



A Call for the EU: Leading the Way to 2030 with Wetlands

Wetlands: Key to Advancing EU Global Leadership on Climate, Biodiversity, and Sustainable Development



Wetlands
INTERNATIONAL

A Call for the EU: Leading the Way to 2030 with Wetlands

Wetlands: Key to Advancing EU Global Leadership on Climate, Biodiversity, and Sustainable Development



Figure 1 Waterbirds at Las Peladas Lake, Argentina (Wetlands International)

WETLANDS GLOBALLY

(from Ramsar Convention on Wetlands¹

Wetlands and Water:

- Wetlands hold and provide most of our freshwater. Less than 1% of freshwater is usable.
- Our water use increased sixfold in 100 years and rises 1% annually.
- Almost all global freshwater sources are compromised: 82% of the world's population is exposed to high levels of pollution in their water supply²

Wetlands and Biodiversity:

- About 40% of the world's plant and animal species depend on wetlands
- Wetland biodiversity is the basis of recreation (nature-based tourism, angling, hunting)
- Freshwater ecosystems' wildlife is collapsing: species populations have declined by 83% globally since the 1970s³.
- Migratory freshwater fish populations have suffered a similar decline rate, with an 81% global decline and a 73% decline in Europe since the 1970s.⁴

Wetlands and Livelihood:

- 4 billion people rely on wetlands' services for their health and livelihood.
- More than **660 million** people depend on fishing and aquaculture.
- Half of international tourists seek relaxation in wetland areas, supporting **266 million** jobs in the travel and tourism sectors – **8.9%** of the world's total employment.
- Wetlands offer economic opportunities for Indigenous populations, including traditional livelihoods that entail harvesting and processing medicinal plants, dyes, fruits, reeds, and grasses.
- Farmers and herders look to wetlands for a consistent water supply for livestock grazing.

Wetlands and Climate:

- Wetlands capture CO₂ from the atmosphere and store more carbon than any other ecosystem on Earth.
- Peatlands store about **30%** of land-based carbon — twice that of all the world's forests.
- Coastal wetlands (mangroves, seagrass beds, salt marshes) capture and store carbon in their sediment up to **55 times faster than tropical rainforests**.
- Wetlands safeguard 60% of humanity along coastlines against storm surges, hurricanes, and tsunamis.
- Wetlands can typically hold between 1 to 3 million lt of floodwater per hectare.

Wetlands and Food

- Wetlands have underpinned the development of civilizations for thousands of years, providing people with access to fish, other food and freshwater for crops and livestock⁵.
- Fish harvested from wetlands provide the primary source of protein for more than 1 billion people.
- Rice paddies feed 3.5 billion people annually.
- Agriculture accounts for 70% of water withdrawals from the Earth's wetlands.

(Source <https://www.worldwetlandsday.org/materials>)

¹ The **Convention on Wetlands of International Importance**, commonly known as the **Ramsar Convention**, is an international treaty adopted in 1971 in the city of Ramsar, Iran. Its primary aim is to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands to ensure their ecological health while recognizing their critical role in sustaining biodiversity and supporting human well-being. As of today, the Ramsar Convention includes 172 contracting parties (countries) and over **2,500 Ramsar Sites**, covering more than **256 million hectares** of wetlands globally. <https://www.ramsar.org/>

² <https://medwet.org/2024/01/world-wetlands-day-2024-wetlands-and-human-wellbeing/>

³ LPI Report, 2022 - https://wwflpr.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/lpr_2022_full_report.pdf

⁴ LPI Report Migratory Freshwater Fishes 2024 update -

https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wpcontent/uploads/2024/05/LPI_Executive-Summary_2024.pdf

⁵ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/importance-of-restoring-nature>

1. Introduction

Wetlands, encompassing ecosystems like peatlands, mangroves, rivers, lakes, salt marshes, and seagrass beds, are globally significant for their vital services. They offer a range of provisioning, regulating, and cultural benefits. They are essential for sustainable cities, agriculture, and resilience to extreme weather, contributing significantly to a carbon-neutral future and advancing global climate and biodiversity goals. However, these ecosystems face severe threats from climate change, urbanization, intensive agriculture, and poorly planned developments.

With 80% of Europe's wetlands lost in the past century⁶ and 20% lost globally since 1700⁷ Reversing this decline is crucial to meeting European and international environmental objectives. Healthy wetlands are integral to delivering on many of the EU's policy frameworks, including the Common Agricultural Policy, Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, and the Habitats and Birds Directives. They are also integral to delivering global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Paris Agreement, and the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Investments in wetland restoration, conservation, and sustainable management are essential. The UN and World Economic Forum study on the State of Finance for Nature: Tripling investments in nature-based solutions by 2030 underscores the need to triple global investments in nature-based solutions (NbS) by 2030, rising from \$133 billion annually to \$536 billion by 2050. Wetland ecosystems provide an estimated \$47.4 trillion in services annually, highlighting their unparalleled value and demand for a significant proportion of this investment.

While the EU has made significant strides in integrating wetland restoration and conservation into its international strategies, challenges remain in fully integrating these into EU international strategic programmes. Effective implementation requires prioritization, sufficient financial resources, stakeholder involvement, public support, and policy coherence at various levels. Addressing these challenges is crucial for successfully restoring and conserving wetland ecosystems in and beyond Europe.

We urge EU institutions to view wetlands as a "win-win" solution when decarbonizing the economy, preparing for climate adaptation, mitigating disaster risks, and building societal resilience. Wetlands are the planet's superheroes, supporting water, food security, and protection from climate extremes.

We count on the EU's leadership to prioritize wetlands, stop their degradation, and integrate them into political and investment agendas. Together, we can ensure wetlands in Europe and beyond become powerful agents of positive change for a sustainable future.

Therefore, Wetlands International Europe calls on the EU institutions and member states to prioritise the following actions:

- **Establish a new cooperation instrument focusing on wetlands, EU Wetland Partnerships, which mobilizes resources, technical assistance, and knowledge exchange to achieve global climate, biodiversity, and SDGs goals.**
- **Position wetlands at the heart of the EU's global efforts on water, climate, energy, and green diplomacy, ensuring they are central in advancing sustainability and resilience worldwide.**
- **Foster well-functioning wetland ecosystems for sustainable and resilient agriculture needs.**
- **Ensure that EU Strategic Partnerships on Critical Raw Materials aim to minimise environmental and human impacts.**
- **Integrate wetlands into the EU's water, peace and security agenda.**

⁶ <https://biodiversity.europa.eu/europes-biodiversity/habitats-to-be-restored/wetlands>

⁷ Fluet-Chouinard, E., Stocker, B.D., Zhang, Z. et al. Extensive global wetland loss over the past three centuries. *Nature* 614, 281–286 (2023).

2. A Call for the EU: Leading the Way to 2030 with Wetlands

In the next five years, EU institutions must take a leadership role globally in safeguarding wetlands, recognizing their vital importance in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and water security. The EU should leverage its international influence to integrate wetland conservation into global agricultural, trade, and climate policies, setting a high standard for sustainability in trade agreements and development cooperation. The EU can drive transformative change by championing stronger international commitments, fostering partnerships with key regions, and supporting wetland-friendly agricultural reforms worldwide. Let this be the era where wetlands are placed at the heart of Europe's global environmental and socio-economic agenda, securing a resilient future for people and nature everywhere.

More specifically, the EU and its member states should:

- 1) **Establish a new cooperation instrument focusing on wetlands, EU Wetland Partnerships, which mobilizes resources, technical assistance, and knowledge exchange to achieve global climate, biodiversity, and SDG goals.**

Globally, there is an urgent need to mobilize funding to support large-scale wetland restoration and conservation interventions. These interventions would also underpin sustainable development and a just transition supporting Indigenous peoples' rights, youth and women's entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment.

We call for the European Union to play an essential role in establishing [EU Wetland Partnerships](#) with partner countries as a new cooperation tool to solve this challenge. Wetland Partnerships will reverse wetlands degradation and contribute to more inclusive economies and societies. Through Wetland Partnerships, the European Union will deliver on the European Green Deal priorities and its development cooperation objectives, including poverty alleviation and human rights. Furthermore, EU Wetland Partnerships will contribute to meeting the EU's international commitments.

At UNFCCC COP30 in Brazil in 2025, it would be great if the EU could launch the first-ever EU Wetland Partnerships, including one on the Pantanal.

- 2) **Position wetlands at the heart of the EU's global efforts on water, climate, energy, and green diplomacy, ensuring they play a central role in advancing sustainability and resilience worldwide**

The European Council⁸ has emphasized the need for enhanced integration of water-related actions into the EU's external climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts and Disaster Risk Reduction and preparedness. Additionally, it has stressed the critical role of conserving and restoring aquatic ecosystems, particularly wetlands, to promote human development, safeguard biodiversity, mitigate water pollution, and advance climate action in harmony with the European Green Deal and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

To maximize their impact and further integrate sustainability into EU international cooperation and development, the EU must prioritize the management and restoration of wetlands through its Annual Action Plans, Regional Plans, Team Europe Initiatives, and strategies to strengthen community

⁸ [Water in diplomacy: Council confirms EU's commitment to enhanced EU engagement - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

resilience and preserve their diverse societal benefits. This strategic approach is critical for achieving global biodiversity, climate, and Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, the EU should leverage its global influence to champion wetlands in multilateral agreements, trade negotiations, and development cooperation, promoting sustainable supply chains and wetland-friendly practices worldwide.

3) Foster well-functioning wetland ecosystems for sustainable and resilient agriculture needs

According to the Convention on Wetlands, 35% of the world's wetlands have been lost since 1970, primarily due to agriculture. Unsustainable farming practices, driven by global demand for products like palm oil, soy, and sugarcane, continue degrading wetlands, particularly in Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa, impacting biodiversity and climate. Wetlands, often spanning multiple countries, are further threatened by upstream agricultural activities, affecting water availability downstream.

Robust policies are urgently needed to protect wetlands and ensure sustainable commodity supply chains. We welcome the European Commission's Vision for Agriculture and Food and its commitment to promoting sustainable agriculture. We urge the EU to integrate environmental sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and climate action into international trade agreements and support farmers in transitioning to more sustainable practices, including phasing out peat-based farming.

The EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSD) could drive investments in nature-based solutions that benefit wetlands. We also encourage collaboration among businesses, governments, and civil society to position wetlands as effective, nature-based solutions that align with corporate Environmental, social and governance (ESG) goals and address wetland-related risks in global supply chains.

4) Ensure that EU Strategic Partnerships on Critical Raw Materials aim at reduced environmental and human impacts

The extraction of transitional minerals like lithium⁹ severely impact people and nature¹⁰. By 2050, Europe's lithium demand could increase 60-fold to reach carbon neutrality¹¹ posing major environmental threats¹². Most of the extraction occurs in the "lithium triangle": Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile.

Current extracting technology uses 2 million liters of water per ton of lithium, driving the loss of vital water resources and salinization. This reduces freshwater availability for human and agricultural use, dries surface water bodies, and damages wetlands. The process also releases significant CO₂, affecting climate stability. In drought-prone regions like the High Andes, these impacts threaten local communities reliant on wetlands¹³ and drive out-migration.

EU strategic partnerships¹⁴ and projects on critical raw materials foreseen under the EU Critical Raw Material Act (CRMA) should support partners in developing nature-positive pathways with local communities and shaping innovative business models for electric vehicles and energy storage sectors.

⁹ Lithium, nickel and cobalt are commonly used in lithium-ion batteries for mobile devices and electric vehicles.
<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/what-are-energy-transition-minerals-and-how-can-they-unlock-clean-energy-age#:~:text=These%20energy%20transition%20minerals%20are,lead%20to%20human%20rights%20abuses.>

¹¹ [Europe's quest for home-grown lithium \(the-parliament-magazine.eu\)](https://the-parliament-magazine.eu/en/europe-s-quest-for-home-grown-lithium)

¹² <https://eurmc.org/publication/limiting-environmental-damage-human-rights-abuses-and-indigenous-peoples-rights-violations-civil-society-guidelines-for-the-implementation-of-the-eu-critical-raw-materials-regulation/>

¹³ <https://www.wetlands.org/publication/briefing-on-lithium-mining-in-the-andes-of-south-america-no-to-water-mega-mining/>

¹⁴ https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/raw-materials-diplomacy_en#:~:text=So%20far%2C%20the%20EU%20has,%2C%20Serbia%2C%20Ukraine%20and%20Zambia.

5) Integrate wetlands into the EU's water, peace, and security agenda

Climate change and environmental degradation present growing threats to global peace and security, exacerbating each other in interconnected ways. Loss and degradation of wetlands directly impact the livelihoods of local communities, fuelling tensions between them over access to and control of water and land. For instance, the worsening condition of wetlands in the Sahel and their decline is undermining human well-being and compelling people to migrate, including to Europe¹⁵.

Wetland restoration and conservation are pivotal to environmental peacebuilding, offering solutions for conflict prevention, post-conflict recovery, sustainable livelihoods, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and international cooperation. We urge the EU to integrate wetland conservation and restoration into its water and peace agenda, leveraging conflict prevention, increased stability, and ultimately growing investments in wetland landscapes in fragile regions.

'Wetlands are so central to the water cycle on Earth that a world without wetlands would be a world without fresh water.'

3. Who we are

Wetlands International Europe is the single network organization in Europe bringing together NGOs whose shared mission is to inspire and mobilize society to safeguard and restore wetlands for people and nature.

Since our establishment, we have drawn attention to wetlands' status, trends, and values and the importance of European policy to protect and secure their long-term recovery. Our ambition for 2020-2030 is to upscale action to safeguard and restore wetlands, collaborating with multiple partners and mobilising a wide range of actors to transform whole landscapes and sectors. Our access to cutting-edge science, combined with our understanding of EU policies, the on-ground experience from our members, partners, and their networks, and our global network, makes us a credible and effective advocate for improving European policies and practices.

¹⁵ <https://www.wetlands.org/publication/water-shocks-wetlands-human-migration-sahel/>



[Wetlands International Europe](#)

[Rue de l'Industrie 10, 1000 Brussels](#)

europe@wetlands.org

