



Wetlands
INTERNATIONAL

Regional Strategy 2020-2030

WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION



National Park
Hauts Fagnes in
spring, Belgium



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Field visit for Building with Nature partners from Asia to the Marker Wadden, Netherlands

INTRODUCING WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL EUROPEAN'S STRATEGY 2020-2030

Wetlands International's journey in Europe started more than 60 years ago with a focus on waterbirds and wetlands protection. In 2013, our European programme was formalised through the establishment of an European Association thanks to seven founding organisations sharing a common desire to become the voice for wetlands in Europe. Since its formal establishment, Wetlands International's operations in the region have successfully raised awareness on the values, status and trends of wetlands, and their importance for the attainment of European policy goals. At present, the European network comprises 11 nongovernmental organisations from seven European countries and is coordinated by a Secretariat based in Brussels, Belgium and Ede, The Netherlands.

As a member-based organisation, our working model is designed to connect knowledge at three scales: European, national and on-the-ground, creating a virtuous cycle of information flow between the Secretariat and member organisations that combines bottom-up and top-down approaches, and facilitates the collection of examples of best practices and lessons learned that are used to inform policy processes and decision makers. The Secretariat binds this wealth of experience together for a greater collective impact.

This Strategy was developed during a period when the overlapping crises of a global pandemic, climate change and biodiversity loss created tremendous uncertainty, but also led to the realisation that action during this decade is essential to set society on a different, more sustainable trajectory. Amid urgent calls from scientists and civil society for governments to commit to climate action, nature protection and restoration as a foundation for recovery, we now have the opportunity to help catalyse action on a scale

that will transform society, from the European Union's (EU) determination to become the first climate-neutral region in the world by 2050 while committing to nature protection, to the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and the groundswell from all levels of government, business and civil society to create a better future. In this unprecedented environment, our wetlands solutions have never been more essential to these efforts.

Wetlands International members and partners' knowledge, experience and expertise have guided our Strategy, and achieving the vision contained within will be only possible by working together and continuing to grow our organisation. This Strategy sets out a joint roadmap to build new strategic alliances, strengthen existing ones, make ourselves more visible and position ourselves as the main reference for wetlands solutions in Europe. It also expresses our desire to expand and bring new voices, energy and leadership to benefit our European network.



Most na Soči, Slovenia

EUROPEAN CONTEXT

European wetlands host a substantial share of Europe's biodiversity. They also provide a wide range of priceless ecosystem services, such as carbon storage and protection from floods and droughts, and include many social benefits and cultural values. Still, they are among Europe's most threatened ecosystems and are disappearing and being degraded at an alarming rate.

Rivers and Lakes, Coasts and Deltas and Peatlands are key wetland ecosystems where we work. All face exceptional challenges:

- Around 60% of our European waters are not in good ecological status and up to 90% of floodplain wetlands are degraded;
- The fragmentation of rivers by dams and grey infrastructure is disconnecting migratory fish pathways and cutting off floodplain ecosystems, resulting in a dramatic decline in freshwater biodiversity and increased risk from floods and droughts;
- Healthy peatlands are the world's most effective carbon stores, but harmful agricultural subsidies are incentivising drainage and have degraded more than 50% of the EU's peatlands, contributing 25% of the EU's agricultural emissions of CO₂;
- Hard infrastructure armouring coasts and deltas is unable to adapt to a changing climate of rising sea levels while worsening coastal erosion and degrading coastal habitats and biodiversity.

We stand at a critical moment when the scale and the urgency of action is of the utmost importance. To solve Europe's most pressing environmental challenges, wetlands must be an integral part of solutions.

Opportunities:

Rivers and Lakes

Europe's rivers are its living arteries. The EU's ambition to tackle the crises of declining freshwater ecosystems, extinction, and climate change is a generational opportunity

to put Europe's rivers and wetlands at the forefront of nature-based solutions. The Biodiversity Strategy to restore 25,000 km of rivers can be used to accelerate the removal of barriers, prioritise migratory swimways and protect and restore rivers. As the Water Framework Directive enters its final implementation cycle, Member States are required to achieve good status for their waters by 2027. To do so, investments in river restoration, nature-based solutions and green infrastructure need to be dramatically increased, and better coordination with the Nature Directives and Eel Regulation is urgently needed.

Coast and Deltas

European coasts and deltas are its ecological corridors between marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems. They are critical breeding habitats for fish and other marine fauna as well as stopover sites for migratory birds, hosting the majority of Waterbird Critical Sites in major estuaries, deltas and lagoons. Coastal wetlands store carbon at a high rate in seagrasses and salt marshes, making them crucial for EU policies on climate change mitigation. Decades of traditional grey engineering approaches to flood and coastal protection have altered flows of water and sediment and degraded coastal ecosystems. To adapt to a rapidly changing climate of rising sea levels and increasing extreme weather events, Building with Nature approaches, such as restoring oysters and seagrass to create living breakwaters, are urgently needed to restore natural resilience and provide solutions that protect coastal populations.

Peatlands

Despite the recognised importance of peatlands in adaptation and mitigation from a changing climate and the efforts of European countries and policymakers to protect and restore them, there are still loopholes in various policies that incentivise drainage. What is needed is to step up in target setting, policy commitments and investments for peatland rewetting that will keep carbon locked in the ground. Healthy peatlands, either pristine, restored or sustainably managed, can contribute as nature-based solutions to the achievement of the European Green Deal and Biodiversity Strategy through the design and financing of landscape scale restoration initiatives. Therefore, appropriate climate and biodiversity policy measures, especially in the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy, the European Forestry Strategy and the Climate Adaptation Strategy, must be enabled to minimise peatland emissions.

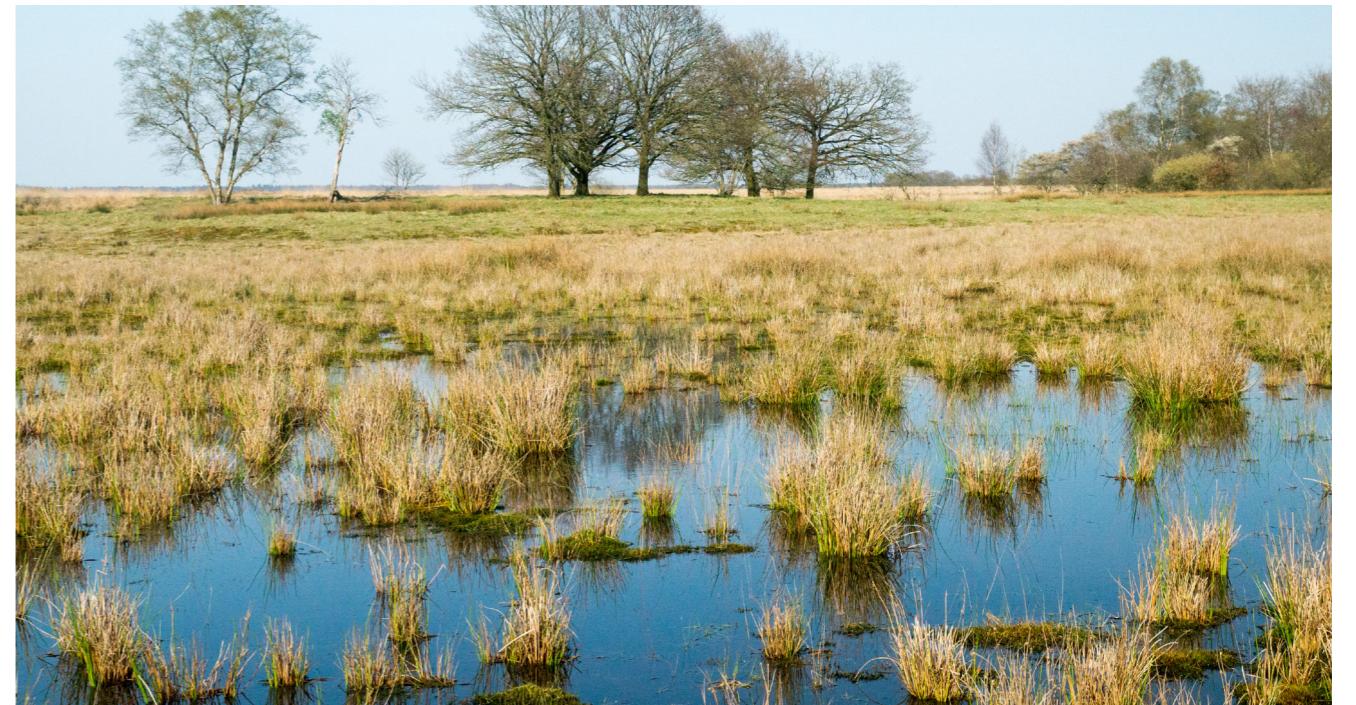
Biodiversity

The new 30% protected area target under the Biodiversity Strategy offer opportunities to increase the protection of wetlands while our experience with the flyway approach to

waterbird conservation can allow the transfer of waterbird conservation to other taxa. This can be particularly the case for emblematic and threatened migratory fish species to be used to set ecologically meaningful targets for river restoration. Moreover, our International Waterbirds Census networks and permanent membership in the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) Technical Committee can provide us with contacts in every European, North African and Central Asian country and the opportunity to promote flyway conservation issues across the entire Agreement area.

External Action

By leading in international negotiations, the EU is building green alliances with partner countries in support of their Nationally Determined Contributions and on the restoration and conservation of biodiversity, for example through ecosystem-based approaches to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) that will enable resilience outside European borders through the wise use of wetlands. There is also growing interest within the EU to consider water as a tool for peace and security that can be used to increase the recognition of the interlinkages between wetlands, peace, and security.



Peatland restoration

Our vision is a world where wetlands are treasured and nurtured for their beauty, the life they support and the resources they provide.

Our mission is to inspire and mobilise society to safeguard and restore wetlands for people and nature.

Our ambition for the period 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 THEORY OF CHANGE

Our Theory of Change encapsulates the three main phases of our work:

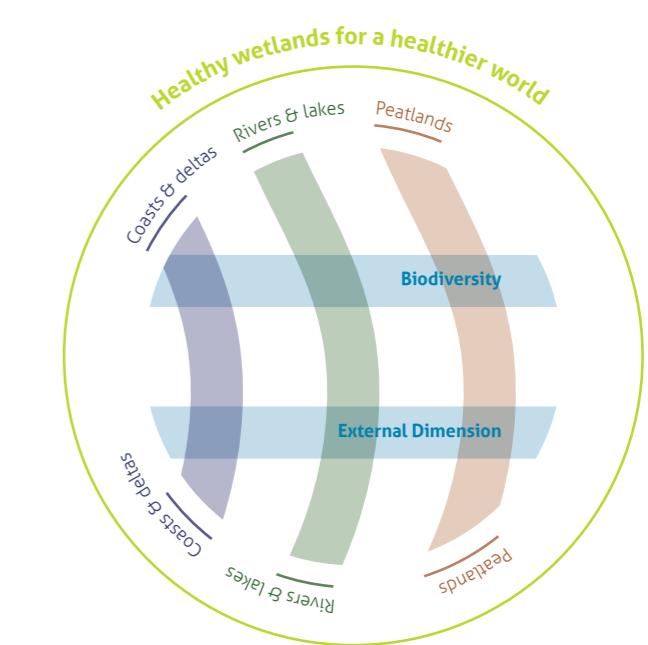
INSPIRE: To create societal demand for wetland action, we: develop and share knowledge and insights, encourage innovation and influence policy agendas.

MOBILISE: To enable action and create conditions for upscaling solutions, we: enable dialogues, build coalitions around a shared vision and identify and pilot landscape solutions.

UPSCALE: To increase the scale of our impacts by enabling others to implement solutions, we: design integrated landscape scale plans, transform policies and attract investments and improve standards and behaviours of companies.

The European Strategy is also fully aligned with Wetlands International's Strategic Intent 2020-2030, sharing a same vision, mission and ambition, and will contribute to this framework by putting wetlands at the forefront of policies to solve the inter-linked crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and the degradation of freshwater ecosystems.

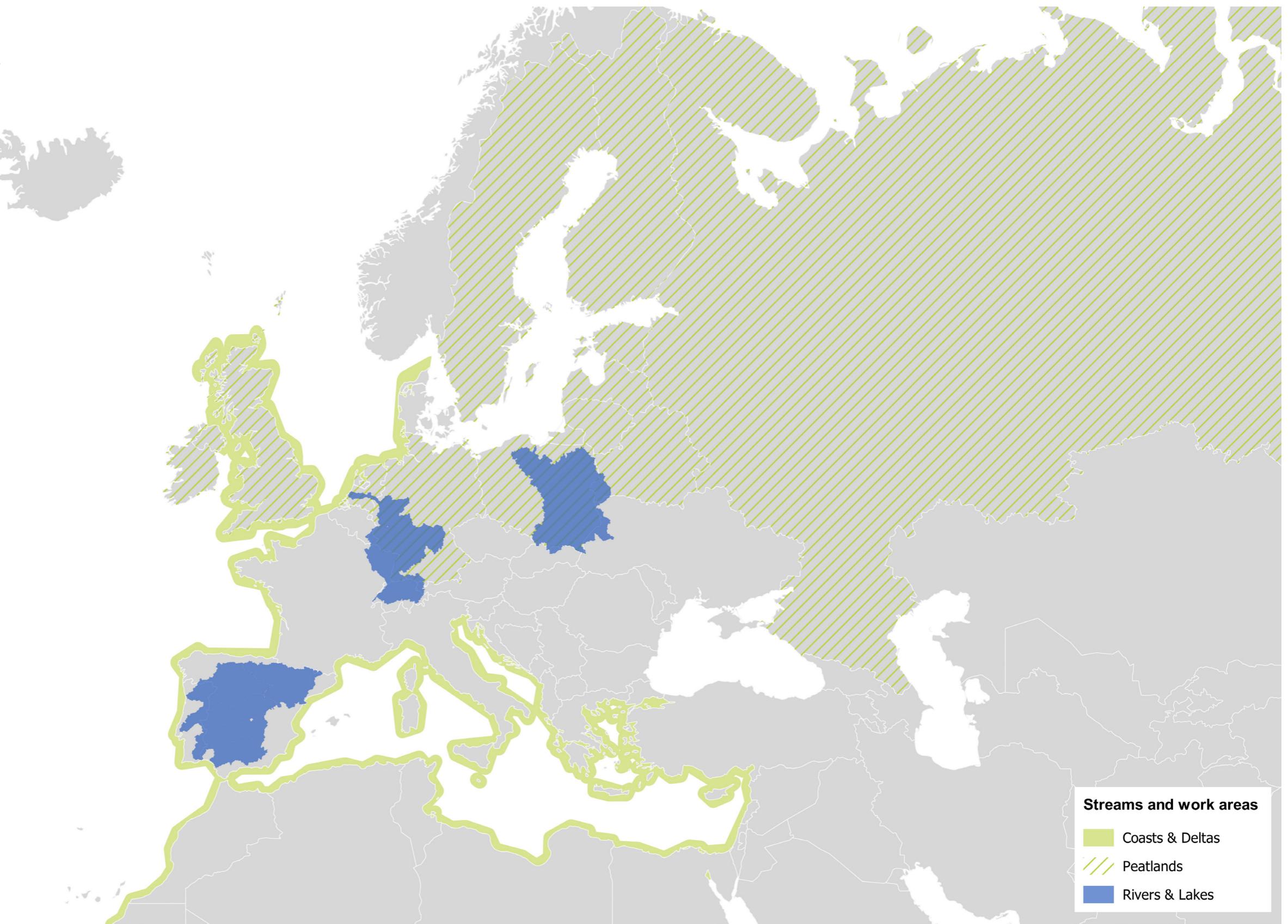
This framework will bring about the accomplishment of the European Green Deal objectives and Wetlands International's three global inter-connected impacts: Healthy Wetlands, Resilient Communities and Reduced Climate Risks across three "streams" or wetland landscapes: Coasts and Deltas, Rivers and Lakes, and Peatlands. In Europe, these streams will be cross-cut by two important lines of work that will be also translated into programmes: Biodiversity and External Dimension.



We will measure our progress across these programmes according to the following six outcomes:

- Wetland habitats and functions safeguarded and restored
- Water and food secured for wetland communities
- Wetland carbon stores secured and enhanced
- Wetland species recovered
- Reduced societal conflict and displacement from wetlands
- Wetland nature-based solutions integrated into policies and deployed

**While our regional scope covers
the entire European continent, the
following map reflects our priority
wetland-landscapes under each
programme.**



OUR WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE DECADE

Our work programme's areas include a set of lines of action organized within the three main phases.

Rivers and Lakes

Goal: To catalyse investments to conserve and restore the ecological integrity of lakes and rivers.

Our Freshwater programme will bring the expertise of our members and partners to take root as frontrunners for wetland solutions, amplifying our voice for bolder initiatives and more urgent action to meet the goals of European policies. Our advocacy will inspire the accelerated protection and restoration of rivers and lakes, and will boost collaboration between a growing number of stakeholders. Our capacity to connect and mobilise stakeholders will allow for developing and upscaling landscape-scale restoration and investments in nature-based solutions.

Inspire

- Attention to the power of wetlands and nature-based solutions with evidence from our work on river restoration, the importance of migratory pathways, and the harmful impacts of grey infrastructure and barriers.
- European policies and initiatives addressing the urgency of the freshwater and biodiversity crises.
- Better linkages and implementation between water and nature policies.

Upscale

- Policy integration that acknowledges protecting and restoring wetlands is an integral solution to the climate crisis.
- Barrier removal, opening up significant migratory pathways and riverine habitat to restore populations to target levels.
- Investments in river restoration and nature-based solutions at a landscape scale by governments and the corporate sector.
- Proliferation of innovative river protection mechanisms driven by a groundswell of support.

Mobilise

- Societal demand for healthy, free-flowing rivers and growing networks that drives action for protection above and beyond the Water Framework Directive at local, national and EU levels.
- Increased enforcement and better implementation of existing policies and conventions.
- Growing partnerships and interest in river restoration, dam removals and a swimways approach.
- An alliance for Natural Water Retention Measures that advocates for wetland restoration as sponge solutions for healthy rivers.

Coasts and Deltas

Goal: To safeguard and restore coastal wetland ecosystems by developing a programme in Europe.

The Coasts and Deltas programme is a new ambition for expanding our impact on green infrastructure, nature-based solutions and healthy biodiversity. From the success of our global network, there is a wealth of experience and partners to draw from in mainstreaming Building with Nature approaches in Europe. Working with our members, we aim to further develop our work in the Mediterranean region with a coastal focus and strengthen our engagement in resilient landscapes such as seagrass meadows and oyster reefs that create living breakwaters.

Inspire

- Recognition of the value of Building with Nature initiatives in Europe.
- Understanding of the contributions of nature-based solutions such as seagrass meadows and oyster reefs to climate adaptation, mitigation and healthy biodiversity.
- Societal awareness on the need to protect and restore coastal wetlands.

Mobilise

- Funding by governments and the corporate sector to scale up nature-based solutions and Building with Nature approaches.
- New multi-sectoral partnerships.
- Mediterranean partnerships in cross-collaboration with other programmes.

Upscale

- Investments in ambitious landscape-level initiatives to restore coastal wetlands.
- Removal of coastal barriers to fish migration.
- Inclusion of coastal wetland values in climate adaptation and mitigation policies and plans.



View of the Cacela Velha beach in the Ria Formosa Natural Park, Portugal

Peatlands

Goal: To scale up restoration and the application of sustainable peatland management practices.

Our peatlands programme will be implemented in joint collaboration with our members and global network. This will have a twin track approach whereby advocacy actions and the delivery of restoration practices on the ground will go hand-in-hand. We will put an emphasis on facilitating partnerships and developing the knowledge and decision-making infrastructure needed to place peatlands high in the European political agendas.

Inspire

- Attention to the urgent need to protect peatlands with evidence.
- Development of knowledge on the status and trends of peatlands in Europe.
- Demonstration projects at a landscape scale.



Bogland in the National Park Hunsrück-Hochwald, Germany

Mobilise

- Stakeholder engagement: national organisations and coalitions advocate for stronger policies and new initiatives.
- Increased EU collaboration to support the development of Nationally Determined Contributions and increased integration of peatlands into national climate action plans.

Upscale

- Investments to consolidate large-scale re-wetting and restoration projects.
- Inclusion of peatlands in climate, energy, agriculture and biodiversity policies.
- Priority setting by financial institutions and the corporate sector to restore degraded peatlands.

External Dimension

Goal: To mainstream the global recognition of wetlands as providers of water security for people and nature, climate resilience, and sustainable and peaceful landscapes.

Our European programme reflects the global interests of Wetlands International at the EU level. We use the power of best practices from around the world to influence and advocate for external EU policies supporting ecosystem-based approaches to DRR and climate change adaptation, and the role of wetlands as contributors to peace and security. We will build on our knowledge and will strengthen our relations with European stakeholders to ensure that EU external investments protect and conserve wetlands.

Inspire

- Adoption of best practices by policy makers to incorporate sustainable wetlands management into European external policies.
- Prioritisation of Building with Nature, ecosystem-based approaches to DRR and climate change adaptation.
- Adoption of EU policies on imported products and value chains, banning those that contribute to the degradation of wetlands, including peatlands.



Building with Nature Asia regional workshop (The Netherlands, 2019)

Mobilise

- Strengthened collaboration with EU delegations and Member States on sustainable water resource and agricultural management practices.
- Increased commitments to conserve forested peatlands.
- Increased EU collaboration to support the development of Nationally Determined Contributions and increased integration of peatlands into national climate action plans.
- Mediterranean partnerships in cross-collaboration with other programmes.

Upscale

- Increased investments in wetland conservation outside European borders.

Biodiversity

Goal: To improve the conservation status of wetland-dependant species and their habitats.

Wetlands International Europe's first programme focused on waterbird conservation. Through the International Waterbirds Census, we will continue using collected data to support reporting under the Birds Directive and AEWA. This will be accompanied by increased advocacy and inter-sectoral cooperation to create the needed conditions for restoration projects. As strategic players in AEWA, we will seek to maximise synergies with the Birds Directive in terms of monitoring, species recovery, site and habitat conservation.

A new component will be the development of a Trans-European Swimways Network as a visible flagship for migratory fish.

Inspire

- Upgraded waterbird data information through the International Waterbirds Census Online, the Waterbird Population Estimates Portal and the Critical Site Network Tool.
- Attention to sustainable harvest management, including habitat restoration and improved management.
- Wetland Inventories to support the conservation and sustainable management of threatened flagship waterbird species.



A European Green Toad (*Bufo viridis*) at the River Pripyat floodplains. Turov area, Belarus.

Mobilise

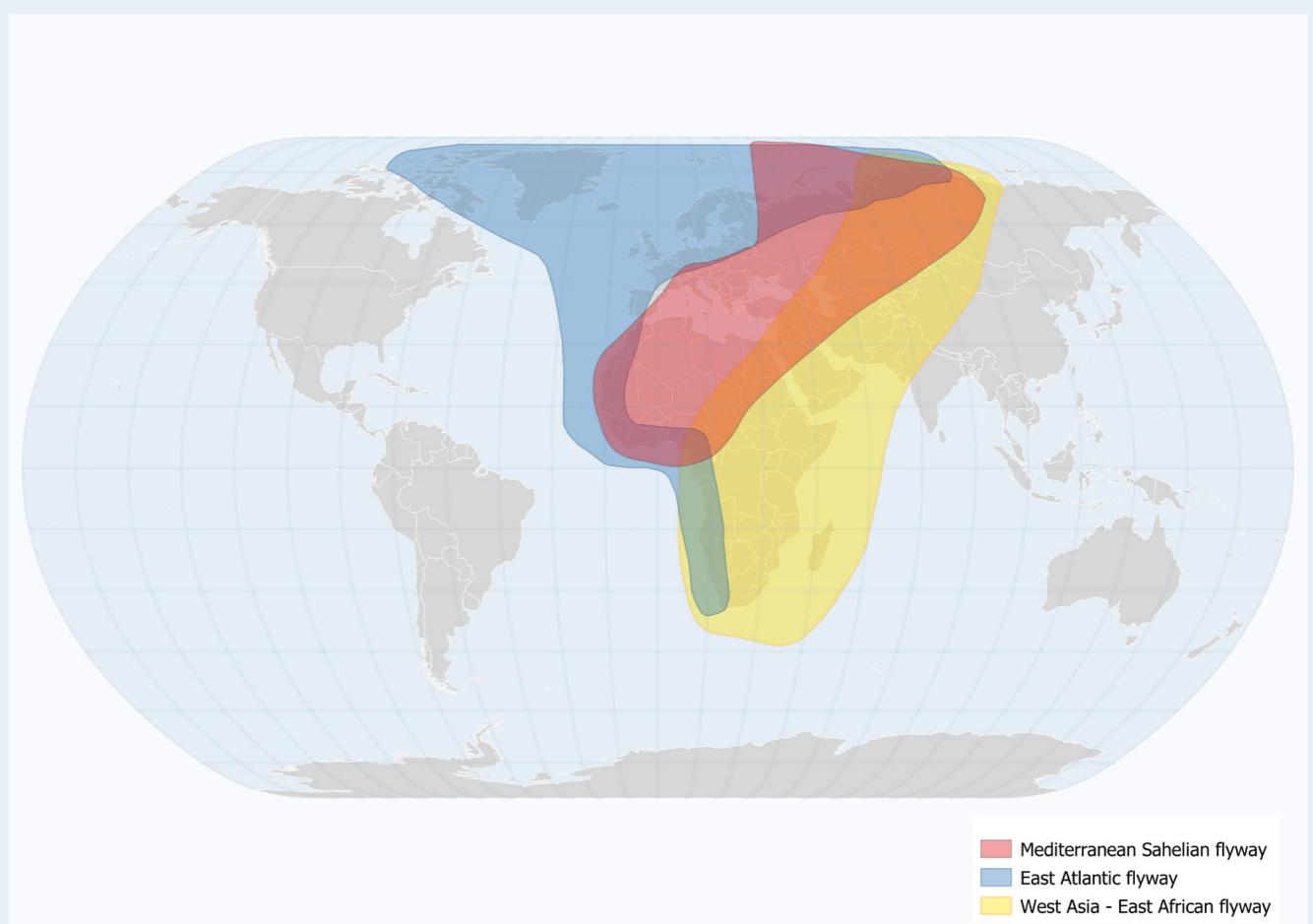
- Enhanced cross-sectoral cooperation (e.g., hunters and anglers) for habitat restoration.
- Collaboration and sharing of best practices to multi-country species conservation projects.
- Adoption of landscape-level approaches to improve the management of Natura 2000 sites, increasing synergies with the Water Framework Directive and Common Agricultural Policy in particular.
- A reinforced, coherent and comprehensive flyway network of protected areas through alignment of monitoring, species recovery, and site and habitat conservation under AEWA and the Birds Directive.
- Mediterranean partnerships in cross-collaboration with other programmes.

Upscale

- Restoration initiatives under a Trans-European Swimways Network.
- Large-scale partnerships and investments in flyway projects focused on key landscapes and the appeal of flagship species.



Eurasian Wigeon (*Mareca penelope*) at the Arkemheense Polder, The Netherlands.



FROM STRATEGY TO ACTION



Our strategic direction looks to influence European policies for the protection, conservation and restoration of the wetlands.

Members

In Europe, our members provide us with the strategic direction to influence European policies and their implementation at the national level. As a member-based organisation, Wetlands International Europe's vision is to represent the strongest voice for the protection, conservation and restoration of wetlands, by uniting a diverse range of organisations in terms of size, focus and geographic representation around common ambitions. We aim to become a leading European network, bringing together national and regional actors around wetland-related policies and programmes. To accomplish this, we will enhance our engagement to address key priorities for wetlands and expand our membership base in key strategic countries.

we believe in cross-sectoral approaches to deliver transformational initiatives, and intend to diversify our pool of collaborations with different sectors and organisations working on various topics.

In our efforts to grow into a more resilient organisation, our strategic vision to create a bigger impact has started to evolve. This process will continue in the upcoming years by establishing a clearer focus on the work we do, consolidating new alliances and nurturing those we already belong to.

Moreover, we provide a bridge to the global network of Wetlands International to connect with European policies and investments, and we will carry on with this work as part of our external dimension activities.

Rivers and Lakes

We will continue nurturing our work with the European Commission, notably the Directorate-General for Environment (DG ENV), and the European Parliament on the implementation and enforcement of the Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive and Biodiversity Strategy. The same will apply to our partnership within Dam Removal Europe combining policy advocacy with stakeholder engagement and on the ground projects.

Partnerships including Wetlands International Global network

Working within alliances is a powerful tool to ensure not only that our messages are amplified and reach a wider audience, but to increase our financial sustainability through new projects and programmes. Engaging with our different networks and working in partnerships provides us with a broad understanding of existing and upcoming environmental issues, and the role of different stakeholders in addressing or exacerbating them. Furthermore,

Our policy and advocacy actions with partnerships and networks such as the Living Rivers Europe coalition, Eurosita, the European Centre for River Restoration will continue. Plus, the creation of a new European alliance to consolidate, promote and upscale Natural Water Retention Measures in the restoration of European rivers will become an immediate target for us.



Scotland

Coasts and Deltas

We will liaise with relevant units in DG Environment, DG for Climate Action, DG for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, DG for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and raise awareness on the importance of ecosystem-based adaptation for coastal landscapes. Likewise, engaging with the regional authorities in charge of the Mediterranean region at the Committee of the Regions will become essential to make sure Mediterranean wetlands, in particular coastal wetlands, are among the EU's priorities. No less relevant will be strengthening our role and involvement in the Mediterranean Wetlands Alliance and the development of new partnerships to promote nature-based solutions in coast and delta ecosystems.

Peatlands

Our active participation in coalitions on agriculture-related policies will be maintained. We will expand our alliances with climate and bioenergy related groups to influence national, EU and external policies in view of developing joint project proposals. In this sense, we will contemplate joining different partnerships such as the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil in Europe or Climate Action Network Europe. We will also ensure that the European dimension of wetlands is included in the Global Peatlands Initiative in which Wetlands International is a member. We will liaise with different Directorates General (DG), namely DG Environment, DG for Climate Action, DG Agriculture, DG for International Partnerships and the European External Action Service. In the mid-term, we will also explore working collaborations with DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, DG for Trade, and also with the EU Permanent Representatives of Member States in Brussels.

Biodiversity

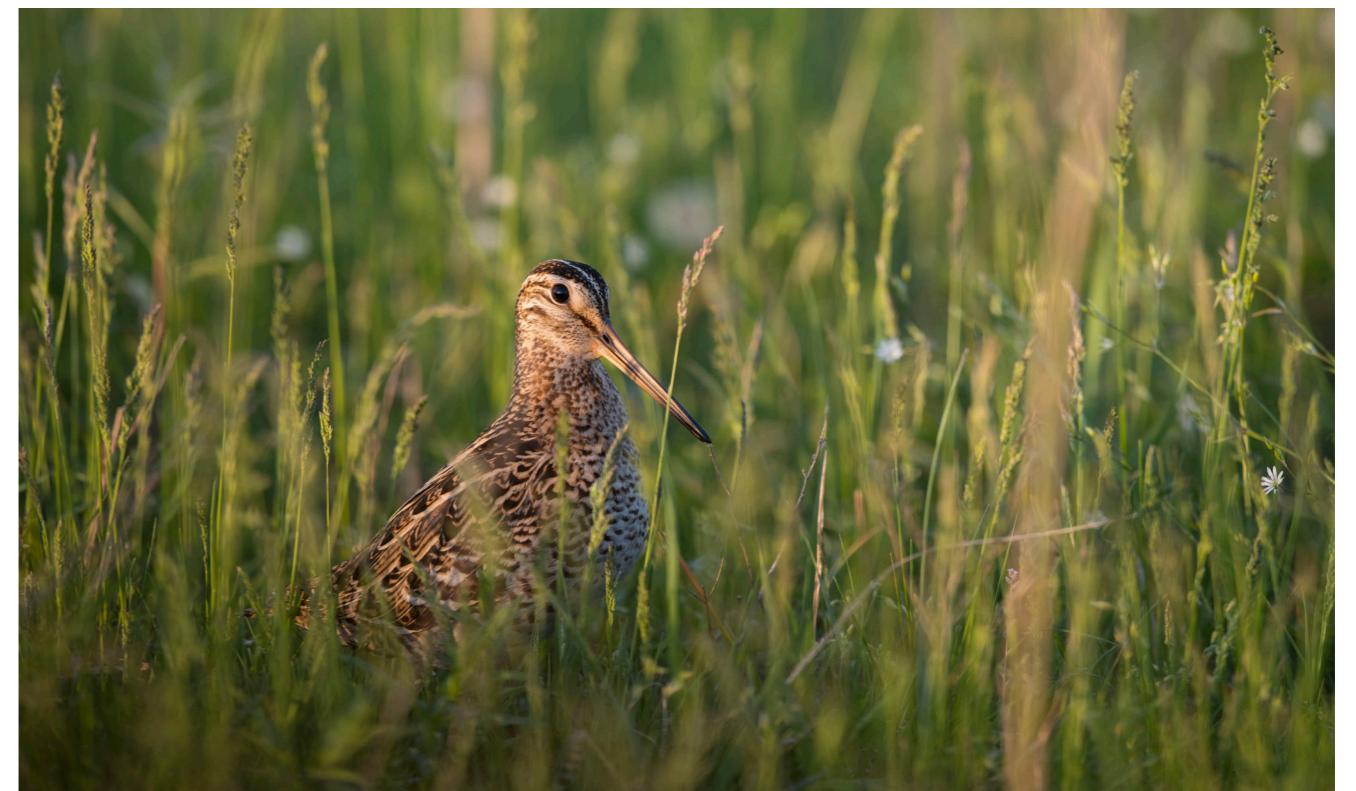
Several of our members have a strong interest in waterbirds, and this also reflects our wise use approach to collaborate both with conservation organisations and with user groups such as hunters, which can be extremely valuable when it comes to developing and implementing species management plans. We will use the Birds Directive framework to work with the European Commission and EU Member States, and will continue contributing to the AEWA Secretariat, AEWA Contracting Parties and AEWA species working groups in consultation with our members and in collaboration with both BirdLife International and FACE to advance waterbird conservation policy issues as the establishment of the flyway network sites. Through the coordination of the African – Eurasian Waterbird Monitoring Partnership, we will nurture and consolidate the waterbird monitoring network.

Building on our experience with flyway conservation, we will create a Trans-European Swimways Network to strategically align countries in their efforts towards achieving free-flowing rivers and restoration targets. This new network will foster international cooperation, while improving scientific knowledge and guidance, connecting fish, rivers and people across borders in Europe.

External Dimension

We will consolidate our presence and work in platforms and networks of civil society organisations, such as CONCORD (development policies), the Partnership for Environment and DRR (PEDRR), Water Europe (water and freshwater policies), VOICE (DRR policies), CAN EU and International (Climate policies) and the Africa-EU CSO Steering group (Joint Africa-EU Strategy). Informally, we will continue cultivating our relationships and work with several NGOs, such as Conservation International, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, the Wildlife Conservation Society, IUCN, WWF, EU Red Cross, Fern, CARE and many more.

We will fortify our relationship with the DG for International Partnerships, the European External Action Service and DG for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations along with United Nations agencies based in Brussels, such as United Nations DRR, the United Nations Environment Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, along with Ramsar Europe and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States.



Great Snipe (*Gallinago media*) near Turov. Belarus

Staffing and operations

As a small organisation with big ambitions, we are aware that further work is needed to strengthen the organisation, especially in external communications, internal project management and fundraising, to enable us to be the leading voice for wetlands in Europe, and as an essential and trusted reference when it comes to wetlands protection and conservation.

Internally, we have identified a need for improved processes and communications, both at a governance and operational level. In this sense, the next years will be critical to establishing solid working methods and joint collaboration between members and the Secretariat to effectively deliver this strategy. We will continue working towards more consistent and efficient governance and resource mobilisation, improving cross-collaboration between programmes to grow into a more efficient organisation. An adaptation to our organisational structure will be needed to fully implement this Strategy and new recruitments will bring new expertise to make this possible.



River, Una National Park, Bosnia

Financing our ambition

In the last years, we have strived to build a diversified portfolio of projects and we have begun to see results in our policy influencing and advocacy capacities. However, to ensure effective implementation of our Strategy, we will have to prioritise fundraising in order to guarantee the long-term sustainability of our operations. Resource development will therefore be at the core of our activities and, with our members and partners, will develop business propositions with wetlands as key solutions for the climate and biodiversity crisis.

As operating and multi-annual grants provide a more stable resource base to sustain our core activities and impact, we will continue applying for these types of grants to leverage further resources.

Public sector funding for NGOs is becoming more restrictive, with increased emphasis on the corporate sector or cross-sector partnerships, investments and loans rather than grants, and more integrated approaches.



Building with Nature

This is an opportunity for Wetlands International in Europe to develop a diversified funding model focussed on the identification of the right partners and revenue sources that are fit for our programme, while reducing the risks of depending on a single donor or grant. The path towards this aim will only be possible with the active engagement of the Secretariat, our members and Wetlands International's global network, to develop joint proposals that guarantee to donors the existence of cohesive consortia, the application of integrated approaches and measurable impacts on wetlands-related topics. In this sense, we will work towards increasing our visibility, outreach and communications for our cases and success stories, connecting our work with that of others, mainly our members. Likewise, further capacity building will be needed to strengthen our skills, in addition to greater engagement and knowledge sharing with our members and global network.

Our target donors will be foundations and trusts, particularly for issue-related campaigns and organisational support; public and institutional funds, particularly for knowledge development and on-the-ground implementation projects, and the corporate sector that will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis by the members. In order to maintain these operations and provide sufficient resources to support our activities, a Business Plan will be developed to become a more sustainable organisation. This plan will provide the Secretariat with the necessary guidance to effectively address our business gaps and take the right direction to accomplish our growth objectives.



Colophon

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