true systems understanding, NBS is in danger of remaining local, ignoring wider landscape and factors that influence it.** This can result in maladaptation, or unintended damage to other ecosystems. Such systems thinking and multi-disciplinary collaboration to re-design landscapes for future resilience enables innovation and the use of best practice for nature based and hybrid solutions[11].

"For deployment of nature-based solutions at scale, we need governments and donors to incentivise joined-up action by different sectors, putting healthy ecosystems and their services at the heart of sustainable development," **Jane Madgwick,** CEO of Wetlands International said. Nature-based solutions have to be designed for each specific context, based on sound knowledge of how factors such as changes in water flows,

[9] https://www.wetlands.org/blog/water-we-doing-about-water/
[10] https://www.wetlands.org/blog/blue-green-infrastructure-climate-change-adaptation-combining-nature-semi-natural-structures-water-management-risk-reduction-peruvian-basins/
[11] https://www.wetlands.org/news/systems-approaches-are-key-to-scaling-up-nature-based-solutions-wetlands-international-chief-executive-tells-climate-action-summit/#read-more



sedimentation, infrastructure, vegetation, land use and climate change influence the ability of ecosystems to support our environment and society's demands.

4.Tackle Global Challenges with healthy wetlands

- **The future of humanity depends on wetlands[12].**

In the European Green Deal Communication, the EU recognises that the global climate and environmental challenges are a significant threat multiplier and a source of instability, committing to work with all partners to increase climate and environmental resilience to prevent these challenges from becoming sources of conflict, food insecurity, population displacement and forced migration, and support a just transition globally.

As wetlands are lost or lose their ability to effectively store and regulate water and to support food production, people are deprived of their well-being too**, leading to social tensions, conflict and eventually human displacement[13].** It is increasingly recognized that **the water crisis**, i.e. the significant decline in the available quality and quantity of fresh water**, should be considered as a societal risk**, rather than simply an environmental one, pointing at the intersection of drought, political instability, war and migration[14].

Billions of people depend directly on the vitality of wetlands for freshwater, fish, rice and grass for grazing. **The relationships between the health and management of wetland ecosystems, human security and conflict, in particular wetland-dryland inter-dependencies, is poorly recognized** and deserves much greater attention in the context of development and humanitarian strategies[15].

- **Safeguarding and restoring wetlands are increasingly looked to as the premier nature-based solution to rebuild society's resilience, securing clean water supplies, reducing the impact of floods and droughts, enabling food security and buffering people against the ravages of climate change,** said Jane Madgwick, WI CEO.

Initiatives like, **the NaturAfrica Initiative,** are an excellent opportunity to promote **integrated landscape approaches and investments in sustainable land management.** An example is Wetlands International's "Blue Lifelines for a Secure Sahel" (BLiSS) initiative that will revive and safeguard the region's rivers, floodplains, lakes, deltas and ponds — improving water and food security and building resilience for communities.

It aims to raise awareness on the need for these "blue lifelines" and to convert political commitment of African leaders and international donors into major investments that put wetlands at the heart of sustainable development and climate adaptation. The aim is, by end 2030, to have restored and safeguarded 20 million hectares of wetlands in at least six major systems improving the adaptive capacity and safety of around 10 million people across the Sahel.

"*BLiSS will be a catalyser of change, re-orientating some existing development investments and enabling communities to take action themselves. Existing investment to regreen and climate-proof the region misses an essential blue dimension and large infrastructure schemes are favoured over community- and ecosystem-based programmes[16], said Jane Madgwick, CEO Wetlands International .*

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[12] https://www.cbd.int/waters/doc/wwd2015/wwd-2015-press-brief-future-en.pdf

[13] Wetlands International, 2017. Water Shocks: Wetlands and Human Migration in the Sahel. Wetlands International, The Netherlands.

[14] World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2018.

[15] https://www.wetlands.org/publications/enhancing-action-wetlands-key-strategy-reach-paris-agreement-objectives/

[16] https://www.wetlands.org/news/wetlands-international-and-africa-union-commission-great-green-wall-initiative-call-for-revival-of-wetland-systems-in-the-sahel-at-new-york-climate-summit/

ANNEX: Priorities on wetlands[17]

- **Safeguarding and restoring production systems linked with wetlands:** needed to sustain and improve food production, while increasing adaptive capacity of the landscape to climate risks. Priorities include:
    - Sustain and restore flow dynamics to Sahelian floodplains;
    - Integrate mangroves into aquaculture ponds in South-east Asia;
    - Regulate for responsible soy and palm oil production that avoids wetland and peatland drainage and pollution.
- **An improvement in the condition and extent of high mountain lakes, peatlands and floodplains:** to reduce the incidence and impacts of human induced water scarcity downstream. Such wetlands are the integrating ecosystems in the landscape that store and regulate water flows. Besides conservation and restoration of wetlands, this also requires an increase of water-use efficiency across all sectors, and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater. Conservation of High Altitude Wetlands of Himalayas, which buffer the water tower of the world, is a crucial step.
- **Invest in multifunctional green infrastructure solutions:** Reduce over-reliance on engineered infrastructure solutions and invest more in green infrastructure which can substitute, augment or work in parallel with grey infrastructure in a cost-effective and sustainable way to rebalance the water cycle. For urban planning, minimize encroachment on wetlands and rehabilitate wetland in cities and their surrounding landscapes reduces water risks.
- **Accelerate global action to safeguard and re-wet peatlands:** Besides restoration of drained peatlands, avoiding new drainage is the priority. Production systems requiring peatland drainage exist all over the world. Peatlands can be cultivated on a small scale with crops adapted to wet soil conditions.
- **Safeguard and restore floodplains, mudflats, saltmarshes and mangroves for resilient coasts and** delta's for safeguarding the prosperity and resilience of vulnerable communities. Examples include:
    o Restore mangrove and coastal ecosystems to protect vulnerable settlements and delta cities from impacts of high waves and storm surges;
    o Safeguard and restore floodplains to slow the flood pulse and reduce flooding downstream.
- **Conserve and restore coastal wetlands as an integral part of fisheries and flood risk management:** a cost-effective and adaptive solution to strengthen resilience, while achieving healthy and productive oceans through wetland serving as nurseries for both inshore and offshore fisheries.
  Building with Nature is an effective approach to counteract coastal erosion, rejuvenate fisheries and increase resilience along heavily modified coasts.
- **Meet obligations for wetlands under international agreements:**
  Ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of inland freshwater ecosystems, including peatlands, arctic wetlands, and arid and semi-arid wetlands is linked with implementation of commitments under MEAs such as Ramsar, CBD, CMS, UNCCD and UNFCCC and Agenda 2030.
- **Identify the wetland hotspots, where wetlands are contributing to maintaining peace,** through supporting livelihoods and sustainable development – and where loss of wetlands is contributing to insecurity. As a means to highlight dryland-wetland inter-dependencies and de-risk policies and investments at a range of scales.

17. Enhancing action on wetlands as a key strategy to reach Paris Agreement objectives, contributing to climate change adaptation, mitigation, resilience and peacebuilding, March 2018 Wetlands International

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