



A Rocha Lebanon for the Environment

Friends of A Rocha Lebanon Newsletter Special Issue

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Dear Friends,

February the 2nd is a special day in the calendar, as it is the “World Wetlands Day”. To celebrate the day we are issuing this special newsletter full of important information about wetlands. We hope you enjoy reading it and if you have any questions or you would like more information or material that can be used in your schools, groups, environment clubs...to celebrate the day please contact Chris on arocha@cyberia.net.lb.



World Wetland Day Logo 2007
Fish for tomorrow
Wetlands support fisheries ... Keep them safe

Why wetlands are Important

What words or images come to mind when you hear the words “wetland”, “marsh” or “swamp”?



Aamniq Wetland-early morning

Are they largely negative ones such as “muddy”, “slimy”, “dark”, “smelly”, “dangerous”, “unhealthy”, and “disease-ridden”? Or are they more positive ones like “fertile”, “rich”, “diverse”, “productive”, “haven”, “life-giving” and “purifying”?

In fact wetlands are hugely important places for lots of different reasons, but they are also fragile, vulnerable to damage and destruction, and are threatened throughout the world. They cover an estimated 7-9 million km², or 4-6% of earth’s land surface.

But what is a wetland? This is not so easy to define as there are many different types. They can be natural or

man-made, permanent or temporary, with still or flowing water. Also, the water can be fresh or salt, or somewhere in between.

All wetlands have, for at least part of the year, water above ground or saturating the root zone of the vegetation. They all have unique soil conditions created by the presence of water, and vegetation which is specially adapted to living in flooded situations.

Examples of types of wetland are freshwater marshes, salt-marshes, mangrove forests, swamps and peat-bogs. Even some entirely marine environments, such as coral reefs, are classed as wetlands so long as the water is no deeper than 6 meters at low tide.

Despite the bad press that wetlands have had throughout much of history, they really are of vital importance, not just to wildlife such as fish and birds, but to people too. In different parts of the world there are different people groups which depend directly on wetlands for their livelihoods, often living right in the middle of them. However, even those of us who don’t live in houseboats or houses on stilts, depend on the existence of wetlands for our existence.



So why are they so important?

The value of wetlands includes such diverse benefits as:

- Providing habitat and food to living organisms - they are estimated to contain 40% of all the world's plant or animal species. They are the primary habitat for hundreds of species of waterfowl as well as many other birds, fish, mammals and insects. Wetlands are very productive so they can support high numbers of plants and animals (that is, large populations as well as many different types). A very high proportion of the world's endangered species rely on wetlands.
- Purifying water – wetlands have a high capacity for removing nutrients and toxic chemicals from water. Also, man-made wetlands are now frequently used for waste-water treatment – when properly designed they can be more efficient than mechanical methods of sewage treatment as well as being a lot cheaper and better for the environment, and providing a living place for wildlife.
- Retaining nutrients and sediments – wetlands slow river flow, causing them to deposit sediments which are rich in nutrients, thus making them exceedingly rich habitats capable of supporting a huge diversity of life.
- Reducing effects of floods – they act like giant sponges, spreading water over a large area, slowing its flow and mitigating its effects on people.
- Stabilizing climate – wetlands contain a large proportion of the world's carbon. They can also buffer the effects of extreme events such as the tsunami of 2004, where areas of coast with intact mangrove forests suffered less than those where the forests had been removed to make way for tourist developments and fish-farming.
- Replenishing ground-water – ground-water is a very important source drinking water and irrigation.
- Providing resources for human use – wetlands are obviously a vital source of food for people, such as rice and fish, but they also provide roofing material (such as reeds), fuel (such as peat) and many other commodities.

Make sure to read our article
and the interview with Chris
in Al Nahar news paper of
Feb 2nd.

Threatened paradises

While it is true that wetlands are a very important source of food for lots of people, it is ironic that it is demand for food which has led to the loss of huge areas of wetlands in the past fifty years. Agriculture now uses 70% of all water withdrawals globally; wetlands are drained for cultivation, and threatened by

[Aammig's Wetland](#)



agricultural pollution, through fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. The construction of dams, supporting irrigation development, destroys floodplains, the river side habitat and species breeding grounds. Other causes of loss are residential and industrial development, in-filling for solid waste disposal, over-exploitation for fish, peat and wood, river canalisations and flood control works.

In the United States, more than half of the original 894,400km² of wetlands that existed at the time of European settlement were destroyed by the 1980s. This situation has been similar all over the world, while in some countries there has been up to 90% loss of wetlands.

The seriousness of this situation has now been recognised in many quarters, and since the Ramsar Convention in Iran in 1971, over 1150 sites in 130 nations (including Lebanon) are now recognised as “wetlands of international importance”. However, across the globe, wetlands are still being lost and degraded at an alarming rate with huge implications in terms of human health, people's livelihoods, and flooding as well as loss of species and wildlife habitat. It is estimated that by the middle of this century, seven billion people in 60 countries may be faced with water scarcity (at least 2 billion in 48 countries will face such a harsh reality).

[A Rocha is the Ramsar CEPA focal point for Lebanon](#)

Thanks for reading to the end don't forget our website: www.arocha.org Best wishes, The A Rocha Lebanon team

Lebanon A Rocha news available in 2 languages!!!

If you are reading this newsletter in English but would prefer to have it in Arabic email us and we will send you your preferred version.

